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

'Steven Erikson is an extraordinary writer ... My advice to anyone who might listen to me is: treat yourself Stephen R. Donaldson

'Give me the evocation of a rich, complex and yet ultimately unknowable other world, with a compelling suggestion of intricate history and mythology and lore. Give me mystery amid the grand narrative ... Give me the world in which every sea hides a crumbled Atlantis, every ruin has a tale to tell, every broken blade is a silent legacy of struggles unknown. Give me in other words, the fantasy work of Steven Erikson ... a master of lost and forgotten epochs, a weaver of ancient epics' Salon.com

'I stand slack-jawed in awe of *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*. This masterwork of the imagination may be the high watermark of epic fantasy' Glen Cook

'Truly epic in scope, Erikson has no peer when it comes to action and imagination, and joins the ranks of Tolkien and Donaldson in his mythic vision and perhaps then goes one better' SF Site

'Rare is the writer who so fluidly combines a sense of mythic power and depth of world with fully realized characters and thrilling action, but Steven Erikson manages it spectacularly' Michael A. Stackpole

'Like the archaeologist that he is, Erikson continues to delve into the history and ruins of the Malazan Empire, in the process revealing unforeseen riches and annals that defy expectation ... this is true myth in the making, a drawing upon fantasy to recreate histories and legends as rich as any found within our culture' Interzone

'Gripping, fast-moving, delightfully dark ... Erikson brings a punchy, mesmerizing writing style into the genre of epic fantasy, making an indelible impression. Utterly engrossing' Elizabeth Hayden

'Everything we have come to expect from this most excellent of fantasy writers; huge in scope, vast in implication and immensely, utterly entertaining' alienonline

'One of the most promising new writers of the past few years, he has more than proved his right to A-list status' Bookseller

'Erikson's strengths are his grown-up characters and his ability to create a world every bit as intricate and messy as our own' J. V. Jones

'An author who never disappoints on delivering stunning and hard-edged fantasy is Steven Erikson ... a master of modern fantasy' WBQ magazine

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'Erikson ... is able to create a world that is both absorbing on a human level and full of magical sublimity ... A wonderfully grand conception ... splendidly written ... fiendishly readable' Adam Roberts

'A multi-layered tale of magic and war, loyalty and betrayal. Complexly drawn characters occupy a richly detailed world in this panoramic saga' Library Journal

'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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To Christopher Porozny
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Tiste Edur
LANDS and
NORTH LETHER FRONTIER

Tundra

ICE FIELDS

FORT SHAKE
The Munse

Five Points
White Point

Brans Keep

To Letheras

0 50 100 150 leagues
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE TISTE EDUR

Tomad Sengar, patriarch of the Sengar Bloodline
Uruth, matriarch of the Sengar Bloodline
Fear Sengar, Eldest Son, Weapons Master of the Tribes
Trull Sengar, Second Son
Binadas Sengar, Third Son
Rhulad Sengar, Fourth and Youngest Son
Mayen, Fear's Betrothed
Hannan Mosag, Warlock King of the Six Tribes Confederacy
Theradas Buhn, Eldest Son of the Buhn Bloodline
Midik Buhn, Second Son
Badar, an unblooded
Rethal, a warrior
Canarth, a warrior
Choram Irard, an unblooded
Kholb Harat, an unblooded
Matra Brith, an unblooded

LEThERII SLAVES AMONG THE TISTE EDUR

Udinaas
Feather Witch
Hulad
Virrick

THE LETHERII

In the Palace
Ezgara Diskanar, King of Letheras
Janall, Queen of Letheras
Quillas Diskanar, Prince and Heir
Unmutal Hebaz, Preda (Commander) of Letherii army
Brys Beddict, Finadd (Captain) and King's Champion, youngest of the Beddict brothers
Moroch Nevath, a Finadd bodyguard to Prince Quillas Diskanar
Kuru Qan, Ceda (Sorceror) to the King
Nisall, the King's First Concubine
Turudal Brizad, The Queen's First Consort
Nifadas, First Eunuch
Gerun Eberict, Finadd in the Royal Guard
Triban Gnol, Chancellor
Laerdas, a mage in the Prince's retinue
In the North
Buruk the Pale, a merchant in the north
Seren Pedac, Acquitor for Buruk the Pale
Hull Beddict, Sentinel in the north, eldest among the Beddict brothers
Nekal Bara, a sorceress
Arahathan, a mage
Enedictal, a mage
Yan Tovis (Twilight), Atri-Preda at Fent Reach
In the City of Letheras
Tehol Beddict, a citizen in the capital, middle among the Beddict brothers
Hejun, an employee of Tehol
Rissarh, an employee of Tehol
Shand, an employee of Tehol
Chulas, a watchman
Biri, a merchant
Huldo, an establishment proprietor
Bugg, Tehol's servant
Ublala Pung, a criminal
Harlest, a household guard
Ormly, Champion Rat Catcher
Rucket, Chief Investigator, Rat Catchers' Guild
Bubyrd, Rat Catchers' Guild
Glisten, Rat Catchers' Guild
Ruby, Rat Catchers' Guild
Onyx, Rat Catchers' Guild
Scint, Rat Catchers' Guild
Kettle, a child
Shurq Elalle, a thief
Selush, a Dresser of the Dead
Padderunt, assistant to Selush
Urul, chief server in Huldo's
Inchers, a citizen
Hulbat, a citizen
Turtle, a citizen
Unn, a half-blood indigent
Delisp, Matron of the Temple Brothel
Prist, a gardener
Strong Rail, a cut-throat
Green Pig, an infamous mage of old

OTHERS
Withal, a Meckros weaponsmith
Rind, a Nacht
Mape, a Nacht
Pule, a Nacht

The One Within
Silchas Ruin, a Tiste Andii Eleint Soletaken
Scabandari Bloodeye, a Tiste Edur Eleint Soletaken
Gothos, a Jaghut
Rud Elalle, a child
Iron Bars, a soldier
Corlo, a mage
Halfpeck, a soldier
Ulshun Pral, an Imass
PROLOGUE

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 draconean 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 Che’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 army’s heart.

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 bloodkin armies of the three Matrons. Four hundred thousand Tiste Andii, against sixty thousand 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 from coming to the aid of the armies on the plain below. By themselves, the assaults on the four sky keeps had yielded only marginal effect, 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 draconean ally to close on the floating fortresses, unleashing upon them the warrens of Starvald Demelain, and Kuraldu Emurlahn and Galain.

The dragon swept downward to where a jumbled mountain of K’Chain Che’Malle carcasses marked the last stand of one of the Matrons. Kurald Emurlahn 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 atop 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 broad, downturned 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 hanging from his shoulders 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 draconean form. Also sheathed in blood ... and much of it own, for Silchas Ruin had fought alongside his Andii kin against the K'ell Hunters.

Scabandari watched his ally approach, stepping back only when the huge dragon settled onto the hilltop and then quickly semblled. 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 in the warrior's thick, long white hair. The red of his eyes seemed feverish, so brightly did it glow. Silchas Ruin bore wounds: sword-slashes across his body. Most of his upper armour had fallen away, revealing the blue-green of his veins and arteries tracking branching paths beneath the thin, hairless skin of his chest. 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 in spirit. 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 re-formed 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 Forkrul 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 as Scabandari's expression returned 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 Bloodeye? 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, and 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 veered into his draconean form. An enormous taloned foot closed about the motionless 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 Scabandari Bloodeye's path his 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 Irake, who broke with his mother and with his kind. Who then vanished before I could deal with him. Vanished, probably never to be seen again.

And now Silchas Ruin, who in a very short time will know the eternal prison of the Azath.
Scabandari Bloodeye 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 myriad 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? Osserc? 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, with deep blue skin that faded to pale gold at throat and bared belly. Lank blond 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. Osserc 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.

* * *

1159th Year of Bum'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 racked his head, fierce enough to leave him half blind, and it was some time before he finally rocked back to sit up and glare 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. 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 tideline. 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 the 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, and found 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 the strand again – 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 like nothing he had ever seen before, long tubular triangles, razor-edged – as he discovered once he passed through them when he found his low legs crisscrossed with 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 the 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, a 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 slaked, 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, and 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 have already met—'

'The bhoka'ral?' Withal snorted. 'What can—'

'Not bhoka'ral, mortal. Although perhaps they once were. These are Nachts. 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 ...'
BOOK ONE

FROZEN BLOOD
There is a spear of ice, newly thrust into the heart of the land. The soul within it yearns to kill. He who grasps
that spear will know death. Again and again, he shall know death.

Hannan Mosag's Vision
CHAPTER ONE

Listen! The seas whisper
and dream of breaking truths
in the crumbling of stone

Hantallit of Miner Sluice

Year of the Late Frost
One year before the Letherii Seventh Closure
The Ascension of the Empty Hold

Here, then, is the tale. Between the swish of the tides, when giants knelt down and became mountains. When they fell scattered on the land like the ballast stones of the sky, yet could not hold fast against the rising dawn. Between the swish of the tides, we will speak of one such giant. Because the tale hides with his own.

And because it amuses.

Thus.

In darkness he closed his eyes. Only by day did he elect to open them, for he reasoned in this manner: night defies vision and so, if little can be seen, what value seeking to pierce the gloom?

Witness as well, this. He came to the edge of the land and discovered the sea, and was fascinated by the mysterious fluid. A fascination that became a singular obsession through the course of that fated day. He could see how the waves moved, up and down along the entire shore, a ceaseless motion that ever threatened to engulf all the land, yet ever failed to do so. He watched the sea through the afternoon's high winds, witness to its wild thrashing far up along the sloping strand, and sometimes it did indeed reach far, but always it would sullenly retreat once more.

When night arrived, he closed his eyes and lay down to sleep. Tomorrow, he decided, he would look once more upon this sea.

In darkness he closed his eyes.

The tides came with the night, swirling up round the giant. The tides came and drowned him as he slept. And the water seeped minerals into his flesh, until he became as rock, a gnarled ridge on the strand. Then, each night for thousands of years, the tides came to wear away at his form. Stealing his shape.

But not entirely. To see him true, even to this day, one must look in darkness. Or close one's eyes to slits in brightest sunlight. Glance askance, or focus on all but the stone itself.

Of all the gifts Father Shadow has given his children, this one talent stands tallest. Look away to see. Trust in it, and you will be led into Shadow. Where all truths hide.

Look away to see.

Now, look away.

The mice scattered as the deeper shadow flowed across snow brushed blue by dusk. They scampered in wild panic, but, among them, one's fate was already sealed. A lone tufted, taloned foot snapped down, piercing furry flesh and crushing minute bones.

At the clearing's edge, the owl had dropped silently from its branch, sailing out over the hard-packed snow and its litter of seeds, and the arc of its flight, momentarily punctuated by plucking the mouse from the ground, rose up once more, this time in a heavy flapping of wings, towards a nearby tree. It landed one-legged, and a moment later it began to feed.
The figure who jogged across the glade a dozen heartbeats later saw nothing untoward. The mice were all gone, the snow solid enough to leave no signs of their passing, and the owl froze motionless in its hollow amidst the branches of the spruce tree, eyes wide as they followed the figure's progress across the clearing. Once it had passed, the owl resumed feeding.

Dusk belonged to the hunters, and the raptor was not yet done this night.

As he weaved through the frost-rimed humus of the trail, Trull Sengar's thoughts were distant, making him heedless of the forest surrounding him, uncharacteristically distracted from all the signs and details it offered. He had not even paused to make propitiation to Sheltatha Lore, Daughter Dusk, the most cherished of the Three Daughters of Father Shadow – although he would make recompense at tomorrow's sunset – and, earlier, he had moved unmindful through the patches of lingering light that blotted the trail, risking the attention of fickle Sukul Ankhadu, the Daughter of Deceit, also known as Dapple.

The Calach breeding beds swarmed with seals. They'd come early, surprising Trull in his collecting of raw jade above the shoreline. Alone, the arrival of the seals would engender only excitement in the young Tiste Edur, but there had been other arrivals, in ships ringing the bay, and the harvest had been well under way.

Letherii, the white-skinned peoples from the south.

He could imagine the anger of those in the village he now approached, once he delivered the news of his discovery – an anger he shared. This encroachment on Edur territories was brazen, the theft of seals that rightly belonged to his people an arrogant defiance of the old agreements.

There were fools among the Letherii, just as there were fools among the Edur. Trull could not imagine this broaching being anything but unsanctioned. The Great Meeting was only two cycles of the moon away. It served neither side's purpose to spill blood now. No matter that the Edur would be right in attacking and destroying the intruder ships; the Letherii delegation would be outraged at the slaughter of its citizens, even citizens contravening the laws. The chances of agreeing upon a new treaty had just become minuscule.

And this disturbed Trull Sengar. One long and vicious war had just ended for the Edur: the thought of another beginning was too hard to bear.

He had not embarrassed his brothers during the wars of subjugation; on his wide belt was a row of twenty-one red-stained rivets, each one marking a coup, and among those seven were ringed in white paint, to signify actual kills. Only his elder brother's belt sported more trophies among the male children of Tomad Sengar, and that was right and proper, given Fear Sengar's eminence among the warriors of the Hiroth tribe.

Of course, battles against the five other tribes of the Edur were strictly bound in rules and prohibitions, and even vast, protracted battles had yielded only a handful of actual deaths. Even so, the conquests had been exhausting. Against the Letherii, there were no rules to constrain the Edur warriors. No counting coup. Just killing. Nor did the enemy need a weapon in hand – even the helpless and the innocent would know the sword's bite. Such slaughter stained warrior and victim alike.

But Trull well knew that, though he might decry the killing that was to come, he would do so only to himself, and he would stride alongside his brothers, sword in hand, to deliver the Edur judgement upon the trespassers. There was no choice. Turn away from this crime and more would follow, in waves unending.

His steady jog brought him past the tanneries, with their troughs and stone-lined pits, to the forest edge. A few Letherii slaves glanced his way, quickly bowing in deference until he was past. The towering cedar logs of the village wall rose from the clearing ahead, over which woodsmoke hung in stretched streams. Fields of rich black soil spread out to either side of the narrow, raised track leading to the distant gate. Winter had only just begun to release its grip on the earth, and the first planting of the season was still weeks away. By midsummer, close to thirty different types of plants would fill these fields, providing food, medicine, fibres and feed for the livestock, many among the thirty of a flowering variety, drawing the bees from which honey and wax were procured. The tribe's women oversaw the slaves in such harvesting. The men would leave in small groups to journey into the forest, to cut timber or hunt, whilst others set out in the Knarri ships to harvest from the seas and shoals.
Or so it should be, when peace ruled the tribes. The past dozen years had seen more war-parties setting out than any other kind, and so the people had on occasion suffered. Until the war, hunger had never threatened the Edur. Trull wanted an end to such depredations. Hannan Mosag, Warlock King of the Hiroth, was now overlord to all the Edur tribes. From a host of warring peoples, a confederacy had been wrought, although Trull well knew that it was a confederacy in name only. Hannan Mosag held as hostage the firstborn sons of the subjugated chiefs – his K'risnan Cadre – and ruled as dictator. Peace, then, at the point of a sword, but peace none the less.

A recognizable figure was striding from the palisade gate, approaching the fork in the trail where Trull now halted. 'I greet you, Binadas,' he said.

A spear was strapped to his younger brother's back, a hide pack slung round one shoulder and resting against a hip; at the opposite side a single-edged longsword in a leather-wrapped wooden scabbard. Binadas was half a head taller than Trull, his visage as weathered as his buckskin clothes. Of Trull's three brothers, Binadas was the most remote, evasive and thus difficult to predict, much less understand. He resided in the village only infrequently, seeming to prefer the wilds of the western forest and the mountains to the south. He had rarely joined others in raids, yet often when he returned he carried trophies of coup, and so none doubted his bravery.

'You are winded, Trull,' Binadas observed, 'and I see distress once more upon your face.'

'There are Letherii moored off the Calach beds.'

Binadas frowned. 'I shall not delay you, then.'

'Will you be gone long, brother?'

The man shrugged, then stepped past Trull, taking the westerly fork of the trail.

Trull Sengar moved on, through the gate and into the village.

Four smithies dominated this inland end of the vast walled interior, each surrounded by a deep sloping trench that drained into a buried channel that led away from the village and the surrounding fields. For what seemed years the forges had rung almost ceaselessly with the fashioning of weapons, and the stench of heavy, acrid fumes had filled the air, rising up to coat nearby trees in white-crusted soot. Now, as he passed, Trull saw that only two were occupied, and the dozen or so visible slaves were unhurried in their work.

Beyond the smithies ran the elongated, brick-lined storage chambers, a row of segmented beehive-shaped buildings that held surplus grains, smoked fish and seal meat, whale oil and harvested fibre plants. Similar structures existed in the deep forest surrounding each village – most of which were empty at the moment, a consequence of the wars.

The stone houses of the weavers, potters, carvers, lesser scribes, armourers and other assorted skilled citizens of the village rose round Trull once he was past the storage chambers. Voices called out in greeting, to which he made the minimal response that decorum allowed, such gestures signifying to his acquaintances that he could not pause for conversation.

The Edur warrior now hurried through the residential streets. Letherii slaves called villages such as this one cities, but no citizen saw the need for changing their word usage – a village it had been at birth, thus a village it would always be, no matter that almost twenty thousand Edur and thrice that number of Letherii now resided within it.

Shrines to the Father and his Favoured Daughter dominated the residential area, raised platforms ringed by living trees of the sacred Blackwood, the surface of the stone discs crowded with images and glyphs. Kurald Emurlahn played ceaselessly within the tree-ringed circle, rippling half-shapes dancing along the pictographs, the sorcerous emanations awakened by the propitiations that had accompanied the arrival of dusk.

Trull Sengar emerged onto the Avenue of the Warlock, the sacred approach to the massive citadel that was both temple and palace, and the seat of the Warlock King, Hannan Mosag. Black-barked cedars lined the approach. The trees were a thousand years old, towering over the entire village. They were devoid of branches
except for the uppermost reaches. Invested sorcery suffused every ring of their midnight wood, bleeding out to fill the entire avenue with a shroud of gloom.

At the far end, a lesser palisade enclosed the citadel and its grounds, constructed of the same black wood, these boles crowded with carved wards. The main gate was a tunnel formed of living trees, a passage of unrelieved shadow leading to a footbridge spanning a canal in which sat a dozen K'orthan raider longboats. The footbridge opened out onto a broad flagstoned compound flanked by barracks and storehouses. Beyond stood the stone and timber longhouses of the noble families — those with blood-ties to Hannan Mosag's own line — with their wood-shingled roofs and Blackwood ridgepoles, the array of residences neatly bisected by a resumption of the Avenue, across yet another footbridge to the citadel proper.

There were warriors training in the compound, and Trull saw the tall, broad-shouldered figure of his elder brother, Fear, standing with a half-dozen of his assistants nearby, watching the weapons practice. A pang of sympathy for those young warriors flickered through Trull. He himself had suffered beneath his brother's critical, unrelenting eye during the years of his own schooling.

A voice hailed him and Trull glanced over to the other side of the compound, to see his youngest brother, Rhulad, and Midik Buhn. They had been doing their own sparring, it seemed, and a moment later Trull saw the source of their uncharacteristic diligence — Mayen, Fear's betrothed, had appeared with four younger women in tow, probably on their way to the market, given the dozen slaves accompanying them. That they had stopped to watch the sudden, no doubt impromptu martial demonstration was of course obligatory, given the complex rules of courtship. Mayen was expected to treat all of Fear's brothers with appropriate respect.

Although there was nothing untoward in the scene Trull looked upon, he nevertheless felt a tremor of unease. Rhulad's eagerness to strut before the woman who would be his eldest brother's wife had crept to the very edge of proper conduct. Fear was, in Trull's opinion, displaying far too much indulgence when it came to Rhulad.

As have we all. Of course, there were reasons for that.

Rhulad had clearly bested his childhood companion in the mock contest, given the flushed pride in his handsome face. 'Trull!' He waved his sword. 'I have drawn blood once this day, and now thirst for more! Come, scrape the rust off that sword at your side!'

'Some other time, brother,' Trull called back. 'I must speak with our father without delay.'

Rhulad's grin was amiable enough, but even from ten paces away Trull saw the flash of triumph in his clear grey eyes. 'Another time, then,' he said, with a final dismissive wave of his sword as he turned back to face the women.

But Mayen had gestured to her companions and the party was already moving off.

Rhulad opened his mouth to say something to her, but Trull spoke first. 'Brother, I invite you to join me. The news I must give our father is of grave import, and I would that you are present, so that your words are woven into the discussion that will follow.'

'I am honoured, Trull,' he said, sheathing his sword.

As have we all, standing alone and tending to a sword-cut on his wrist, Rhulad joined Trull and they strode to the family longhouse.

Trophy shields cluttered the outside walls, many of them sun-faded by the centuries. Whale bones clung to the underside of the roof's overhang. Totems stolen from rival tribes formed a chaotic arch over the doorway, the strips of fur, beaded hide, shells, talons and teeth looking like an elongated bird's nest.

They passed within.

The air was cool, slightly acrid with woodsmoke. Oil lamps sat in niches along the walls, between tapestries and stretched furs. The traditional hearthstone in the centre of the chamber, where each family had once prepared its meals, remained stoked with tinder, although the slaves now worked in kitchens behind the
longhouse proper, to reduce the risk of fires. Blackwood furniture marked out the various rooms, although no dividing walls were present. Hung from hooks on the crossbeams were scores of weapons, some from the earliest days, when the art of forging iron had been lost in the dark times immediately following Father Shadow's disappearance, the rough bronze of these weapons pitted and warped.

Just beyond the hearthstone rose the bole of a living Blackwood, from which the gleaming upper third of a longsword thrust upward and outward at just above head height: a true Emurlahn blade, the iron treated in some manner the smiths had yet to rediscover. The sword of the Sengar family, signifier of their noble bloodline; normally, these original weapons of the noble families, bound against the tree when it was but a sapling, were, after centuries, gone from sight, lying as they did along the heartwood. But some twist in this particular tree had pried the weapon away, thus revealing that black and silver blade. Uncommon, but not unique.

Both brothers reached out and touched the iron as they passed.

They saw their mother, Uruth, flanked by slaves as she worked on the bloodline's tapestry, finishing the final scenes of the Sengar participation in the War of Unification. Intent on her work, she did not look up as her sons strode past.

Tomad Sengar sat with three other noble-born patriarchs around a game board fashioned from a huge palmate antler, the playing pieces carved from ivory and jade.

Trull halted at the edge of the circle. He settled his right hand over the pommel of his sword, signifying that the words he brought were both urgent and potentially dangerous. Behind him, he heard Rhulad's quickly indrawn breath.

Although none of the elders looked up, Tomad's guests rose as one, while Tomad himself began putting away the game pieces. The three elders departed in silence, and a moment later Tomad set the game board to one side and settled back on his haunches.

Trull settled down opposite him. 'I greet you, Father. A Letherii fleet is harvesting the Calach beds. The herds have come early, and are now being slaughtered. I witnessed these things with my own eyes, and have not paused in my return.'

Tomad nodded. 'You have run for three days and two nights, then.'

'I have.'

'And the Letherii harvest, it was well along?'

'Father, by dawn this morning, Daughter Menandore will have witnessed the ships' holds filled to bursting, and the sails filling with wind, the wake of every ship a crimson river.'

'And new ships arriving to take their places!' Rhulad hissed.

Tomad frowned at his youngest son's impropriety, and made his disapproval clear with his next words. 'Rhulad, take this news to Hannan Mosag.'

Trull sensed his brother's flinch, but Rhulad nodded. 'As you command, Father.' He pivoted and marched away.

Tomad's frown deepened. 'You invited an unblooded warrior to this exchange?'

'I did, Father.'

'Why?'

Trull said nothing, as was his choice. He was not about to voice his concern over Rhulad's undue attentions towards Fear's betrothed.

After a moment, Tomad sighed. He seemed to be studying his large, scarred hands where they rested on his thighs. 'We have grown complacent,' he rumbled.
'Father, is it complacency to assume the ones with whom we treat are honourable?'

'Yes, given the precedents.'

'Then why has the Warlock King agreed to a Great Meeting with the Letherii?'

Tomad's dark eyes flicked up to pin Trull's own. Of all Tomad's sons, only Fear possessed a perfect, unwavering match to his father's eyes, in hue and indurative regard. Despite himself, Trull felt himself wilt slightly beneath that scornful gaze.

'I withdraw my foolish question,' Trull said, breaking contact to disguise his dismay. A measuring of enemies. This contravention, no matter its original intent, will become a double-pointed blade, given the inevitable response to it by the Edur. A blade both peoples shall grasp. The unblooded warriors will be pleased.'

'The unblooded warriors shall one day sit in the council, Trull.'

'Is that not the reward of peace, Father?'

Tomad made no reply to that. 'Hannan Mosag shall call the council. You must needs be present to relate what you witnessed. Further, the Warlock King has made a request of me, that I give my sons to him for a singular task. I do not think that decision will be affected by the news you deliver.'

Trull worked through his surprise, then said, 'I passed Binadas on the way into the village—'

'He has been informed, and will return within a moon's time.'

'Does Rhulad know of this?'

'No, although he will accompany you. An unblooded is an unblooded.'

'As you say, Father.'

'Now, rest. You shall be awakened in time for the council.'

A white crow hopped down from a salt-bleached root and began picking through the midden. At first Trull had thought it to be a gull, lingering on the strand in the fast-fading light, but then it cackled and, mussel shell in its pallid beak, sidled down from the midden towards the waterline.

Sleep had proved an impossibility. The council had been called for midnight. Restless, nerves jangling along his exhausted limbs, Trull had walked down to the pebble beach north of the village and the river mouth.

And now, as darkness rolled in with the sleepy waves, he had found himself sharing the strand with a white crow. It had carried its prize down to the very edge, and with each whispering approach, the bird dipped the mussel shell into the water. Six times.

A fastidious creature, Trull observed, watching as the crow hopped onto a nearby rock and began picking at the shell.

White was evil, of course. Common enough knowledge. The blush of bone, Menandore's hateful light at dawn. The sails of the Letherii were white, as well, which was not surprising. And the clear waters of Calach Bay would reveal the glimmer of white cluttering the sea bottom, from the bones of thousands of slaughtered seals.

This season would have marked a return to surplus for the six tribes, beginning the replenishment of depleted reserves to guard against famine. Thoughts that led him to another way of seeing this illegal harvesting. A perfectly timed gesture to weaken the confederacy, a ploy intended to undermine the Edur position at the Great Meeting. The argument of inevitability. The same argument first thrown into our faces with the settlements on the Reach. "The kingdom of Lether is expanding, its needs growing. Your camps on the Reach were seasonal, after all, and with the war they had been all but abandoned.'
It was inevitable that more and more independent ships would come to ply the rich waters of the north coast. One could not police them all. The Edur need only look at other tribes that had once dwelt beyond the Letherii borderlands, the vast rewards that came with swearing fealty to King Ezgara Diskanar of Lether.

*But we are not as other tribes.*

The crow cackled from atop its stone throne, flinging the mussel shell away with a toss of its head, then, spreading its ghostly wings, rose up into the night. A final drawn out cawl from the darkness. Trull made a warding gesture.

Stones turned underfoot behind him and he swung about to see his elder brother approaching.

'I greet you, Trull,' Fear said in a quiet voice. 'The words you delivered have roused the warriors.'

'And the Warlock King?'

'Has said nothing.'

Trull returned to his study of the dark waves hissing on the strand. 'Their eyes are fixed upon those ships,' he said.

'Hannan Mosag knows to look away, brother.'

'He has asked for the sons of Tomad Sengar. What do you know of that?'

Fear was at his side now, and Trull sensed his shrug. 'Visions have guided the Warlock King since he was a child,' Fear said after a moment. 'He carries blood memories all the way back to the Dark Times. Father Shadow stretches before him with every stride he takes.'

The notion of visions made Trull uneasy. He did not doubt their power – in fact, the very opposite. The Dark Times had come with the rivening of Tiste Edur, the assault of sorceries and strange armies and the disappearance of Father Shadow himself. And, although the magic of Kurald Emurlahn was not denied to the tribes, the warren was lost to them: shattered, the fragments ruled by false kings and gods. Trull suspected that Hannan Mosag possessed an ambition far vaster than simply unifying the six tribes.

'There is reluctance in you, Trull. You hide it well enough, but I can see where others cannot. You are a warrior who would rather not fight.'

'That is not a crime,' Trull muttered, then he added: 'Of all the Sengar, only you and Father carry more trophies.'

'I was not questioning your bravery, brother. But courage is the least of that which binds us. We are Edur. We were masters of the Hounds, once. We held the throne of Kurald Emurlahn. And would hold it still, if not for betrayal, first by the kin of Scabandari Bloodeye, then by the Tiste Andii who came with us to this world. We are a beset people, Trull. The Letherii are but one enemy among many. The Warlock King understands this.'

Trull studied the glimmer of starlight on the placid surface of the bay. 'I will not hesitate in fighting those who would be our enemies, Fear.'

'That is good, brother. It is enough to keep Rhulad silent, then.'

Trull stiffened. 'He speaks against me? That unblooded ... pup?'

'Where he sees weakness ...'

'What he sees and what is true are different things,' Trull said.

'Then show him otherwise,' Fear said in his low, calm voice.

Trull was silent. He had been openly dismissive of Rhulad and his endless challenges and postures, as was
his right given that Rhulad was unblooded. But more significantly, Trull's reasons were raised like a protective wall around the maiden that Fear was to wed. Of course, to voice such things now would be unseemly, whispering as they would of spite and malice. After all, Mayen was Fear's betrothed, not Trull's, and her protection was Fear's responsibility.

Things would be simpler, he ruefully reflected, if he had a sense of Mayen herself. She did not invite Rhulad's attention, but nor did she turn a shoulder to it. She walked the cliff-edge of propriety, as self-assured as any maiden would – and should – be when privileged to become the wife of the Hiroth's Weapons Master. It was not, he told himself once again, any of his business. 'I will not show Rhulad what he should already see,' Trull growled. 'He has done nothing to warrant the gift of my regard.'

'Rhulad lacks the subtlety to see your reluctance as anything but weakness—'

'His failing, not mine!'

'Do you expect a blind elder to cross a stream's stepping stones unaided, Trull? No, you guide him until in his mind's eye he finally sees that which everyone else can see.'

'If everyone else can see,' Trull replied, 'then Rhulad's words against me are powerless, and so I am right to ignore them.'

'Brother, Rhulad is not alone in lacking subtlety.'

'Is it your wish, Fear, that there be enemies among the sons of Tomad Sengar?'

'Rhulad is not an enemy, not of you nor of any other Edur. He is young and eager for blood. You once walked his path, so I ask that you remember yourself back then. This is not the time to deliver wounds sure to scar. And, to an unblooded warrior, disdain delivers the deepest wound of all.'

Trull grimaced. 'I see the truth of that, Fear. I shall endeavour to curtail my indifference. '

His brother did not react to the sarcasm. 'The council is gathering in the citadel, brother. Will you enter the King's Hall at my side?'

Trull relented. 'I am honoured, Fear.'

They turned away from the black water, and so did not see the pale-winged shape gliding over the lazy waves a short distance offshore.

Thirteen years ago Udinaas had been a young sailor in the third year of his family's indenture to the merchant Intaros of Trate, the northernmost city of Lether. He was aboard the whaler *Brunt* and on the return run from Beneda waters. They had slipped in under cover of darkness, killing three sows, and were towing the carcasses into the neutral Troughs west of Calach Bay when five K'orthan ships of the Hiroth were sighted in hard pursuit.

The captain's greed had spelled their doom, as he would not abandon the kills.

Udinaas well remembered the faces of the whaler's officers, the captain included, as they were bound to one of the sows to be left to the sharks and dhenrabi, whilst the common sailors were taken off the ship, along with every piece of iron and every other item that caught the Edur's fancy. Shadow wraiths were then loosed on the *Brunt*, to devour and tear apart the dead wood of the Letherii ship. Towing the other two sows, the five Blackwood K'orthan ships then departed, leaving the third whale to the slayers of the deep.

Even back then, Udinaas had been indifferent to the grisly fate of the captain and his officers. He had been born into debt, as had his father and his father before him. Indenture and slavery were two words for the same thing. Nor was life as a slave among the Hiroth particularly harsh. Obedience was rewarded with protection, clothing and a dwelling sheltered from the rain and snow, and, until recently, plenty of food.

Among Udinaas's many tasks within the household of the Sengar was the repair of nets for the four Knarri fisher-boats owned by the noble family. Because he had been a sailor, he was not permitted to leave land, and
knotting the nets and affixing weight-stones down on the strand south of the river mouth was as close as he ever came to the open waters of the sea. Not that he had any desire to escape the Edur. There were plenty of slaves in the village – all Letherii, of course – so he did not miss the company of his own kind, miserable as it often was. Nor were the comforts of Lether sufficient lure to attempt what was virtually impossible anyway – he had memory of seeing such comforts, but never of partaking in them. And finally, Udinaas hated the sea with a passion, just as he had done when he was a sailor.

In the failing light he had seen the two eldest sons of Tomad Sengar on the beach on the other side of the river mouth, and was not surprised to hear the faint, indistinguishable words they exchanged. Letherii ships had struck again – the news had raced among the slaves before young Rhulad had even reached the entrance of the citadel. A council had been called, which was to be expected, and Udinaas assumed that there would be slaughter before too long, that deadly, terrifying merging of iron-edged ferocity and sorcery that marked every clash with the Letherii of the south. And, truth be told, Udinaas wished them good hunting. Seals taken by the Letherii threatened famine among the Edur, and in famine it was the slaves who were the first to suffer.

Udinaas well understood his own kind. To the Letherii, gold was all that mattered. Gold and its possession defined their entire world. Power, status, self-worth and respect – all were commodities that could be purchased by coin. Indeed, debt bound the entire kingdom, defining every relationship, the motivation casting the shadow of every act, every decision. This devious hunting of the seals was the opening move in a ploy the Letherii had used countless times, against every tribe beyond the borderlands. To the Letherii, the Edur were no different. But they are, you fools.

Even so, the next move would come at the Great Meeting, and Udinaas suspected that the Warlock King and his advisers, clever as they were, would walk into that treaty like blind elders. What worried him was all that would follow.

Like hatchlings borne on the tide, the peoples of two kingdoms were rushing headlong into deep, deadly waters.

Three slaves from the Buhn household trotted past, bundles of bound seaweed on their shoulders. One called out to Udinaas, 'Feather Witch will cast tonight, Udinaas! Even as the council gathers.'

Udinaas began folding the net over the drying rack. 'I will be there, Hulad.'

The three left the strand, and Udinaas was alone once more. He glanced north and saw Fear and Trull walking up the slope towards the outer wall’s postern gate.

Finished with the net, he placed his tools in the small basket and fastened the lid, then straightened.

He heard the flap of wings behind him and turned, startled by the sound of a bird in flight so long after the sun had set. A pale shape skimmed the waterline, and was gone.

Udinaas blinked, straining to see it again, telling himself that it was not what it had appeared to be. Not that. Anything but that. He moved to his left to a bare patch of sand. Crouching, he quickly sketched an invoking sigil into the sand with the small finger of his left hand, lifting his right hand to his face, first two fingers reaching to his eyes to pull the lids down for a brief moment, as he whispered a prayer, 'Knuckles cast, Saviour look down upon me this night. Errant! Look down upon us all!'

He lowered his right hand and dropped his gaze to the symbol he had drawn.

'Crow, begone!'

The sigh of wind, the murmur of waves. Then a distant cackle.

Shivering, Udinaas bolted upright. Snatching up the basket, he ran for the gate.

The King's Meet was a vast, circular chamber, the Blackwood boles of the ceiling reaching up to a central peak lost in smoke. Unblooded warriors of noble birth stood at the very edge, the outermost ring of those attending to witness the council. Next, and seated on backed benches, were the matrons, the wedded and widowed women. Then came the unwedded and the betrothed, cross-legged on hides. A pace before them, the floor
dropped an arm's length to form a central pit of packed earth where sat the warriors. At the very centre was a raised dais, fifteen paces across, where stood the Warlock King, Hannan Mosag, with the five hostage princes seated around him, facing outward.

As Trull and Fear descended to the pit to take their place among the blooded warriors, Trull stared up at his king. Of average height and build, Hannan Mosag seemed unprepossessing at first glance. His features were even, a shade paler than most Edur, and there was a wide cast to his eyes that gave him a perpetually surprised look. The power, then, was not physical. It lay entirely in his voice. Rich and deep, it was a voice that demanded to be listened to without regard to volume.

Standing in silence, as he did now, Hannan Mosag's claim to kingship seemed a mere accident of placement, as if he had wandered into the centre of the huge chamber, and now looked about with a vaguely bemused expression. His clothing was no different from that of any other warriors, barring the absence of trophies – for his trophies, after all, were seated around him on the dais, the first sons of the five subjugated chiefs.

A more concerted study of the Warlock King revealed another indication of his power. His shadow reared behind him. Huge, hulking. Long, indistinct but deadly swords gripped in both gauntleted hands. Helmed, the shoulders angular with plates of armour. Hannan Mosag's shadow wraith bodyguard never slept. There was, Trull reflected, nothing bemused in its wide stance.

Few warlocks were capable of conjuring such a creature when drawing from the life-force of their own shadows. Kurald Emurlahn flowed raw and brutal in that silent, ever-vigilant sentinel.

Trull's gaze fell to those of the hostages facing him. The K'risnan. More than representatives of their fathers, they were Hannan Mosag's apprentices in sorcery. Their names had been different from that of any other warriors, barring the absence of trophies – for their trophies, after all, were seated around him on the dais, the first sons of the five subjugated chiefs.

The hostage from the Merude tribe was directly opposite Trull. Largest of the six tribes, the Merude had been the last to capitulate. They had always maintained that, with their numbers approaching one hundred thousand, forty thousand of which were blooded or soon-to-be-blooded warriors, they should by right have held pre-eminence among the Edur. More warriors, more ships, and ruled by a chief with more trophies at his belt than had been seen in generations. Domination belonged to the Merude.

Or it should have, if not for Hannan Mosag's extraordinary mastery of those fragments of Kurald Emurlahn from which power could be drawn. Chief Hanradi Khalag's skill with the spear far outweighed his capacity as a warlock.

No-one but Hannan Mosag and Hanradi Khalag knew the details of that final surrendering. Merude had been holding strong against the Hiroth and their contingents of Arapay, Sollanta, Den-Ratha and Beneda warriors, and the ritual constraints of the war were fast unravelling, in their place an alarming brutality born of desperation. The ancient laws had been on the verge of shattering.

One night, Hannan Mosag had walked, somehow unseen by anyone, into the chief's village, into the ruler's own longhouse. And by the first light of Menandore's cruel awakening, Hanradi Khalag had surrendered his people.

Trull did not know what to make of the tales that persisted, that Hanradi no longer cast a shadow. He had never seen the Merude chief.

That man's first son now sat before him, head shaved to denote the sundering from his bloodline, a skein of deep-cut, wide scars ribboning his face with shadows, his eyes flat and watchful, as if anticipating an assassination attempt here in the Warlock King's own hall.

The oil lamps suspended from the high ceiling flickered as one, and everyone grew still, eyes fixing on Hannan Mosag.

Though he did not raise his voice, its deep timbre reached across the vast space, leaving none with the necessity to strain to hear his words. 'Rhulad, unblooded warrior and son of Tomad Sengar, has brought to me
words from his brother, Trull Sengar. This warrior had travelled to the Calach shore seeking jade. He was witness to a dire event, and has run without pause for three days and two nights.' Hannan Mosag’s eyes fixed on Trull. 'Rise to stand at my side, Trull Sengar, and relate your tale.'

He walked the path the other warriors made for him and leapt up onto the raised dais, fighting to disguise the exhaustion in his legs that made him come close to sagging with the effort. Straightening, he stepped between two K’risnan and positioned himself to the right of the Warlock King. He looked out onto the array of upturned faces, and saw that what he would say was already known to most of them. Expressions dark with anger and a hunger for vengeance. Here and there, frowns of concern and dismay.

'I bring these words to the council. The tusked seals have come early to the breeding beds. Beyond the shallows I saw the sharks that leap in numbers beyond counting. And in their midst, nineteen Letherii ships—'

'Nineteen!' A half-hundred voices uttered that cry in unison. An uncharacteristic breach of propriety, but understandable none the less. Trull waited a moment, then resumed. 'Their holds were almost full, for they sat low in the water, and the waters around them were red with blood and offal. Their harvest boats were alongside the great ships. In the fifty heartbeats that I stood and watched, I was witness to hundreds of seal carcasses rising on hooks to swing into waiting hands. On the strand itself twenty boats waited in the shallows and seventy men were on the beach, among the seals—'

'Did they see you?' one warrior asked.

It seemed Hannan Mosag was prepared to ignore the rules – for the time being at least.

'They did, and checked their slaughter ... for a moment. I saw their mouths move, though I could not hear their words above the roar of the seals, and I saw them laugh—'

Rage erupted among the gathering. Warriors leapt upright.

Hannan Mosag snapped out a hand.

Sudden silence.

'Trull Sengar is not yet finished his tale.'

Clearing his throat, Trull nodded. 'You see me before you now, warriors, and those of you who know me will also know my preferred weapon – the spear. When have you seen me without my iron-hafted slayer of foes? Alas, I have surrendered it ... in the chest of the one who first laughed.'

A roar answered his words.

Hannan Mosag settled a hand on Trull’s shoulder, and the young warrior stepped aside. The Warlock King scanned the faces before him for a moment, then spoke. 'Trull Sengar did as every warrior of the Edur would do. His deed has heartened me. Yet here he now stands, weaponless.'

Trull stiffened beneath the weight of that hand.

'And so, in measured thought, such as must be made by a king,' Hannan Mosag went on, 'I find I must push my pride to one side, and look beyond it. To what is signified. A thrown spear. A dead Letherii. A disarmed Edur. And now, I see upon the faces of my treasured warriors a thousand flung spears, a thousand dead Letherii. A thousand disarmed Edur.'

No-one spoke. No-one countered with the obvious retort: We have many spears.

'I see the hunger for vengeance. The Letherii raiders must be slain. Even as prelude to the Great Meeting, for their slaying was desired. Our reaction was anticipated, for these are the games the Letherii would play with our lives. Shall we do as they intended? Of course. There can be but one answer to their crime. And thus, by our predictability, we serve an unknown design, which shall no doubt be unveiled at the Great Meeting.'
Deep-etched frowns. Undisguised confusion. Hannan Mosag had led them into the unfamiliar territory of complexity. He had brought them to the edge of an unknown path, and now would lead them forward, step by tentative step.

'The raiders will die,' the Warlock King resumed, 'but not one of you shall spill their blood. We do as predicted, but in a manner they could not imagine. There will be a time for slaughter of the Letherii, but this is not that time. Thus, I promise you blood, my warriors. But not now. The raiders shall not know the honour of dying at your hands. Their fates shall be found within Kurald Emurlahn.'

Despite himself, Trull Sengar shivered.

Silence once more in the hall.

'A full unveiling,' Hannan Mosag continued in a rumble, 'by my K'risnan. No weapon, no armour, shall avail the Letherii. Their mages will be blind and lost, incapable of countering that which arrives to take them. The raiders will die in pain and in terror. Soiled by fear, weeping like children – and that fate will be writ on their faces, there for those who find them.'

Trull's heart was pounding, his mouth bone-dry. A full unveiling. What long-lost power had Hannan Mosag stumbled upon? The last full unveiling of Kurald Emurlahn had been by Scabandari Bloodeye, Father Shadow himself. Before the warren had been sundered. And that sundering had not healed. It would, Trull suspected, never be healed. Even so, some fragments were vaster and more powerful than others. Had the Warlock King discovered a new one?

Faded, battered and chipped, the ceramic tiles lay scattered before Feather Witch. The casting was done, even as Udinaas stumbled into the mote-filled barn to bring word of the omen – to warn the young slave woman away from a scanning of the Holds. Too late. Too late.

A hundred slaves had gathered for the event, fewer than was usual, but not surprising, since many Edur warriors would have charged their own slaves with tasks of preparation for the anticipated skirmish. Heads turned as Udinaas entered the circle. His eyes remained fixed on Feather Witch.

Her soul had already walked well back on the Path to the Holds. Her head drooped, chin between the prominent bones of her clavicles, thick yellow hair hanging down, and rhythmic trembling ran through her small, child-like body. Feather Witch had been born in the village eighteen years ago, a rare winter birth – rare in that she had survived – and her gifts had become known before her fourth year, when her dreams walked back and spoke in the voices of the ancestors. The old tiles of the Holds had been dug up from the grave of the last Letherii in the village who'd possessed the talent, and given to the child. There had been none to teach her the mysteries of those tiles, but, as it turned out, she'd needed no instruction from mortals – ghostly ancestors had provided that.

She was a handmaid to Mayen, and, upon Mayen's marriage to Fear Sengar, she would enter the Sengar household. And Udinaas was in love with her.

Hopeless, of course. Feather Witch would be given a husband from among the better born of the Letherii slaves, a man whose bloodline held title and power back in Letheras. An Indebted, such as Udinaas, had no hope of such a pairing.

As he stood staring at her, his friend Hulad reached up and took his wrist. Gentle pressure drew Udinaas down to a cross-legged position amidst the other witnesses.

Hulad leaned close. 'What ails you, Udinaas?'

'She has cast ...'

'Aye, and now we wait while she walks.'

'I saw a white crow.'

Hulad flinched back.
'Down on the strand. I beseeched the Errant, to no avail. The crow but laughed at my words.'

Their exchange had been overheard, and murmurs rippled out among the witnesses.

Feather Witch's sudden moan silenced the gathering. All eyes fixed upon her, as she slowly raised her head.

Her eyes were empty, the whites clear as the ice on a mountain stream, iris and pupils vanished as if they had never been. And through the translucence swam twin spirals of faint light, smeared against the blackness of the Abyss.

Terror twisted her once-beautiful features, the terror of Beginnings, the soul standing before oblivion. A place of such loneliness that despair seemed the only answer. Yet it was also the place where power was thought, and thought flickered through the Abyss bereft of Makers, born from flesh yet to exist – for only the mind could reach back into the past, only its thoughts could dwell there. She was in the time before the worlds, and now must stride forward.

To witness the rise of the Holds.

Udinaas, like all Letherii, knew the sequences and the forms. First would come the three Fulcra known as the Realm Forgers. Fire, the silent scream of light, the very swirl of the stars themselves. Then Dolmen, bleak and rootless, drifting aimless in the void. And into the path of these two forces, the Errant. Bearer of its own unknowable laws, it would draw Fire and Dolmen into fierce wars. Vast fields of destructions, instance upon instance of mutual annihilation. But occasionally, rarely, there would be peace made between the two contestants. And Fire would bathe but not burn, and Dolmen would surrender its wandering ways, and so find root.

The Errant would then weave its mysterious skein, forging the Holds themselves. Ice. Eleint. Azath. Beast. And into their midst would emerge the remaining Fulcra. Axe, Knuckles, Blade, the Pack, Shapefinder and White Crow.

Then, as the realms took shape, the spiralling light would grow sharper, and the final Hold would be revealed. The Hold that had existed, unseen, at the very beginning. The Empty Hold – heart of Letherii worship – that was at the very centre of the vast spiral of realms. Home to the Throne that knew no King, home to the Wanderer Knight, and to the Mistress who waited still, alone in her bed of dreams. To the Watcher, who witnessed all, and the Walker, who patrolled borders not even he could see. To the Saviour, whose outstretched hand was never grasped. And, finally, to the Betrayer, whose loving embrace destroyed all it touched.

'Walk with me to the Holds.'

The witnesses sighed as one, unable to resist that sultry, languid invitation.

'We stand upon Dolmen. Broken rock, pitted by shattered kin, its surface seething with life so small it escapes our eyes. Life locked in eternal wars. Blade and Knuckles. We are among the Beasts. I can see the Bone Perch, slick with blood and layered with the ghost memories of countless usurpers. I see the Elder, still faceless, still blind. And Crone, who measures the cost in the scrawling passage of behemoths. Seer, who speaks to the indifferent. I see Shaman, seeking truths among the dead. And Hunter, who lives in the moment and thinks nothing of the consequences of slaughter. And Tracker, who sees the signs of the unknown, and walks the endless paths of tragedy. The Hold of the Beast, here in this valley that is but a scratch upon Dolmen's hard skin.

'There is no-one upon Bone Perch. Chaos hones every weapon, and the killing goes on and on. And from the maelstrom powerful creatures arise, and the slaying reaches beyond measure.

'Such powers must be answered. The Errant returns, and casts the seed into blood-soaked earth. Thus rises the Hold of the Azath.

'Deadly shelter for the tyrants, oh they are so easily lured. And so balance is achieved. But it remains a grisly balance, yes? No cessation to the wars, although they are much diminished, so that, finally, their cruel ways come into focus.'
Her voice was like sorcery unbound. Its rough-edged song entranced, devoured, unveiled vistas into the minds of all those who heard it. Feather Witch had walked from the terror of the Beginnings, and there was no fear in her words.

'But the tread of time is itself a prison. We are shackled with progression. And so the Errant comes once more, and the Ice Hold rises, with its attendant servants who journey through the realms to war against time. Walker, Huntress, Shaper, Bearer, Child and Seed. And upon the Throne of Ice sits Death, cowled and frost-rimmed, stealer of caring, to shatter the anxious shackles of mortal life. It is a gift, but a cold one.

'Then, to achieve balance once more, is born the Eleint, and chaos is given flesh, and that flesh is draconic. Ruled by the Queen, who must be slain again and again by every child she bears. And her Consort, who loves none but himself. Then Liege, servant and guardian and doomed to eternal failure. Knight, the very sword of chaos itself – 'ware his path! And Gate, that which is the Breath. Wyval, spawn of the dragons, and the Lady, the Sister, Blood-Drinker and Path-Shaper. The Fell Dragons.

'One Hold remains ...

Udinaas spoke with the others as they whispered, 'The Empty Hold.'

Feather Witch tilted her head suddenly, a frown marring her forehead. 'Something circles above the Empty Throne. I cannot see it, yet it ... circles. A pallid hand, severed and dancing ... no, it is—'

She stiffened, then red spurted from wounds on her shoulders, and she was lifted from the ground.

Screams, the witnesses surging to their feet, rushing forward, arms outstretched.

But too late, as invisible talons clenched tighter and invisible wings thundered the dusty air of the barn. Carrying Feather Witch into the shadows beneath the curved ceiling. She shrieked.

Udinaas, heart hammering in his chest, pushed away, through the jostling bodies, to the wooden stairs reaching to the loft. Splinters stabbed his hands as he clawed his way up the steep, rough-hewn steps. Feather Witch's shrieks filled the air now, as she thrashed in the grip of the unseen talons. But crows have no talons—

He reached the loft, skidding as he raced across its uneven planks, eyes fixed on Feather Witch, then, one step from the edge, he leapt into the air. Arms outstretched, he sailed over the heads of the crowd below.

His target was the swirling air above her, the place where the invisible creature hovered. And when he reached that place, he collided hard with a massive, scaled body. Leathery wings hammered wildly at him as he wrapped his arms tight about a clammy, muscle-clenched body. He heard a wild hiss, then a jaw snapped down over his left shoulder. Needle-like teeth punched through his skin, sank deep into his flesh.

Udinaas grunted.

A Wyval, spawn of Eleint—

With his left hand, he scrabbled for the net-hook at his belt.

The beast tore at his shoulder, and blood gushed out.

He found the tool's worn wooden grip, dragged the hooked blade free. Its inner edge was honed sharp, used to trim knots. Twisting round, teeth clenched in an effort to ignore the lizard jaws slashing his shoulder again and again until little more than shreds remained, Udinaas chopped downward to where he thought one of the Wyval's legs must be. Solid contact. He ripped the inside edge of the blade into the tendons.

The creature screamed.

And released Feather Witch.

She plummeted into the mass of upraised arms below.

Talons hammered against Udinaas's chest, punched through.
He slashed, cutting deep. The leg spasmed back.

Jaws drew away, then snapped home once again, this time round his neck.

Net-hook fell from twitching hand. Blood filled his mouth and nose.

Darkness writhed across his vision – and he heard the Wyval scream again, this time in terror and pain, the sound emanating from its nostrils in hot gusts down his back. The jaws ripped free.

And Udinaas was falling.

And knew nothing more.

The others were filing out when Hannan Mosag touched Trull's shoulder. 'Stay,' he murmured. 'Your brothers as well.'

Trull watched his fellow warriors leave in small groups. They were troubled, and more than one hardened face revealed a flash of dismay when casting a final parting glance back at the Warlock King and his K'risnan. Fear had moved up to stand close by, Rhulad following. Fear's expression was closed – nothing surprising there – while Rhulad seemed unable to keep still, his head turning this way and that, one hand dancing on the pommel of the sword at his hip.

A dozen heartbeats later and they were alone.

Hannan Mosag spoke. 'Look at me, Trull Sengar. I would you understand – I intended no criticism of your gesture. I too would have driven my spear into that Letherii in answer to his jest. I made sore use of you, and for that I apologize—'

'There is no need, sire,' Trull replied. 'I am pleased that you found in my actions a fulcrum by which you could shift the sentiments of the council.'

The Warlock King cocked his head. 'Fulcrum.' He smiled, but it was strained. 'Then we shall speak no more of it, Trull Sengar.' He fixed his attention next upon Rhulad, and his voice hardened slightly as he said, 'Rhulad Sengar, unblooded, you attend me now because you are a son of Tomad ... and my need for his sons includes you. I expect you to listen, not speak.'

Rhulad nodded, suddenly pale.

Hannan Mosag stepped between two of his K'risnan – who had yet to relinquish their vigilant positions – and led the three sons of Tomad down from the dais. 'I understand that Binadas wanders once more. He knows no anchor, does he? Ah, well, there is no diminishment in that. You will have to apprise your brother upon his return of all that I tell you this night.'

They entered the Warlock King's private chamber. There was no wife attending, nor any slaves. Hannan Mosag lived simply, with only his shadow sentinel for company. The room was sparse, severe in its order.

'Three moons past,' the Warlock King began, turning to face them, 'my soul travelled when I slept, and was witness to a vision. I was on a plain of snow and ice. Beyond the lands of the Arapay, east and north of the Hungry Lake. But in the land that is ever still, something had risen. A violent birth, a presence demanding and stern. A spire of ice. Or a spear – I could not close with it – but it towered high above the snows, glittering, blinding with all the sun's light it had captured. Yet something dark waited in its heart.' His eyes had lost their focus, and Trull knew, with a shiver, that his king was once more in that cold, forlorn place. 'A gift. For the Edur. For the Warlock King.' He was silent then.

No-one spoke.

Abruptly, Hannan Mosag reached out and gripped Fear's shoulder, gaze sharpening on Trull's older brother. 'The four sons of Tomad Sengar shall journey to that place. To retrieve this gift. You may take two others – I saw the tracks of six in my vision, leading towards that spire of ice.'
Fear spoke. ‘Theradas and Midik Buhn.’

The Warlock King nodded. ‘Well chosen, yes. Fear Sengar, I charge you as leader of this expedition. You are my will and shall not be disobeyed. Neither you nor any other in your party must touch the gift. Your flesh must not make contact with it, is that understood? Retrieve it from the spire, wrap it in hides if that is possible, and return here.’

Fear nodded. ‘It will be as you command, sire.’

‘Good.’ He scanned the three brothers. ‘It is the belief of many – perhaps even you – that the unification of the tribes was my singular goal as leader of the Hiroth. Sons of Tomad, know that it is but the beginning.’

All of a sudden a new presence was in the room, sensed simultaneously by the king and the brothers, and they turned as one to the entrance.

A K’risnan stood in the threshold.

Hannan Mosag nodded. ‘The slaves,’ he muttered, ‘have been busy this night. Come, all of you.’

Shadow wraiths had gathered round his soul, for soul was all he was, motionless and vulnerable, seeing without eyes, feeling without flesh as the vague, bestial things closed in, plucking at him, circling like dogs around a turtle.

They were hungry, those shadow spirits. Yet something held them back, some deep-set prohibition. They poked and prodded, but did nothing more.

They scattered – reluctantly – at the approach of something, someone, and Udinaas felt a warm, protective presence settle at his side.

Feather Witch. She was whole, her face luminous, her grey eyes quizzical as she studied him. ‘Son of Debt,’ she said, then sighed. ‘They say you cut me free. Even as the Wyval tore into you. You cared nothing for that.’

She studied him for a moment longer, then said, ‘Your love burns my eyes, Udinaas. What am I to do about this truth?’

He found he could speak. ‘Do nothing, Feather Witch. I know what is not to be. I would not surrender this burden.’

‘No. I see that.’

‘What has happened? Am I dying?’

‘You were. Uruth, wife to Tomad Sengar, came in answer to our ... distress. She drew upon Kurald Emurlahn, and has driven the Wyval away. And now she works healing upon us both. We lie side by side, Udinaas, on the blood-soaked earth. Unconscious. She wonders at our reluctance to return.’

‘Reluctance?’

‘She finds she struggles to heal our wounds – I am resisting her, for us both.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I am troubled. Uruth senses nothing. Her power feels pure to her. Yet it is ... stained.’

‘I do not understand. You said Kurald Emurlahn—’

‘Aye. But it has lost its purity. I do not know how, or what, but it has changed. Among all the Edur, it is changed.’

‘What are we to do?’

She sighed. ‘Return, now. Yield to her command. Offer our gratitude for her intervention, for the healing of
our torn flesh. And in answer to the many questions she has, we can say little. It was confused. Battle with an
unknown demon. Chaos. And of this conversation, Udinaas, we will say nothing. Do you understand?

'I do.'

She reached down and he felt her hand close about his – suddenly he was whole once more – and its warmth
flowed through him.

He could hear his heart now, thundering in answer to that touch. And another heart, distant yet quickly
closing, beating in time. But it was not hers, and Udinaas knew terror.

His mother stepped back, the knot of her brow beginning to unclench. 'They approach,' she said.

Trull stared down at the two slaves. Udinaas, from his own household. And the other, one of Mayen's
servants, the one they knew as Feather Witch for her divinatory powers. The blood still stained the puncture
holes in their shirts, but the wounds themselves had closed. Another kind of blood was spilled across Udinaas's
chest, gold and glistening still.

'I should outlaw these castings,' Hannan Mosag growled. 'Permitting Letherii sorcery in our midst is a
dangerous indulgence.'

'Yet there is value, High King,' Uruth said, and Trull could see that she was still troubled.

'And that is, wife of Tomad?'

'A clarion call, High King, which we would do well to heed.'

Hannan Mosag grimaced. 'There is Wyval blood upon the man's shirt. Is he infected?'

'Possibly,' Uruth conceded. 'Much of that which passes for a soul in a Letherii is concealed from my arts,
High King.'

'A failing that plagues us all, Uruth,' the Warlock King said, granting her great honour by using her true
name. 'This one must be observed at all times,' he continued, eyes on Udinaas. 'If there is Wyval blood within
him, the truth shall be revealed eventually. To whom does he belong?'

Tomad Sengar cleared his throat. 'He is mine, Warlock King.'

Hannan Mosag frowned, and Trull knew he was thinking of his dream, and of his decision to weave into its
tale the Sengar family. There were few coincidences in the world. The Warlock King spoke in a harder voice.
'This Feather Witch, she is Mayen's, yes? Tell me, Uruth, could you sense her power when you healed her?'

Trull's mother shook her head. 'Unimpressive. Or ...'

'Or what?'

Uruth shrugged. 'Or she hid it well, despite her wounds. And if that is the case, then her power surpasses
mine.'

Impossible. She is Letherii. A slave and still a virgin.

Hannan Mosag's grunt conveyed similar sentiments. 'She was assailed by a Wyval, clearly a creature that
proved far beyond her ability to control. No, the child stumbles. Poorly instructed, ignorant of the vastness of
all with which she would play. See, she only now regains awareness.'

Feather Witch's eyes fluttered open, revealing little comprehension, and that quickly overwhelmed by animal
terror.

Hannan Mosag sighed. 'She will be of no use to us for a time. Leave them in the care of Uruth and the other
wives.' He faced Tomad Sengar. 'When Binadas returns ...'
Tomad nodded.

Trull glanced over at Fear. Behind him knelt the slaves that had attended the casting, heads pressed to the earth and motionless, as they had been since Uruth's arrival. It seemed Fear's hard eyes were fixed upon something no-one else could see.

*When Binadas returns ... the sons of Tomad will set forth. Into the ice wastes.*

A sickly groan from Udinaas.

The Warlock King ignored it as he strode from the barn, his K'risnan flanking him, his shadow sentinel trailing a step behind. At the threshold, that monstrous wraith paused of its own accord, for a single glance back – though there was no way to tell upon whom it fixed its shapeless eyes.

Udinaas groaned a second time, and Trull saw the slave's limbs trembling.

At the threshold, the wraith was gone.
CHAPTER TWO

Mistress to these footprints,
Lover to the wake of where
He has just passed,
for the path he wanders
is between us all.

The sweet taste of loss
feeds every mountain stream,
Failing ice down to seas
warm as blood
threading thin our dreams.

For where he leads her
has lost its bones,
And the trail he walks
is flesh without life
and the sea remembers nothing.

Lay of the Ancient Holds
Fisher kel Tath

A glance back. In the misty haze far below and to the west glimmered the innermost extent of Reach Inlet, the sky's pallid reflection thorough in disguising that black, depthless water. On all other sides, apart from the stony trail directly behind Seren Pedac, reared jagged mountains, the snow-clad peaks gilt by a sun she could not see from where she stood at the south end of the saddle pass.

The wind rushing past her stank of ice, the winter's lingering breath of cold decay. She drew her furs tighter and swung round to gauge the progress of the train on the trail below.

Three solid-wheeled wagons, pitching and clanking. The swarming, bare-backed figures of the Nerek tribesmen as they flowed in groups around each wagon, the ones at the head straining on ropes, the ones at the rear advancing the stop-blocks to keep the awkward conveyances from rolling backward.

In those wagons, among other trade goods, were ninety ingots of iron, thirty to each wagon. Not the famed Letherii steel, of course, since sale of that beyond the borders was forbidden, but of the next highest quality grade, carbon-tempered and virtually free of impurities. Each ingot was as long as Seren's arm, and twice as thick.

The air was bitter cold and thin. Yet those Nerek worked half naked, the sweat steaming from their slick skins. If a stop-block failed, the nearest tribesman would throw his own body beneath the wheel.

And for this, Buruk the Pale paid them two docks a day.

Seren Pedac was Buruk's Acquitor, granted passage into Edur lands, one of seven so sanctioned by the last treaty. No merchant could enter Edur territory unless guided by an Acquitor. The bidding for Seren Pedac and the six others had been high. And, for Seren, Buruk's had been highest of all, and now he owned her. Or, rather, he owned her services as guide and finder – a distinction of which he seemed increasingly unmindful.

But this was the contract's sixth year. Only four remaining.

Maybe.

She turned once more, and studied the pass ahead. They were less than a hundred paces' worth of elevation from the treeline. Knee-high, centuries-old dwarf oaks and spruce flanked the uneven path. Mosses and lichens
covered the enormous boulders that had been dragged down by the rivers of ice in ages past. Crusted patches of 
snow remained, clinging to shadowed places. Here the wind moved nothing, not the wiry spruce, not even the 
crooked, leafless branches of the oaks. Against such immovable stolidity, it could only howl.

The first wagon clattered onto level ground behind her, Nerek tongues shouting as it was quickly rolled 
ahead, past Seren Pedac, and anchored in place. The tribesmen then rushed back to help their fellows still on 
the ascent.

The squeal of a door, and Buruk the Pale clambered out from the lead wagon. He stood with his stance wide, 
as if struggling to regain the memory of balance, turning with a wince from the frigid wind, reaching up to keep 
his fur-lined cap on his head as he blinked over at Seren Pedac.

‘I shall etch this vision against the very bone of my skull, blessed Acquitor! There to join a host of others, of 
course. That umber cloak of fur, the stately, primeval grace as you stand there. The weathered majesty of your 
profile, so deftly etched by these wild heights.

‘You – Nerek! Find your foreman – we shall camp here. Meals must be prepared. Unload those bundles of 
wood in the third wagon. I want a fire, there, in the usual place. Be on with it!'

Seren Pedac set her pack down and made her way along the path. The wind quickly dragged Buruk's words 
away. Thirty paces on, she came to the first of the old shrines, a widening of the trail, where level stretches of 
scraped bedrock reached out to the sides and the walls of the flanking mountains had been cut sheer. On each 
flat, boulders had been positioned to form the full-sized outline of a ship, both prow and stern pointed and 
marked by upright menhirs. The prow stones had been carved into a likeness of the Edur god, Father Shadow, 
but the winds had ground the details away. Whatever had originally occupied these two flanking ships had long 
vanished, although the bedrock within was strangely stained.

The sheer walls of rock alone retained something of their ancient power. Smooth and black, they were 
translucent, in the manner of thin, smoky obsidian. And shapes moved behind them. As if the mountains had 
had hollowed out, and each panel was a kind of window, revealing a mysterious, eternal world within. A 
world oblivious of all that surrounded it, beyond its own borders of impenetrable stone, and of these strange 
panels, either blind or indifferent.

The translucent obsidian defied Seren's efforts to focus on the shapes moving on the other side, as it had the 
past score of times she had visited this site. But that very mystery was itself an irresistible lure, drawing her 
again and again.

Stepping carefully around the stern of the ship of boulders, she approached the eastern panel. She tugged the 
fur-lined glove from her right hand, reached and set it against the smooth stone. Warm, drinking the stiffness 
from her fingers, taking the ache from the joints. This was her secret, the healing powers she had discovered 
when she first touched the rock.

A lifetime in these hard lands stole suppleness from the body. Bones grew brittle, misshapen with pain. The 
endless hard rock underfoot soon sent shocks through the spine with each step taken. The Nerek, the tribe that, 
before kneeling to the Letherii king, had dwelt in the range's easternmost reach, believed that they were the 
children of a woman and a serpent, and that the serpent dwelt still within the body, that gently curved spine, the 
stacked knuckles reaching up to hide its head in the centre of the brain. But the mountains despised that serpent, 
desired only to drag it back to the ground, to return it once more to its belly, slithering in the cracks and coiled 
beneath rocks. And so, in the course of a life, the serpent was made to bow, to bend and twist.

Nerek buried their dead beneath flat stones.

At least, they used to, before the king's edict forced them to embrace the faith of the Holds.

Now they leave the bodies of their kin where they fall. Even unto abandoning their huts. It had been years 
ago, but Seren Pedac remembered with painful clarity coming over a rise and looking upon the vast plateau 
where the Nerek dwelt. The villages had lost all distinction, merging together in chaotic, dispirited confusion. 
Every third or fourth hut had been left to ruin, makeshift sepulchres for kin that had died of disease, old age, or 
too much alcohol, white nectar or durhang. Children wandered untended, trailed by feral rock rats that now
bred uncontrolled and had become too disease-ridden to eat.

The Nerek people were destroyed, and from that pit there would be no climbing out. Their homeland was an overgrown cemetery, and the Letherii cities promised only debt and dissolution. They were granted no sympathy. The Letherii way of life was hard, but it was the true way, the way of civilization. The proof was found in its thriving where other ways stumbled or remained weak and stilted.

The bitter wind could not reach Seren Pedac now. The stone's warmth flowed through her. Eyes closed, she leaned her forehead against its welcoming surface.

Who walks in there? Are they the ancestral Edur, as the Hiroth claim? If so, then why could they see no more clearly than Seren herself? Vague shapes, passing to and fro, as lost as those Nerek children in their dying villages.

She had her own beliefs, and, though unpleasant, she held to them. They are the sentinels of futility. Acquirers of the absurd. Reflections of ourselves forever trapped in aimless repetition. Forever indistinct, for that is all we can manage when we look upon ourselves, upon our lives. Sensations, memories and experiences, the fetid soil in which thoughts take root. Pale flowers beneath an empty sky.

If she could, she would sink into this wall of stone. To walk for eternity among those formless shapes, looking out, perhaps, every now and then, and seeing not stunted trees, moss, lichen and the occasional passer-by. No, seeing only the wind. The ever howling wind.

She could hear him walking long before he came into the flickering circle of firelight. The sound of his footfalls awakened the Nerek as well, huddled beneath tattered furs in a rough half-circle at the edge of the light, and they swiftly rose and converged towards that steady beat.

Seren Pedac kept her gaze fixed on the flames, the riotous waste of wood that kept Buruk the Pale warm while he got steadily drunker on a mix of wine and white nectar, and fought against the tug at one corner of her mouth, that unbidden and unwelcome ironic curl that expressed bitter amusement at this impending conjoining of broken hearts.

Buruk the Pale carried with him secret instructions, a list long enough to fill an entire scroll, from other merchants, speculators and officials, including, she suspected, the Royal Household itself. And whatever those instructions entailed, their content was killing the man. He'd always liked his wine, but not with the seductive destroyer, white nectar, mixed in. That was this journey's new fuel for the ebbing fires of Buruk's soul, and it would drown him as surely as would the deep waters of Reach Inlet.

Four more years. Maybe.

The Nerek were mobbing their visitor, scores of voices blending into an eerie murmur, like worshippers beseeching a particularly bemusing god, and though the event was hidden in the darkness beyond the fire, Seren Pedac could see it well enough in her imagination. He was trying, only his eyes revealing his unease at the endless embraces, seeking to answer each one with something – anything – that could not be mistaken for benediction. He was, he would want to say, not a man worthy of such reverence. He was, he would want to say, a sordid culmination of failures – just as they were. All of them lost, here in this cold-hearted world. He would want to say – but no, Hull Beddict never said anything. Not, in any case, things so boldly ... vulnerable.

Buruk the Pale had lifted his head at the commotion, blinking blearily. 'Who comes?'

'Hull Beddict,' Seren Pedac answered.

The merchant licked his lips. 'The old Sentinel?'

'Yes. Although I advise you not to call him by that title. He returned the King's Reed long ago.'

'And so betrayed the Letherii, aye.' Buruk laughed. 'Poor, honourable fool. Honour demands dishonour, now that is amusing, isn't it? Ever seen a mountain of ice in the sea? Calving again and again beneath the endless gnawing teeth of salt water. Just so.' He tilted his bottle back, and Seren watched his throat bob.
'Dishonour makes you thirsty, Buruk?'

He pulled the bottle down, glaring. Then a loose smile. 'Parched, Acquitor. Like a drowning man who swallows air.'

'Only it's not air, it's water.'

He shrugged. 'A momentary surprise.'

'Then you get over it.'

'Aye. And in those last moments, the stars swim unseen currents.'

Hull Beddict had done as much as he could with the Nerek, and he stepped into the firelight. Almost as tall as an Edur. Swathed in the white fur of the north wolf, his long braided hair nearly as pale. The sun and high winds had darkened his visage to the hue of tanned hide. His eyes were bleached grey, and it seemed the man behind them was ever elsewhere. And, Seren Pedac well knew, that place was not home.

No, as lost as his flesh and bones, this body standing before us.

'Take some warmth, Hull Beddict,' she said.

He studied her in his distracted way – a seeming contradiction that only he could achieve.

Buruk the Pale laughed. 'What's the point? It'll never reach him through those furs. Hungry, Beddict? Thirsty? I didn't think so. How about a woman? I could spare you one of my Nerek half-bloods – the darlings wait in my wagon.' He drank noisily from his bottle and held it out. 'Some of this? Oh dear, he hides poorly his disgust.'

Eyes on the old Sentinel, Seren asked, 'Have you come down the pass? Are the snows gone?'

Hull Beddict glanced over at the wagons. When he replied, the words came awkwardly, as if it had been some time since he last spoke. 'Should do.'

'Where are you going?'

He glanced at her once more. 'With you.'

Seren's brows rose.

Laughing, Buruk the Pale waved expansively with his bottle – which was empty save for a last few scattering drops that hit the fire with a hiss. 'Oh, welcome company indeed! By all means! The Nerek will be delighted.' He tottered upright, weaving perilously close to the fire, then, with a final wave, he stumbled towards his wagon.

Seren and Hull watched him leave, and Seren saw that the Nerek had returned to their sleeping places, but all sat awake, their eyes glittering with reflected flames as they watched the old Sentinel, who now stepped closer to the fire and slowly sat down. He held out battered hands to the heat.

They could be softer than they appeared, Seren recalled. The memory did little more than stir long-dead ashes, however, and she tipped another log into the hungry fire before them, watched the sparks leap into the darkness.

'He intends to remain a guest of the Hiroth until the Great Meeting?'

She shot him a look, then shrugged. 'I think so. Is that why you've decided to accompany us?'

'It will not be like past treaties, this meeting,' he said. 'The Edur are no longer divided. The Warlock King rules unchallenged.'

'Everything's changed, yes.'

'And so Diskanar sends Buruk the Pale.'
She snorted, kicked back into the flames an errant log that had rolled out. 'A poor choice. I doubt he'll remain sober enough to manage much spying.'

'Seven merchant houses and twenty-eight ships have descended upon the Calach beds,' Hull Beddict said, flexing his fingers.

'I know.'

'Diskanar's delegation will claim the hunting was unsanctioned. They will decry the slaughter. Then use it to argue that the old treaty is flawed, that it needs to be revised. For the lost seals, they will make a magnanimous gesture – by throwing gold at Hannan Mosag's feet.'

She said nothing. He was right, after all. Hull Beddict knew better than most King Ezgara Diskanar's mind – or, rather, that of the Royal Household, which wasn't always the same thing. 'There is more to it, I suspect,' she said after a moment.

'How so?'

'I imagine you have not heard who will be leading the delegation.'

He grunted sourly. 'The mountains are silent on such matters.'

She nodded. 'Representing the king's interests, Nifadas.'

'Good. The First Eunuch is no fool.'

'Nifadas will be sharing command with Prince Quillas Diskanar.'

Hull Beddict slowly turned to face her. 'She's risen far, then.'

'She has. And for all the years since you last crossed her son's path ... well, Quillas has changed little. The queen keeps him on a short leash, with the Chancellor close at hand to feed him sweet treats. It's rumoured that the primary holder of interest in the seven merchant houses that defied the treaty is none other than Queen Janall herself.'

'And the Chancellor dares not leave the palace,' Hull Beddict said, and she heard the sneer. 'So he sends Quillas. A mistake. The prince is blind to subtlety. He knows his own ignorance and stupidity so is ever suspicious of others, especially when they say things he does not understand. One cannot negotiate when dragged in the wake of emotions.'

'Hardly a secret,' Seren Pedac replied. And waited.

Hull Beddict spat into the fire. 'They don't care. The queen's let him slip the leash. Allowing Quillas to flail about, to deliver clumsy insults in the face of Hannan Mosag. Is this plain arrogance? Or do they truly invite war?'

'I don't know.'

'And Buruk the Pale – whose instructions does he carry?'

'I'm not sure. But he's not happy.'

They fell silent then.

Twelve years past, King Ezgara Diskanar charged his favoured Preda of the Guard, Hull Beddict, with the role of Sentinel. He was to journey to the north borders, then beyond. His task was to study the tribes who still dwelt wild in the mountains and high forests. Talented warrior though he was, Hull Beddict had been naive. What he had embraced as a journey in search of knowledge, the first steps towards peaceful co-existence, had in fact been a prelude to conquest. His detailed reports of tribes such as the Nerek, and the Faraed and the Tarthenal, had been pored over by minions of Chancellor Triban Gnol. Weaknesses had been prised from the descriptions. And then, in a series of campaigns of subjugation, brutally exploited.
And Hull Beddict, who had forged blood-ties with those fierce tribes, was there to witness all his enthusiasm delivered. Gifts that were not gifts at all, incurring debts, the debts exchanged for land. The deadly maze lined with traders, merchants, seducers of false need, purveyors of destructive poisons. Defiance answered with annihilation. The devouring of pride, independence and self-sufficiency. In all, a war so profoundly cynical in its cold, heartless expediting that no honourable soul could survive witness. Especially when that soul was responsible for it. For all of it.

And to this day, the Nerek worshipped Hull Beddict. As did the half-dozen indebted beggars who were all that was left of the Faraed. And the scattered remnants of the Tarthenal, huge and shambling and drunk in the pit towns outside the cities to the south, still bore the three bar tattoos beneath their left shoulders — a match to those on Hull's own back.

He sat now in silence beside her, his eyes on the ebbing flames of the dying hearth. One of his guards had returned to the capital, bearing the King's Reed. The Sentinel was Sentinel no longer. Nor would he return to the southlands. He had walked into the mountains.

She had first met him eight years ago, a day out from High Fort, reduced to little more than a scavenging animal in the wilds.

And had brought him back. At least some of the way. Oh, but it was far less noble than it first seemed. Perhaps it would have been. Truly noble. Had I not then made sore use of him.

She had succumbed to her own selfish needs, and there was nothing glorious in that.

Seren wondered if he would ever forgive her. She then wondered if she would ever forgive herself.

'Buruk the Pale knows all that I need to learn,' Hull Beddict said.

'Possibly.'

'He will tell me.'

Not of his own volition, he won't. 'Regardless of his instructions,' she said, 'he remains a small player in this game, Hull. Head of a merchant house conveniently placed in Trate, with considerable experience dealing with the Hiroth and Arapay.' And, through me, legitimate passage into Edur lands.

'Hannan Mosag will send his warriors after those ships,' Hull Beddict said. 'The queen's interest in those merchant houses is about to take a beating.'

'I expect she has anticipated the loss.'

The man beside her was not the naive youth he had once been. But he was long removed from the intricate schemes and deadly sleight of hand that was so much the lifeblood of the Letherii. She could sense him struggling with the multiplicity of layers of intent and design at work here. 'I begin to see the path she takes,' he said after a time, and the bleak despair in his voice was so raw that she looked away, blinking.

He went on, 'This is the curse, then, that we are so inclined to look ahead, ever ahead. As if the path before us should be any different from the one behind us.'

Aye, and it pays to remind me, every time I glance back.

I really should stop doing that.

'Five wings will buy you a grovel,' Tehel Beddict muttered from his bed. 'Haven't you ever wondered how odd it is? Of course, every god should have a throne, but shouldn't it also follow that every throne built for a god is actually occupied? And if it isn't, who in their right mind decided that it was worthwhile to worship an empty throne?'

Seated on a low three-legged stool at the foot of the bed, Bugg paused in his knitting. He held out and examined the coarse wool shirt he was working on, one eye squeezing into a critical squint.
Tehol's gaze flicked down at his servant. 'I'm fairly certain my left arm is of a length close to, if not identical with, that of my right. Why do you persist in this conceit? You've no talent to speak of, in much of anything, come to think of it. Probably why I love you so dearly, Bugg.'

'Not half as much as you love yourself,' the old man replied, resuming his knitting.

'Well, I see no point in arguing that.' He sighed, wigging his toes beneath the threadbare sheet. The wind was freshening, blessedly cool and only faintly reeking of the south shore's Stink Flats. Bed and stool were the only furniture on the roof of Tehol's house. Bugg still slept below, despite the sweltering heat, and only came up when his work demanded light enough to see. Saved on lamp oil, Tehol told himself, since oil was getting dreadfully expensive now that the whales were getting scarce.

He reached down to the half-dozen dried figs on the tarnished plate Bugg had set down beside him. 'Ah, more figs. Another humiliating trip to the public privies awaits me, then.' He chewed desultorily, watching the monkeylike clambering of the workers on the dome of the Eternal Domicile. Purely accidental, this exquisitely unobstructed view of the distant palace rising from the heart of Letheras, and all the more satisfying for that, particularly the way the nearby towers and Third Height bridges so neatly framed King Ezgara Diskanar's conceit. 'Eternal Domicile indeed. Eternally unfinished.'

The dome had proved so challenging to the royal architects that four of them had committed suicide in the course of its construction, and one had died tragically – if somewhat mysteriously – trapped inside a drainage pipe. 'Seventeen years and counting. Looks like they've given up entirely on that fifth wing. What do you think, Bugg? I value your expert opinion.'

Bugg's expertise amounted to rebuilding the hearth in the kitchen below. Twenty-two fired bricks stacked into a shape very nearly cubic, and indeed it would have been if three of the bricks had not come from a toppled mausoleum at the local cemetery. Grave masons held to peculiar notions of what a brick's dimensions should be, pious bastards that they were.

In response to Tehol’s query, Bugg glanced up, squinting with both eyes.

Five wings to the palace, the dome rising from the centre. Four tiers to those wings, except for the shoreside one, where only two tiers had been built. Work had been suspended when it was discovered that the clay beneath the foundations tended to squeeze out to the sides, like closing a fist on a block of butter. The fifth wing was sinking.

'Gravel,' Bugg said, returning to his knitting.

'What?'

'Gravel,' the old man repeated. 'Drill deep wells down into the clay, every few paces or so, and fill 'em with gravel, packed down with drivers. Cap 'em and build your foundation pillars on top. No weight on the clay means it's got no reason to squirm.'

Tehol stared down at his servant. 'All right. Where in the Errant's name did you come by that? And don't tell me you stumbled onto it trying to keep our hearth from wandering.'

Bugg shook his head. 'No, it's not that heavy. But if it was, that's what I would've done.'

'Bore a hole? How far down?'

'Bedrock, of course. Won't work otherwise.'

'And fill it with gravel.'

'Pounded down tight, aye.'

Tehol plucked another fig from the plate, brushed dust from it – Bugg had been harvesting from the market leavings again. Outwitting the rats and dogs. 'That'd make for an impressive cook hearth.'
'It would at that.'

'You could cook secure and content in the knowledge that the flatstone will never move, barring an earthquake—'

'Oh no, it'll handle an earthquake too. Gravel, right? Flexible, you see.'

'Extraordinary.' He spat out a seed. 'What do you think? Should I get out of bed today, Bugg?'

'Got no reason to—' The servant stopped short, then cocked his head, thinking. 'Mind you, maybe you have.'

'Oh? And you'd better not be wasting my time with this.'

'Three women visited this morning.'

'Three women.' Tehol glanced up at the nearest Third Height bridge, watched people and carts moving across it. 'I don't know three women, Bugg. And if I did, all of them arriving simultaneously would be cause for terror, rather than an incidental "oh by the way".'

'Aye, but you don't know them. Not even one of them. I don't think. New faces to me, anyway.'

'New? You've never seen them before? Not even in the market? The riverfront?'

'No. Might be from one of the other cities, or maybe a village. Odd accents.'

'And they asked for me by name?'

'Well, not precisely. They wanted to know if this was the house of the man who sleeps on his roof.'

'If they needed to ask that, they are from some toad-squelching village. What else did they want to know? The colour of your hair? What you were wearing while standing there in front of them? Did they want to know their own names as well? Tell me, are they sisters? Do they share a single eyebrow?'

'Not that I noticed. Handsome women, as I recall. Young and meaty. Sounds as though you're not interested, though.'

'Servants shouldn't presume. Handsome. Young and meaty. Are you sure they were women?'

'Oh yes, quite certain. Even eunuchs don't have breasts so large, or perfect, or, indeed, lifted so high the lasses could rest their chins—'

Tehol found himself standing beside the bed. He wasn't sure how he got there, but it felt right. 'You finished that shirt, Bugg?'

The servant held it out once more. 'Just roll up the sleeve, I think.'

'Finally, I can go out in public once more. Tie those ends off or whatever it is you do to them and give it here.'

'But I haven't started yet on the trousers—'

'Never mind that,' Tehol cut in, wrapping the bed sheet about his waist, once, twice, thrice, then tucking it in at one hip. He then paused, a strange look stealing across his features. 'Bugg, for Errant's sake, no more figs for a while, all right? Where are these mountainously endowed sisters, then?'

'Red Lane. Huldo's.'

'The pits or on the courtyard?'

'Courtyard.'

'That's something, at least. Do you think Huldo might have forgotten?'
'No. But he's been spending a lot of time down at the Drownings.'

Tehol smiled, then began rubbing a finger along his teeth. 'Winnin' or losin'?'

'Losing.'

'Hah!' He ran a hand through his hair and struck a casual pose. 'How do I look?'

Bugg handed him the shirt. 'How you manage to keep those muscles when you do nothing baffles me,' he said.

'A Beddict trait, dear sad minion of mine. You should see Brys, under all that armour. But even he looks scrawny when compared to Hull. As the middle son, I of course represent the perfect balance. Wit, physical prowess and a multitude of talents to match my natural grace. When combined with my extraordinary ability to waste it all, you see, standing before you, the exquisite culmination.'

'A fine and pathetic speech,' Bugg said with a nod.

'It was, wasn't it? I shall be on my way now.' Tehol gestured as he walked to the ladder. 'Clean up the place. We might have guests this evening.'

'I will, if I find the time.'

Tehol paused at the ragged edge of the section of roof that had collapsed. 'Ah yes, you have trousers to make – have you enough wool for that?'

'Well, I can make one leg down all the way, or I can make both short.'

'How short?'

'Pretty short.'

'Go with the one leg.'

'Aye, master. And then I have to find us something to eat. And drink.'

Tehol turned, hands on his hips. 'Haven't we sold virtually everything, sparing one bed and a lone stool? So, just how much tidying up is required?'

Bugg squinted. 'Not much,' he conceded. 'What do you want we should eat tonight?'

'Something that needs cooking.'

'Would that be something better when cooked, or something that has to be cooked?'

'Either way's fine.'

'How about wood?'

'I'm not eating—'

'For the hearth.'

'Oh, right. Well, find some. Look at that stool you're sitting on – it doesn't really need all three legs, does it? When scrouring doesn't pay, it's time to improvise. I'm off to meet my three destinies, Bugg. Pray the Errant's looking the other way, will you?'

'Of course.'

Tehol made his way down the ladder, discovering, in a moment of panic, that only one rung in three remained.
The ground-level room was bare except for a thin mattress rolled up against one wall. A single battered pot rested on the hearth's flatstone, which sat beneath the front-facing window, a pair of wooden spoons and bowls on the floor nearby. All in all, Tehol reflected, elegant in its severity.

He swung aside the ratty curtain that served as a door, reminding himself to tell Bugg to retrieve the door latch from the hearth-bed. A bit of polishing and it might earn a dock or two from Cusp the Tinkerer. Tehol stepped outside.

He was in a narrow aisle, so narrow he was forced to sidle sideways out to the street, kicking rubbish aside with each step. Meaty women ... wish I'd seen them squeezing their way to my door. An invitation to dinner now seemed essential. And, mindful host that he was, he could position himself with a clear view, and whatever pleasure they saw on his face they could take for welcome.

The street beyond was empty save for three Nerek, a mother and two half-blood children, who'd found in the recessed niche in the wall opposite a new home and seemed to do nothing but sleep. He strode past their huddled forms, kicking at a rat that had been edging closer, and threaded his way between the high-stacked wooden crates that virtually blocked this end of the street. Biri's warehouse was perpetually overstocked, and Biri viewed the last reach of Cul Street this side of Quillas Canal as his own personal compound.

Chalas, the watchman of the yard, was sprawled on a bench on the other side, where Cul opened out onto Burl Square, his leather-wrapped clout resting on his thighs. Red-shot eyes found Tehol. 'Nice skirt,' the guard said.

'You've lightened my step, Chalas.'

'Happy to oblige, Tehol.'

Tehol paused, hands on hips, and surveyed the crowded square. 'The city thrives.'

'No change there ... exceptin' the last time.'

'Oh, that was a minor sideways tug, as far as currents go.'

'Not to hear Biri talk of it. He still wants your head salted and in a barrel rolling out to sea.'

'Biri always did run in place.'

Chalas grunted. 'It's been weeks since you last came down. Special occasion?'

'I have a date with three women.'

'Want my clout?'

Tehol glanced down and studied the battered weapon. 'I wouldn't want to leave you defenceless.'

'It's my face scares 'em away. Exceptin' those Nerek. Got past me, those ones did.'

'Giving you trouble?'

'No. The rat count's way down, in fact. But you know Bin.'

'Better than he knows himself. Remind him of that, Chalas, if he starts thinking of giving them trouble.'

'I will.'

Tehol set out, winding through the seething press in the square. The Down Markets opened out onto it from three sides; a more decrepit collection of useless items for sale Tehol had yet to see. And the people bought in a frenzy, day after blessed day. Our civilization thrives on stupidity. And it only took a sliver of cleverness to tap that idiot vein and drink deep of the riches. Comforting, if slightly depressing. The way of most grim truths.

He reached the other side, entered Red Lane. Thirty strides on and he came opposite the arched entrance to
Huldo's. Down the shadowed walkway and back into the courtyard's sunlight. A half-dozen tables, all occupied. Repose for the blissfully ignorant or those without the coin to sample the pits in Huldo's inner sanctum, where various sordid activities were conducted day and night, said activities occasionally approaching the artistic expression of the absurd. One more example, Tehol reflected, of what people would pay for, given the chance.

The three women at a table in the far corner stood out for not just the obvious detail – they were the only women present – but for a host of subtler distinctions. *Handsome is ... just the right word.* If they were sisters it was in sentiment only, and for the shared predilection for some form of martial vigour, given their brawn, and the bundled armour and covered weapons heaped beside the table.

The one on the left was red-haired, the fiery tresses sun-bleached and hanging in reluctant ripples down onto her broad shoulders. She was drinking from a clay-wrapped bottle, disdaining or perhaps not understanding the function of the cup that had accompanied it. Her face belonged to a heroic statue lining a colonnade, strong and smooth and perfect, her blue eyes casting a stony regard with the serene indifference of all such statues. Next to her, and leaning with both forearms on the small tabletop, was a woman with a hint of Faraed blood in her, given the honeyed hue of her skin and the faint up-tilt of her dark eyes. Her hair was either dark brown or black, and had been tied back, leaving clear her heart-shaped face. The third woman sat slouched back in her chair, left leg tipped out to one side, the right incessantly jittering up and down – fine legs, Tehol observed, clad in tight rawhide, tanned very nearly white. Her head was shaved, the pale skin gleaming. Wide-set, light grey eyes lazily scanning the other patrons, finally coming to rest on Tehol where he stood at the courtyard's threshold.

He smiled.

She sneered.

Urul, Huldo's chief server, edged out from a nearby shadow and beckoned Tehol over.

He came as close as he dared. 'You're looking ... well, Urul. Is Huldo here?'

The man's need for a bath was legendary. Patrons gave their orders with decisive brevity and rarely called Urul over for more wine until the meal was finished. He stood before Tehol now, brow gleaming with oily sweat, hands fidgeting over the wide sash of his belt. 'Huldo? No, Errant be praised. He's on the Low Walk at the Drownings. Tehol, those women – they've been here all morning! They frighten me, the way they scowl whenever I get close.'

'Leave them to me, Urul,' Tehol said, risking a pat on the man's damp shoulder.

'You?'

'Why not?' With that, Tehol adjusted his skirt, checked his sleeves, and threaded his way between the tables. Halting before the three women, he glanced round for a chair. He found one and dragged it close, then settled with a sigh.

'What do you want?' asked the bald one.

'That was *my* question. My servant informs me that you visited my residence this morning. I am Tehol Beddict... the one who sleeps on his roof.'

Three sets of eyes fixed on him.

*Enough to make a stalwart warlord wilt ... but me? Only slightly.*

'You?'

Tehol scowled at the bald woman. 'Why does everyone keep asking that? Yes, me. Now, by your accent, I'd hazard you're from the islands. I don't know anyone in the islands. Accordingly, I don't know you. Not to say I wouldn't like to, of course. Know you, that is. At least, I think so.'

The red-haired woman set her bottle down with a clunk. 'We've made a mistake.'
'I'm sorry to hear that—'

'No,' the bald woman said to her companion. 'This is an affectation. We should have anticipated a certain degree of ... mockery.'

'He has no trousers."

The dark-eyed woman added, 'And his arms are lopsided.'

'Not quite accurate,' Tehol said to her. 'It's only the sleeves that are somewhat askew.'

'I don't like him,' she pronounced, crossing her arms.

'You don't have to,' the bald woman said. 'Errant knows, we're not going to bed him, are we?'

'I'm crushed.'

'You would be,' the red-haired woman said, with an unpleasant smile.

'Bed him? On the roof? You must be insane, Shand.'

'How can not liking him be unimportant?'

The bald woman, the one named Shand, sighed and rubbed her eyes. 'Listen to me, Hejun. This is business. Sentiments have no place in business – I've already told you that.'

Hejun's arms remained crossed, and she shook her head. 'You can't trust who you don't like.'

'Of course you can!' Shand said, blinking.

'It's his reputation I'm not happy with,' said the third, as yet unnamed, woman.

'Rissarh,' Shand said, sighing again, 'it's his reputation what's brought us here.'

Tehol clapped his hands. Once, loud enough to startle the three women. 'Excellent. Rissarh with the red hair. Hejun, with Faraed blood. And Shand, no hair at all. Well,' he set his hands on the table and rose, 'I'm content with that. Goodbye—'

'Sit down!'

The growl was so menacing that Tehol found himself seated once more, the prickle of sweat beneath his woollen shirt.

'That's better,' Shand said in a more mellow tone. She leaned forward. 'Tehol Beddict. We know all about you.'

'Oh?'

'We even know why what happened happened.'

'Indeed.'

'And we want you to do it again.'

'You do?'

'Yes. Only this time, you'll have the courage to go through with it. All the way.'

'I will?'

'Because we – myself, Hejun and Rissarh – we're going to be your courage. This time. Now, let's get out of here, before that server comes back. We've purchased a building. We can talk there. It doesn't smell.'
'Now that’s a relief,’ Tehol said.

The three women rose.

He did not.

‘I told you,’ Hejun said to Shand. ‘It’s not going to work. There’s nothing left in there. Look at him.’

‘It’ll work,’ Shand said.

‘Hejun is, alas, right,’ Tehol said. ‘It won’t.’

‘We know where the money went,’ Shand said.

‘That’s no secret. Riches to rags. I lost it.’

But Shand shook her head. ‘No you didn’t. Like I said, we know. And if we talk ...’

‘You keep saying you know something,’ Tehol said, adding a shrug.

‘As you said,’ she replied, smiling, ‘we’re from the islands.’

‘But not those islands.’

‘Of course not – who’d go there? And that’s what you counted on.’

Tehol rose. ‘As they say, five wings will buy you a grovel. All right, you’ve purchased a building.’

‘You’ll do it,’ Shand insisted. ‘Because if it comes out, Hull will kill you.’

‘Hull?’ Finally Tehol could smile. ‘My brother knows nothing about it.’

He savoured the pleasure, then, in seeing these three women knocked off balance. There, now you know how it feels.

‘Hull may prove a problem.’

Brys Beddict could not hold his gaze on the man standing before him. Those small, placid eyes peering out from the folds of pink flesh seemed in some way other than human, holding so still that the Finadd of the Royal Guard imagined he was looking into the eyes of a snake. A flare neck, coiled on the centre of the river road when the rains are but days away. Up from the river, three times as long as a man is tall, head resting on the arm-thick curl of its body. ‘Ware the plodding cattle dragging their carts on that road. ‘Ware the drover stupid enough to approach.

‘Finadd?’

Brys forced his eyes back to the huge man. ‘First Eunuch, I am at a loss as to how to respond. I have neither seen nor spoken with my brother in years. Nor will I be accompanying the delegation.’

First Eunuch Nifadas turned away, and walked noiselessly to the high-backed wooden chair behind the massive desk that dominated the chamber of his office. He sat, the motion slow and even. ‘Be at ease, Finadd Beddict. I have immense respect for your brother Hull. I admire the extremity of his conviction, and understand to the fullest extent the motivation behind his... choices in the past.’

‘Then, if you will forgive me, you are further down the path than I, First Eunuch. Of my brother – of my brothers – I understand virtually nothing. Alas, it has always been so.’

Nifadas blinked sleepily, then he nodded. ‘Families are odd things, aren’t they? Naturally, my own experience precludes many of the subtleties regarding that subject. Yet, if you will, my exclusion has, in the past, permitted me a certain objectivity, from which I have often observed the mechanisms of such fraught relationships with a clear eye.’ He looked up and fixed Brys once more with his regard. ‘Will you permit me a comment or two?’
'Forgive me, First Eunuch—'

Nifadas waved him silent with one plump hand. 'No need. I was presumptuous. Nor have I explained myself. As you know, preparations are well along. The Great Meeting looms. I am informed that Hull Beddict has joined Buruk the Pale and Seren Pedac on the trail to Hiroth lands. Further, it is my understanding that Buruk is charged with a host of instructions – none issued by me, I might add. In other words, it is likely that those instructions not only do not reflect the king's interests, but in fact may contradict our Sire's wishes.' He blinked again, slow and measured. 'Precarious, agreed. Unwelcome, as well. My concern is this. Hull may ... misunderstand...'

'By assuming that Buruk acts on behalf of King Diskanar, you mean.'

'Just so.'

'He would then seek to counter the merchant.'

Nifadas sighed his agreement.

'Which,' Brys continued, 'is itself not necessarily a bad thing.'

'True, in itself not necessarily a bad thing.'

'Unless you intend, as the king's official representative and nominal head of the delegation, to counter the merchant in your own way. To deflect those interests Buruk has been charged with presenting to the Edur.'

The First Eunuch's small mouth hinted at a smile.

Nothing more than that, yet Brys understood. His gaze travelled to the window behind Nifadas. Clouds swam blearily through the bubbled, wavy glass. 'Not Hull's strengths,' he said

'No, we are agreed in that. Tell me, Finadd, what do you know of this Acquitor, Seren Pedac?'

'Reputation only. But it's said she owns a residence here in the capital. Although I have never heard if she visits.'

'Rearly. The last time was six years ago.'

'Her name is untarnished,' Brys said.

'Indeed. Yet one must wonder ... she is not blind, after all. Nor, I gather, unthinking.'

'I would imagine, First Eunuch, that few Acquitors are.'

'Just so. Well, thank you for your time, Finadd. Tell me,' he added as he slowly rose, indicating the audience was at an end, 'have you settled well as the King's Champion?'

'Uh, well enough, First Eunuch.'

'The burden is easily shouldered by one as young and fit as you, then?'

'Not easily. I would make no claim to that.'

'Not comfortable, but manageable.'

'A fair enough description.'

'You are an honest man, Brys. As one of the king's advisers, I am content with my choice.'

But you feel I need the reminder. Why is that? 'I remain honoured, First Eunuch, by the king's faith, and of course, yours.'

'I will delay you no longer, Finadd.'
Brys nodded, turned and strode from the office.

A part of him longed for the days of old, when he was just an officer in the Palace Guard. When he carried little political weight, and the presence of the king was always at a distance, with Brys and his fellow guardsmen standing at attention along one wall at official audiences and engagements. Then again, he reconsidered as he walked down the corridor, the First Eunuch had called him because of his blood, not his new role as King's Champion.

Hull Beddict. Like a restless ghost, a presence cursed to haunt him no matter where he went, no matter what he did. Brys remembered seeing his eldest brother, resplendent in the garb of Sentinel, the King's Reed at his belt. A last and lasting vision for the young, impressionable boy he had been all those years ago. That moment remained with him, a tableau frozen in time that he wandered into in his dreams, or at reflective moments like these. A painted image. Brothers, man and child, the two of them cracked and yellowed beneath the dust. And he would stand witness, like a stranger, to the boy's wide-eyed, adoring expression, and would follow that uplifted gaze and then shift his own uneasily, suspicious of that uniformed soldier's pride.

Innocence was a blade of glory, yet it could blind on both sides.

He'd told Nifadas he did not understand Hull. But he did. All too well.

He understood Tehol, too, though perhaps marginally less well. The rewards of wealth beyond measure had proved cold; only the hungry desire for that wealth hissed with heat. And that truth belonged to the world of the Letherii, the brittle flaw at the core of the golden sword. Tehol had thrown himself on that sword, and seemed content to bleed to death, slowly and with amiable aplomb. Whatever final message he sought in his death was a waste of time, since no-one would look his way when that day came. No-one dared. Which is why, I suspect, he's smiling.

His brothers had ascended their peaks long ago – too early, it turned out – and now slid down their particular paths to dissolution and death. And what of me, then? I have been named King's Champion. Judged the finest swordsman in the kingdom. I believe I stand, here and now, upon the highest reach. There was no need to take that thought further.

He reached a T-intersection and swung right. Ten paces ahead a side door spilled light into the corridor. As he came opposite it a voice called to him from the chamber within.

'Finadd! Come quick.'

Brys inwardly smiled and turned. Three strides into the spice-filled, low-ceilinged room. Countless sources of light made a war of colours on the furniture and tables with their crowds of implements, scrolls and beakers.

'Ceda?'

'Over here. Come and see what I've done.'

Brys edged past a bookcase extending out perpendicularly from one wall and found the King's Sorceror behind it, perched on a stool. A tilted table with a level bottom shelf was at the man's side, cluttered with discs of polished glass.

'Your step has changed, Finadd,' Kuru Qan said, 'since becoming the King's Champion.'

'I was not aware of that, Ceda.'

Kuru Qan spun on his seat and raised a strange object before his face. Twin lenses of glass, bound in place side by side with wire. The Ceda's broad, prominent features were made even more so by a magnifying effect from the lenses. Kuru Qan set the object against his face, using ties to bind it so that the lenses sat before his eyes, making them huge as he blinked up at Brys.

'You are as I imagined you. Excellent. The blur diminishes in importance. Clarity ascends, achieving preeminence among all the important things. What I hear now matters less than what I see. Thus, perspective shifts. The world changes. Important, Finadd. Very important.'
'Those lenses have given you vision? That is wonderful, Ceda!'

'The key was in seeking a solution that was the antithesis of sorcery. Looking upon the Empty Hold stole my sight, after all. I could not effect correction through the same medium. Not yet important, this detail. Pray indeed it never becomes so.'

Ceda Kuru Qan never held but one discourse at any one time. Or so he had explained it once. While many found this frustrating, Brys was ever charmed.

'Am I the first to be shown your discovery, Ceda?'

'You would see its importance more than most. Swordsman, dancing with place, distance and timing, with all the material truths. I need to make adjustments.' He snatched the contraption off and hunched over it, minuscule tools flicking in his deft hands. 'You were in the First Eunuch's chamber of office. Not an altogether pleasing conversation for you. Unimportant, for the moment.'

'I am summoned to the throne room, Ceda.'

'True. Not entirely urgent. The Preda would have you present . . . shortly. The First Eunuch enquired after your eldest brother?'

Brys sighed.

'I surmised,' Kuru Qan said, glancing up with a broad smile. 'Your unease tainted your sweat. Nifadas is sorely obsessed at the moment.' He set the lenses against his eyes once more. Focused on the Finadd's eyes – disconcerting, since it had never happened before. 'Who needs spies when one's nose roots out all truths?'

'I hope, Ceda, that you do not lose that talent, with this new invention of yours.'

'Ah, see! A swordsman indeed. The importance of every sense is not lost on you! What a measurable delight – here, let me show you.' He slid down from the stool and approached a table, where he poured clear liquid into a translucent beaker. Crouched low to check its level, then nodded. 'Measurable, as I had suspected.' He plucked the beaker from its stand and tossed the contents back, smacking his lips when he was done. 'But it is both brothers who haunt you now.'

'I am not immune to uncertainty.'

'One should hope not! An important admission. When the Preda is done with you – and it shall not be long – return to me. We have a task before us, you and I.'

'Very well, Ceda.'

'Time for some adjustments.' He pulled off the lenses once more. 'For us both,' he added.

Brys considered, then nodded. 'Until later, then, Ceda.'

He made his way from the sorceror's chamber.

_Nifadas and Kuru Qan, they stand to one side of King Diskanar. Would that there was no other side._

The throne room was misnamed, in that the king was in the process of shifting the royal seat of power to the Eternal Domicile, now that the leaks in its lofty roof had been corrected. A few trappings remained, including the ancient rug approaching the dais, and the stylized gateway arching over the place where the throne had once stood.

When Brys arrived, only his old commander, Preda Unnutal Hebaz, was present. As always, a dominating figure, no matter how exalted her surroundings. She stood taller than most women, nearly Brys's own height. Fair-skinned, with a burnished cast to her blonde hair yet eyes of a dark hazel, she turned to face him at his approach. In her fortieth year, she was none the less possessed of extraordinary beauty that the weather lines only enhanced.
'Finadd Beddict, you are late.'

'Impromptu audiences with the First Eunuch and the Ceda—'

'We have but a few moments,' she interrupted. 'Take your place along the wall, as would a guard. They might recognize you, or they might assume you are but one of my underlings, especially given the poor light now that the sconces have been taken down. Either way, you are to stand at attention and say nothing.'

Frowning, Brys strode to his old guard's niche, turned about to face the chamber, then edged back into the shadows until hard stone pressed against his shoulders. He saw the Preda studying him for a moment, then she nodded and swung to face the doorway at the far corner of the wall behind the dais.

*Ah, this meeting belongs to the other side ...*

The door slammed open to the gauntleted hand of a Prince's Guardsman, and the helmed, armoured figure of that man strode warily into the chamber. His sword was still in its scabbard, but Brys knew that Moroch Nevath could draw it in a single beat of a heart. He knew, also, that 'Moroch had been the prince's own candidate for King's Champion. And *well deserved too. Moroch Nevath not only possesses the skill, he also has the presence ...* And, although that bold manner irritated Brys in some indefinable way, he found himself envying it as well.

The Prince's Guard studied the chamber, fixing here and there on shadowed recesses, including the one wherein Brys stood – but it was a momentary thing, seeming only to acknowledge the presence of one of the Preda's guards – and Moroch finally settled his attention on Unnutal Hebaz.

A single nod of acknowledgement, then Moroch stepped to one side.

*Prince Quillas Diskanar entered. Behind him came Chancellor Triban Gnol. Then, two figures that made Brys start. Queen Janall and her First Consort, Turudal Brizad.*

*By the Errant, the entire squalid nest.*

Quillas bared his teeth at Unnutal Hebaz as would a dog at the end of his chain. 'You have released Finadd Gerun Eberict to Nifadas's entourage. I want him taken back, Preda. Choose someone else.'

Unnutal's tone was calm. 'Gerun Eberict's competence is above reproach, Prince Quillas. I am informed that the First Eunuch is pleased with the selection.'

Chancellor Triban Gnol spoke in an equally reasonable voice. 'Your prince believes otherwise, Preda. It behoves you to accord that opinion due respect.'

'The prince's beliefs are his own concern. I am charged by his father, the king, in this matter. Regarding what I do and do not respect, Chancellor, I strongly suggest you retract your challenge.'

Moroch Nevath growled and stepped forward.

The Preda's hand snapped out – not to the Prince's Guardsman, but towards the niche where Brys stood, halting him a half-stride from his position. The sword was already in his hand, and its freeing from the scabbard had been as silent as it had been fast.

Moroch's gaze flashed to Brys, the startled expression giving way to recognition. The man's own sword was but halfway out of its scabbard.

A dry chuckle from the queen. 'Ah, the Preda's decision for but one guard is ... explained. Step forward, if you please, Champion.'

'That will not be necessary,' Unnutal said.

Brys nodded and slowly stepped back, sheathing his sword as he did so.

Queen Janall's brows rose at the Preda's brusque countermand. 'Dear Unnutal Hebaz, you rise far above your station.'
"The presumption is not mine, Queen. The Royal Guard answer to the king and no-one else."

"Well, forgive me if I delight in challenging that antiquated conceit." Janall fluttered one thin hand. "Strengths are ever at risk of becoming weaknesses." She stepped close to her son. "Heed your mother's advice, Quillas. It was folly to cut at the Preda's pedestal, for it has not yet turned to sand. Patience, beloved one."

The Chancellor sighed. "The queen's advice—"

"Is due respect," Quillas mimed. 'As you will, then. As you all will. Moroch!'

Bodyguard trailing, the prince strode from the chamber.

The queen's smile was tender as she said, 'Preda Unnutal Hebaz, we beg your forgiveness. This meeting was not of our choice, but my son insisted. From the moment our procession began, the Chancellor and I both sought to dissuade him.'

'To no avail,' the Chancellor said, sighing once more.

The Preda's expression did not change. 'Are we done?'

Queen Janall wagged a single finger in mute warning, then gestured to her First Consort, slipping her arm through his as they left.

Triban Gnol remained a moment longer. 'My congratulations, Preda,' he said. 'Finadd Gerun Eberict was an exquisite choice.'

Unnutal Hebaz said nothing.

Five heartbeats later and she and Brys were alone in the chamber.

The Preda turned. 'Your speed, Champion, never fails to take my breath away. I did not hear you, only ... anticipated. Had I not, Moroch would now be dead.'

' Possibly, Preda. If only because he had dismissed my presence.'

'And Quillas would have only himself to blame.'

Brys said nothing.

'I should not have halted you.'

He watched her leave.

Gerun Eberict, you poor bastard.

Recalling that the Ceda wanted him, Brys swung about and strode from the chamber.

Leaving behind no blood.

And he knew that Kuru Qan would hear the relief in his every step.

The Ceda had been waiting outside his door, seemingly intent on practising a dance step, when Brys arrived.

'A few fraught moments?' Kuru Qan asked without looking up. 'Unimportant. For now. Come.'

Fifty paces on, down stone steps, along dusty corridors, and Brys guessed at their destination. He felt his heart sinking. A place he had heard of, but one he had yet to visit. It seemed the King's Champion was permitted to walk where a lowly Finadd was not. This time, however, the privilege was suspect.

They came to a pair of massive copper-sheathed doors. Green and rumpled with moss, they were bare of markings and showed no locking mechanism. The Ceda leaned on them and they parted with a grinding squeal.
Beyond rose narrow steps, leading to a walkway suspended knee-high above the floor by chains that reached down from the ceiling. The room was circular, and in the floor were set luminous tiles forming a spiral. The walkway ended at a platform in the chamber's centre.

'Trepidation, Finadd? Well deserved.' Gesturing, Kuru Qan led Brys onto the walkway.

It swayed alarmingly.

'The striving for balance is made manifest,' the Ceda said, arms held out to the sides. 'One's steps must needs find the proper rhythm. Important, and difficult for all that there are two of us. No, do not look down upon the tiles – we are not yet ready. To the platform first. Here we are. Stand at my side, Finadd. Look with me upon the first tile of the spiral. What do you see?'

Brys studied the glowing tile. It was large, not quite square. Two spans of a spread hand in length, slightly less so in width.

The Holds. The Cedance. Kuru Qan's chamber of divination. Throughout Letheras there were casters of the tiles, readers of the Holds. Of course, their representations were small, like flattened dice. Only the King's Sorceror possessed tiles such as these. With ever-shifting faces. 'I see a barrow in a yard.'

'Ah, then you see truly. Good. An unhinged mind would reveal itself at this moment, its vision poisoned with fear and malice. Barrow, third from last among the tiles of the Azath Hold. Tell me, what do you sense from it?'

Brys frowned. 'Restlessness.'

'Aye. Disturbing, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'But the Barrow is strong, is it not? It will not yield its claim. Yet, consider for a moment. Something is restless, there beneath that earth. And each time I have visited here in the past month, this tile has begun the spiral.'

'Or ended it.'

Kuru Qan tilted his head. 'Possibly. A swordsman's mind addresses the unexpected. Important? We'll see, won't we? Begins, or ends. So. If the Barrow is in no danger of yielding, then why does this tile persist? Perhaps we but witness what is, whilst that restlessness promises what will be. Alarming.'

'Ceda, have you visited the site of the Azath?'

'I have. Both tower and grounds are unchanged. The Hold's manifestation remains steadfast and contained. Now, drag your gaze onward, Finadd. Next?'

'A gate, formed of a dragon's gaping jaws.'

'Fifth in the Hold of the Dragon. Gate. How does it relate to Barrow of the Azath? Does the Gate precede or follow? In the span of my life, this is the first time I have seen a tile of Dragon Hold in the pattern. We are witness – or shall be witness – to a momentous occasion.'

Brys glanced at the Ceda. 'We are nearing Seventh Closure. It is momentous. The First Empire shall be reborn. King Diskanar shall be transformed – he shall ascend and assume the ancient title of First Emperor.'

Kuru Qan hugged himself. 'The popular interpretation, aye. But the true prophecy, Finadd, is somewhat more ... obscure.'

Brys was alarmed by the Ceda's reaction. Nor had he known that the popular interpretation was other than accurate. 'Obscure? In what way?'

"The king who rules at the Seventh Closure shall be transformed and so shall become the First Emperor reborn." Thus. Yet, questions arise. Transformed – how? And reborn – in the flesh? The First Emperor was
destroyed along with the First Empire, in a distant land. Leaving the colonies here bereft. We have existed in isolation for a very long time, Finadd. Longer than you might believe.'

'Almost seven thousand years.'

The Ceda smiled. 'Language changes over time. Meaning twists. Mistakes compound with each transcribing. Even those stalwart sentinels of perfection – numbers – can, in a single careless moment, be profoundly altered. Shall I tell you my belief, Finadd? What would you say to my notion that some zeroes were dropped? At the beginning of this the Seventh Closure.'

_Seventy thousand years? Seven hundred thousand?

'Describe for me the next four tiles.'

Feeling slightly unbalanced, Brys forced his attention back to the floor. 'I recognize that one. Betrayer of the Empty Hold. And the tile that follows: White Crow, of the Fulcra. The third is unknown to me. Shards of ice, one of which is upthrust from the ground and grows bright with reflected light.'

Kuru Qan sighed and nodded. 'Seed, last of the tiles in the Hold of Ice. Another unprecedented appearance. And the fourth?'

Brys shook his head. 'It is blank.'

'Just so. The divination ceases. Is blocked, perhaps, by events yet to occur, by choices as yet unmade. Or, it marks the beginning, the flux that is now, this very moment. Leading to the end, which is the last tile – Barrow. Unique mystery. I am at a loss.'

'Has anyone else seen this, Ceda? Have you discussed your impasse with anyone?'

'The First Eunuch has been informed, Brys Beddict. To ensure that he does not walk into the Great Meeting blind to whatever portents might arise there. And now, you. Three of us, Finadd.'

'Why me?'

'Because you are the King's Champion. It is your task to guard his life.'

Brys sighed. 'He keeps sending me away.'

'I will remind him yet again,' Kuru Qan said. 'He must surrender his love of solitude, or come to see no-one when he glances your way. Now, tell me what the queen incited her son to do in the old throne room.'

'Incited? She claimed the very opposite.'

'Unimportant. Tell me what your eyes witnessed, what your ears heard. Tell me, Brys Beddict, what your heart whispered.'

Brys stared down at the blank tile. 'Hull may prove a problem,' he said in a dull voice.

'This is what your heart whispered?'

'It is.'

'At the Great Meeting?'

He nodded.

'How?'

'I fear, Ceda, that he might kill Prince Quillas Diskanar.'

The building had once housed a carpenter's shop on the ground floor, with a modest collection of low-ceilinged residential rooms on the upper level, reached via a dropdown staircase. The front faced out onto Quillas Canal,
opposite a landing where, presumably, the carpenter had received his supplies.

Tehol Beddict walked around the spacious workshop, noting the holes in the hardwood floor where mechanisms had been fitted, hooks on walls for tools still identifiable by the faded outlines. The air still smelled of sawdust and stains, and a single worktable ran the full length of the wall to the left of the entrance. The entire front wall, he saw, was constructed with removable panels. "You purchased this outright?" he asked, facing the three women who had gathered at the foot of the staircase.

'The owner's business was expanding,' Shand said, 'as was his family.'

'Fronting the canal ... this place was worth something ...'

'Two thousand thirds. We bought most of his furniture upstairs. Ordered a desk that was delivered last night.' Shand waved a hand to encompass the ground level. "This area's yours. I'd suggest a wall or two, leaving a corridor from the door to the stairs. That clay pipe is the kitchen drain. We knocked out the section leading to the kitchen upstairs, since we expect your servant to feed the four of us. The privy's out in the backyard, empties into the canal. There's also a cold shed, with a water-tight ice box big enough for a whole Nerek family to live in.'

'A rich carpenter with time on his hands,' Tehol said.

'He has talent,' Shand said, shrugging. 'Now, follow me. The office is upstairs. We've things to discuss.'

'Doesn't sound like it,' he replied. 'Sounds like everything is already decided. I can imagine Bugg's delight at the news. I hope you like figs.'

'You could take the roof,' Rissarh said with a sweet smile.

Tehol crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. 'Let me see if I understand all this. You threaten to expose my terrible secrets, and then offer me some kind of partnership for some venture you haven't even bothered describing. I can see this relationship setting deep roots, given such fertile soil.'

Shand scowled.

'Let's beat him senseless first,' Hejun said.

'It's simple,' Shand said, ignoring Hejun's suggestion. 'We have thirty thousand thirds and with it we want you to make ten.'

'Ten thousand thirds?'

'Ten peaks.'

Tehol stared at her. 'Ten peaks. Ten *million* thirds. I see, and what precisely do you want with all that money?'

'We want you to buy the rest of the islands.'

Tehol ran a hand through his hair and began pacing. 'You're insane. I started with a hundred docks and damn near killed myself making a single peak—'

'Only because you were frivolous, Tehol Beddict. You did it inside of a year, but you only *worked* a day or two every month.'

'Well, those days were murderous.'

'Liar. You never stepped wrong. Not once. You folded in and folded out and left everyone else wallowing in your wake. And they worshipped you for it.'

'Until you knifed them all,' Rissarh said, her smile broadening.
'Your skirt's slipping,' Hejun observed.

Tehol adjusted it. 'It wasn't exactly a knifing. What terrible images you conjure. I made my peak. I wasn't the first to ever make a peak, just the fastest.'

'With a hundred docks. Hard with a hundred levels, maybe. But docks? I made a hundred docks every three months when I was a child, picking olives and grapes. Nobody starts with docks. Nobody but you.'

'And now we're giving you thirty thousand thirds,' Rissarh said. 'Work the columns, Beddict. Ten million peaks? Why not?'

'If you think it's so easy why don't you do it yourselves?'

'We're not that smart,' Shand said. 'We're not easily distracted, either. We stumbled onto your trail and we followed it and here we are.'

'I left no trail.'

'Not one most could see, true. But as I said, we don't get distracted.'

Tehol continued pacing. 'The Merchant Tolls list Letheras's gross at between twelve and fifteen peaks, with maybe another five buried—'

'Is that five including your one?'

'Mine was written off, remember.'

'After a whole lot of pissing blood. Ten thousand curses tied to docks at the bottom of the canal, all with your name on them.'

Hejun asked in surprise, 'Really, Shand? Maybe we should get dredging rights—'

'Too late,' Tehol told her. 'Biri's got those.'

'Biri's a front man,' Shand said. 'You've got those rights, Tehol. Biri may not know it but he works for you.'

'Well, that's a situation I've yet to exploit.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. Then he halted and stared at Shand. 'There's no way you could know that.'

'You're right. I guessed.'

His eyes widened. 'You could make ten peaks, with an instinct like that, Shand.'

'You've fooled everyone because you don't make a wrong step, Tehol Beddict. They don't think you've buried your peak – not any more, not after this long with you living like a rat under the docks. You've truly lost it. Where, nobody knows, but somewhere. That's why they wrote off the loss, isn't it?'

'Money is sleight of hand,' Tehol said, nodding. 'Unless you've got diamonds in your hands. Then it's not just an idea any more. If you want to know the cheat behind the whole game, it's right there, lasses. Even when money's just an idea, it has power. Only it's not real power. Just the promise of power. But that promise is enough so long as everyone keeps pretending it's real. Stop pretending and it all falls apart.'

'Unless the diamonds are in your hands,' Shand said.

'Right. Then it's real power.'

'That's what you began to suspect, isn't it? So you went and tested it. And everything came within a stumble of falling apart.'
Tehol smiled. 'Imagine my dismay.'

'You weren't dismayed,' she said. 'You just realized how deadly an idea could be, in the wrong hands.'

'They're all the wrong hands, Shand. Including mine.'

'So you walked away.'

'And I'm not going back. Do your worst with me. Let Hull know. Take it all down. What's written off can be written back in. The Tolls are good at that. In fact, you'll trigger a boom. Everyone will sigh with relief, seeing that it was all in the game after all.'

'That's not what we want,' Shand said. 'You still don't get it. When we buy the rest of the islands, Tehol, we do it the same way you did. Ten peaks... disappearing.'

'The entire economy will collapse!' At that the three women all nodded.

'You're fanatics!'

'Even worse,' Rissarh said, 'we're vengeful.'

'You're all half-bloods, aren't you?' He didn't need their answers to that. It was obvious. Not every half-blood had to look like a half-blood. 'Faraed, for Hejun. You two? Tarthenal?'

'Tarthenal. Letheras destroyed us. Now, we're going to destroy Letheras.'

'And,' Rissarh said, smiling again, 'you're going to show us how.'

'Because you hate your own people,' Shand said. 'The whole rapacious, cold-blooded lot of them. We want those islands, Tehol Beddict. We know about the remnants of the tribes you delivered to the ones you bought. We know they're hiding out there, trying to rebuild all that they had lost. But it's not enough. Walk this city's streets and the truth of that is plain. You did it for Hull. I had no idea he didn't know about it – you surprised me there. You know, I think you should tell him.'

'Why?'

'Because he needs healing, that's why.'

'I can't do that.'

Shand stepped close and settled a hand on Tehol's shoulder. The contact left him weak-kneed, so unexpected was the sympathy. 'You're right, you can't. Because we both know, it wasn't enough.'

'Tell him our way,' Hejun said. 'Tehol Beddict. Do it right this time.'

He pulled away and studied them. These three damned women. 'It's the Errant's curse, that he walks down paths he's walked before. But that trait of yours, of not getting distracted, it blinds both ways, I'm afraid.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, Shand, that Lether is about to fall – and not through my doing. Find Hull and ask him – I'm sure he's up there, somewhere. In the north. And, you know, it's rather amusing, how he fought so hard for your people, for every one of those tribes Lether then devoured. Because now, knowing what he knows, he's going to fight again. Only, this time, not for a tribe – not for the Tiste Edur. This time, for Lether. Because he knows, my friends, that we've met our match in those damned bastards. This time, it's the Edur who will do the devouring.'

'What makes you think so?' Shand demanded, and he saw the disbelief in her expression.

'Because they don't play the game,' he said.
'What if you're wrong?'

'It's possible. Either way, it's going to be bloody.'

'Then let's make it easier for the Tiste Edur.'

'Shand, you're talking treason.'

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

Rissarh barked a laugh. 'You idiot. We've been doing that all along.'

Errant take me, she's right. 'I'm not convinced a host of barbaric Edur overlords will do any better.'

'We're not talking about what's better,' Shand said. 'We're talking about revenge. Think of Hull, of what was done to him. Do it back, Tehol.'

I don't believe Hull would see it that way. Not quite. Not for a long, long time. 'You realize, don't you, that I've worked very hard at cultivating apathy. In fact, it seems to be bearing endless fruit.'

'Yes, the skirt doesn't hide much.'

'My instincts may be a bit dull.'

'Liar. They've just been lying in wait and you know it. Where do we start, Tehol Beddict?'

He sighed. 'All right. First and foremost, we lease out this ground floor. Biri needs the storage.'

What about you?'

'I happen to like my abode, and I don't intend to leave. As far as anyone else is concerned, I'm still not playing the game. You three are the investors. So, put those damned weapons away; we're in a far deadlier war now. There's a family of Nerek camped outside my house. A mother and two children. Hire them as cook and runners. Then head down to the Merchant Tolls and get yourselves listed. You deal in property, construction and transportation. No other ventures. Not yet. Now, seven properties are for sale around the fifth wing of the Eternal Domicile. They're going cheap.'

'Because they're sinking.'

'Right. And we're going to fix that. And once we've done that, expect a visit from the Royal Surveyor and a motley collection of hopeful architects. Ladies, prepare to get rich.'

Looking for solid grounding? Bugg's Construction is your answer.

Until the flood sweeps the entire world away, that is.

'Can we buy you some clothes?'

Tehol blinked. 'Why?'

Seren stared down. The valley stretched below, its steep sides unrelieved forest, a deep motionless green. The glitter of rushing water threaded through the shadows in the cut's nadir. Blood of the Mountains, the Edur called that river. Tis'forundal. Its waters ran red with the sweat of iron.

The track they would take crossed that river again and again.

The lone Tiste Edur far below had, it seemed, emerged from that crimson stream. Striding to the head of the trail then beginning the ascent.

As if knowing we're here.

Buruk the Pale was taking his time with this journey, calling a halt shortly after midday. The wagons would
not tip onto that rocky, sliding path into the valley until the morrow. Caution or drunk indifference, the result was the same.

Hull stood at her side. Both of them watched the Tiste Edur climb closer.

'Seren.'

'Yes?'

'You weep at night.'

'I thought you were asleep.'

He said nothing for a moment, then, 'Your weeping always woke me.'

_And this is as close as you dare, isn't it? 'Would that yours had me.'_

'I am sure it would have, Seren, had I wept.'

_And this eases my guilt? She nodded towards that distant Tiste Edur. 'Do you recognize him?'

'I do.'

'Will he cause us trouble?'

'No, I don't think so. I believe he will be our escort back to Hiroth lands.'

'Noble-born?'

Hull nodded. 'Binadas Sengar.'

She hesitated, then asked, 'Have you cut flesh for him?'

'I have. As he has for me.'

Seren Pedac drew her furs tighter about her shoulders. The wind had not relented, though something of the valley's damp rot now rode its bludgeoning rush. 'Hull, do you fear this Great Meeting?'

'I need only look back to see what lies ahead.'

'Are you so sure of that?'

'We will buy peace, but it will be, for the Tiste Edur, a deadly peace.'

'But peace none the less, Hull.'

'Acquiror, you might as well know, and so understand me clearly. I mean to shatter that gathering. I mean to incite the Edur into war with Letheras.'

Stunned, she stared at him.

Hull Beddict turned away. 'With that knowledge,' he said, 'do as you will.'
CHAPTER THREE

Face to the Light
betrayed by the Dark
Father Shadow
lies bleeding
Unseen and unseeing lost
until his Children
take the final path
and in the solitude
of strangers
Awaken once more

Tiste Edur prayer

A hard silence that seemed at home in the dense, impenetrable fog. The Blackwood paddles had been drawn
from water thick as blood, which ran in rivulets, then beads, down the polished shafts, finally drying with a
patina of salt in the cool, motionless air. And now there was nothing to do but wait.

Daughter Menandore had delivered a grim omen that morning. The body of a Beneda warrior. A bloated
corpse scorched by sorcery, skin peeled back by the ceaseless hungers of the sea. The whispering roar of flies
stung into flight by the arrival of those Edur whose slaves had first found it.

Letherii sorcery.

The warrior wore no scabbard, no armour. He had been fishing.

Four K’orthan longboats had set out from the river mouth shortly after the discovery. In the lead craft rode
Hannan Mosag and his K’risnan Cadre, along with seventy-five blooded warriors. Crews of one hundred
followed in the three additional raiders.

The tide carried them out for a time. It soon became clear that no wind waited offshore, so they left the three
triangular sails on each ship furled and, thirty-five warriors to a side, had begun paddling.

Until the Warlock King had signalled a halt.

The fog enclosed the four raider longboats. Nothing could be seen twenty strokes of the paddle in any
direction. Trull Sengar sat on the bench behind Fear. He had set his paddle down and now gripped the new
iron-sheathed spear his father had given him.

The Letherii ships were close, he knew, drifting in the same manner as the Edur longboats. But they relied
solely upon sail and so could do nothing until a wind rose.

And Hannan Mosag had made certain there would be no wind.

Shadow wraiths flickered over the deck, roving restlessly, long-clawed hands reaching down as they
clambered on all fours. They prowled as if eager to leave the confines of the raider. Trull had never seen so
many of them, and he knew that they were present on the other longboats as well. They would not, however, be
the slayers of the Letherii. For that, the Warlock King had summoned something else.

He could feel it. Waiting beneath them. A vast patience, suspended in the depths.

Near the prow, Hannan Mosag slowly raised a hand, and, looking beyond the Warlock King, Trull saw the
hulk of a Letherii harvest ship slowly emerge from the fog. Sails furled, lanterns at the end of out-thrust poles,
casting dull, yellow light.
And then a second ship, bound to the first by a thick cable.
Shark fins cut the pellucid surface of the water around them.
And then, suddenly, those fins were gone.
Whatever waited below rose.
Emerged unseen with a shivering of the water.
A moment, blurred and uncertain.
Then screams.

Trull dropped his spear and clapped both hands to his ears – and he was not alone in that response, for the screams grew louder, drawn out from helpless throats and rising to shrieks. Sorcery flashed in the fog, briefly, then ceased.

The Letherii ships were on all sides now. Yet nothing could be seen of what was happening on them. The fog had blackened around them, coiling like smoke, and from that impenetrable gloom only the screams clawed free, like shreds of horror, the writhing of souls.

The sounds were in Trull's skull, indifferent to his efforts to block them. Hundreds of voices. Hundreds upon hundreds.

Then silence. Hard and absolute.

Hannan Mosag gestured.
The white cloak of fog vanished abruptly.
The calm seas now rolled beneath a steady wind. Above, the sun glared down from a fiercely blue sky.
Gone, too, was the black emanation that had engulfed the Letherii fleet.
The ships wallowed, burned-out lanterns pitching wildly.

'Paddle.'

Hannan Mosag's voice seemed to issue from directly beside Trull. He started, then reached down, along with everyone else, for a paddle. Rose to plant his hip against the gunnel, then chopped down into the water.
The longboat surged forward.

In moments they were holding blades firm in the water, halting their craft alongside the hull of one of the ships.
Shadow wraiths swarmed up its red-stained side.
And Trull saw that the waterline on the hull had changed. Its hold was, he realized, now empty.

'Fear,' he hissed. 'What is going on? What has happened?'

His brother turned, and Trull was shocked by Fear's pallid visage. 'It is not for us, Trull,' he said, then swung round once more.

*It is not for us. What does he mean by that? What isn't?*

Dead sharks rolled in the waves around them. Their carcasses were split open, as if they had exploded from within. The water was streaked with viscid froth.

'We return now,' Hannan Mosag said. 'Man the sails, my warriors. We have witnessed. Now we must leave.'
Witnessed – in the name of Father Shadow, what?

Aboard the Letherii ships, canvas snapped and billowed.

_The wraiths will deliver them. By the Dusk, this is no simple show of power. This – this is a challenge._ A challenge, of such profound arrogance that it far surpassed that of these Letherii hunters and their foolish, suicidal harvest of the tusked seals. At that realization, a new thought came to Trull as he watched other warriors tending to the sails. _Who among the Letherii would knowingly send the crews of nineteen ships to their deaths? And why would those crews even agree to it?_

It was said gold was all that mattered to the Letherii. But who, in their right mind, would seek wealth when it meant certain death? They had to have known there would be no escape. _Then again, what if I had not stumbled upon them? What if I had not chosen the Calach strand to look for jade?_ But no, now he was the one being arrogant. If not Trull, then another. The crime would never have gone unnoticed. The crime was _never intended_ to go unnoticed.

He shared the confusion of his fellow warriors. Something was awry here. With both the Letherii and with _us._ With _Hannan Mosag. Our Warlock King._

_Our shadows are dancing. Letherii and Edur, dancing out a ritual – but these are not steps I can recognize. Father Shadow forgive me, I am frightened._

Nineteen ships of death sailed south, while four K’orthan raiders cut eastward. Four hundred Edur warriors, once more riding a hard silence.

It fell to the slaves to attend to the preparations. The Beneda corpse was laid out on a bed of sand on the floor of a large stone outbuilding adjoining the citadel, and left to drain.

The eye sockets, ears, nostrils and gaping mouth were all cleaned and evened out with soft wax. Chewed holes in its flesh were packed with a mixture of clay and oil.

With six Edur widows overseeing, a huge iron tray was set atop a trench filled with coals that had been prepared alongside the corpse. Copper coins rested on the tray, snapping and popping as the droplets of condensation on them sizzled and hissed then vanished.

Udinaas crouched beside the trench, staying far enough back to ensure that his sweat did not drip onto the coins – a blasphemy that meant instant death for the careless slave – and watched the coins, seeing them darken, becoming smoky black. Then, as the first glowing spot emerged in each coin’s centre, he used pincers to pluck it from the tray and set it down on one of a row of fired-clay plates – one plate for each widow.

The widow, kneeling before the plate, employed a finer set of pincers to pick up the coin. And then pivoted to lean over the corpse.

First placement was the left eye socket. A crackling hiss, worms of smoke rising upward as the woman pressed down with the pincers, keeping the coin firmly in place, until it melded with the flesh and would thereafter resist being dislodged. Right eye socket followed. Nose, then forehead and cheeks, every coin touching its neighbours.

When the body’s front and sides, including all the limbs, were done, melted wax was poured over the coin-sheathed corpse. And, when that had cooled, it was then turned over. More coins, until the entire body was covered, excepting the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands. Another layer of melted wax followed.

The task of sheathing consumed most of the day, and it was near dusk when Udinaas finally stumbled from the outbuilding and stood, head bowed, while the cool air plucked at the sweat on his skin. He spat in an effort to get the foul stench out of his mouth. Burnt, rotting flesh in the building’s turgid, oven-hot confines. The reek of scorched hair. No amount of scented oil and skin-combing could defeat what had seeped into his pores. It would be days before Udinaas had rid himself of that cloying, dreadful taste.

He stared down at the ground between his feet. His shoulder still ached from the forced healing done by Uruth. Since that time, he had had no opportunity to speak with Feather Witch.
To his masters, he had explained nothing. They had, in truth, not pressed him very hard. A handful of questions, and they’d seemed content with his awkward, ineffectual answers. Udinaas wondered if Uruth had been as unmotivated in her own questioning of Feather Witch. The Tiste Edur rarely displayed much awareness of their slaves, and even less understanding of their ways. It was, of course, the privilege of the conquerors to be that way, and the universal fate of the conquered to suffer that disregard.

Yet identities persisted. On a personal level. Freedom was little more than a tattered net, draped over a host of minor, self-imposed bindings. Its stripping away changed little, except, perhaps, the comforting delusion of the ideal. Mind bound to self, self to flesh, flesh to bone. As the Errant wills, we are a latticework of cages, and whatever flutters within knows but one freedom, and that is death.

The conquerors always assumed that what they conquered was identity. But the truth was, identity could only be killed from within, and even that gesture was but a chimera. Isolation had many children, and dissolution was but one of them – yet its path was unique, for that path began when identity was left behind.

From the building behind him emerged the song of mourning, the Edur cadence of grief. Hunh, hunk, hunk, hunh … A sound that always chilled Udinaas. Like emotion striking the same wall, again and again and again. The voice of the trapped, the blocked. A voice overwhelmed by the truths of the world. For the Edur, grieving was less about loss than about being lost.

Is that what comes when you live a hundred thousand years?

The widows then emerged, surrounding the corpse that floated waist-high on thick, swirling shadows. A figure of copper coins. The Edur’s singular use of money. Copper, tin, bronze, iron, silver and gold, it was the armour of the dead.

At least that’s honest. Letherii use money to purchase the opposite. Well, not quite. More like the illusion of the opposite. Wealth as life’s armour. Keep, fortress, citadel, eternally vigilant army. But the enemy cares nothing for all that, for the enemy knows you are defenceless.

‘Hunh, hunh, hunh, hunh …’

This was Daughter Sheltatha Lore’s hour, when all things material became uncertain. Smudged by light’s retreat, when the air lost clarity and revealed its motes and grains, the imperfections both light and dark so perfectly disguised at other times. When the throne was shown to be empty.

Why not worship money? At least its rewards are obvious and immediate. But no, that was simplistic. Letherii worship was more subtle, its ethics bound to those traits and habits that well served the acquisition of wealth. Diligence, discipline, hard work, optimism, the personalization of glory. And the corresponding evils: sloth, despair and the anonymity of failure. The world was brutal enough to winnow one from the other and leave no room for doubt or mealy equivocation. In this way, worship could become pragmatism, and pragmatism was a cold god.

Errant make ours a cold god, so we may act without constraint. A suitable Letherii prayer, though none would utter it in such a bold fashion. Feather Witch said that every act made was a prayer, and thus in the course of a day were served a host of gods. Wine and nectar and rustleaf and the imbibing thereof was a prayer to death, she said. Love was a prayer to life. Vengeance was a prayer to the demons of righteousness. Sealing a business pact was, she said with a faint smile, a prayer to the whisperer of illusions. Attainment for one was born of deprivation for another, after all. A game played with two hands.

‘Hunh, hunh, hunh, hunh…’

He shook himself. His sodden tunic now wrapped him in damp chill.

A shout from the direction of the sea. The K’orthan raiders were returning. Udinaas walked across the compound, towards the Sengar household. He saw Tomad Sengar and his wife Uruth emerge, and dropped to his knees, head pressed to the ground, until they passed. Then he rose and hurried into the longhouse.

The copper-sheathed corpse would be placed within the hollowed trunk of a Blackwood, the ends sealed with
discs of cedar. Six days from now, the bole would be buried in one of a dozen sacred groves in the forest. Until that moment, the dirge would continue. The widows taking turns with that blunt, terrible utterance.

He made his way to the small alcove where his sleeping pallet waited. The longboats would file into the canal, one after the other in the grainy half-light. They would not have failed. They never did. The crews of nineteen Letherii ships were now dead – no slaves taken, not this time. Standing on both sides of the canal, the noble wives and fathers greeted their warriors in silence.

In silence.

Because something terrible has happened.

He lay down on his back, staring up at the slanted ceiling, feeling a strange, unnerving constriction in his throat. And could hear, in the rush of his blood, a faint echo behind his heart. A double beat. Hunh hunh Huh. Hunh hunh Huh huh ...

Who are you? What are you waiting for? What do you want with me?

Trull clambered onto the landing, the cold haft of his spear in his right hand, its iron-shod butt striking sparks on the flagstones as he stepped away from the canal's edge and halted beside Fear. Opposite them, but remaining five paces away, stood Tomad and Uruth. Rhulad was nowhere to be seen.

Nor, he realized, was Mayen.

A glance revealed that Fear was scanning the welcoming crowd. There was no change in expression, but he strode towards Tomad.

'Mayen is in the forest with the other maidens,' Tomad said. 'Collecting morok. They are guarded by Theradas, and Midik and Rhulad.'

'My son.' Uruth stepped closer, eyes searching Fear's visage. 'What did he do?'

Fear shook his head.

'They died without honour,' Trull said. 'We could not see the hand that delivered that death, but it was ... monstrous.'

'And the harvest?' Tomad asked.

'It was taken, Father. By that same hand.'

A flash of anger in Uruth's eyes. 'This was no full unveiling. This was a demonic summoning.'

Trull frowned. 'I do not understand, Mother. There were shadows—'

'And a darkness,' Fear cut in. 'From the depths ... darkness.'

She crossed her arms and looked away. Trull had never seen Uruth so distressed.

And in himself, his own growing unease. Fully three-fifths of the Tiste Edur employed sorcery. A multitude of fragments from the riven warren of Kurald Emurlahn. Shadow's power displayed myriad flavours. Among Uruth's sons, only Binadas walked the paths of sorcery. Fear's words had none the less triggered a recognition in Trull. Every Tiste Edur understood his own, after all. Caster of magic or not.

'Mother, Hannan Mosag's sorcery was not Kurald Emurlahn.' He did not need their expressions to realize that he had been the last among them to understand that truth. He grimaced. 'Forgive me my foolish words—'

'Foolish only in speaking them aloud,' Uruth said. 'Fear, take Trull and Rhulad. Go to the Stone Bowl—'

'Stop this. Now.' Tomad's voice was hard, his expression dark. 'Fear. Trull. Return to the house and await me there. Uruth, tend to the needs of the widows. A fallen warrior faces his first dusk among kin. Propitiations
must be made.'

For a moment Trull thought she was going to object. Instead, lips pressed into a line, she nodded and strode away.

Fear beckoned Trull and they walked to the longhouse, leaving their father standing alone beside the canal.

'These are awkward times,' Trull said.

'Is there need,' Fear asked, 'when you stand between Rhulad and Mayen?'

Trull clamped his mouth shut. Too off-balance to deflect the question with a disarming reply.

Fear took the silence for an answer. 'And when you stand between them, who do you face?'

'I – I am sorry, Fear. Your question was unexpected. Is there need, you ask. My answer is: I don't know.'

'Ah, I see.'

'His strutting ... irritates me.'

Fear made no response.

They came to the doorway. Trull studied his brother. 'Fear, what is this Stone Bowl? I have never heard—'

'It doesn't matter,' he replied, then walked inside.

Trull remained at the threshold. He ran a hand through his hair, turned and looked back across the compound. Those who had stood in welcome were gone, as were their warrior kin. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan Cadre were nowhere to be seen. A lone figure remained. Tomad.

_Are we so different from everyone else?_

_Yes. For the Warlock King has asked for Tomad's sons. To pursue a vision._

_He has made us his servants. Yet... is he the master?_

In his dream, Udinaas found himself kneeling in ashes. He was cut and bleeding. His hands. His legs. The ash seemed to gnaw into the wounds with avid hunger. The tightness in his throat made him gasp for breath. He clawed at the air as he clambered onto his feet and stood, wavering – and the sky roared and raced in on all sides.

Fire. A storm of fire.

He screamed.

And found himself on his knees once more.

Beyond his ragged breathing, only silence. Udinaas lifted his head. The storm was gone.

Figures on the plain. Walking, dust roiling up behind them like wind-tossed shrouds. Weapons impaled them. Limbs hung from shreds of tendon and muscle. Sightless eyes and expressions twisted with fearful recognition – faces seeing their own deaths – blind to his own presence as they marched past.

Rising up within him, a vast sense of loss. Grief, then the bitter whisper of betrayal.

_Someone will pay for this. Someone will pay._

_Someone._

_Someone._

The words were not his, the thoughts were another's, but the voice, there in the centre of his skull – that voice
was his own.

A dead warrior walked close. Tall, black-skinned. A sword had taken most of his face. Bone gleamed, latticed with red cracks from some fierce impact.

A flash of motion.

Metal-clad hand crashed into the side of Udinaas's head. Blood sprayed. He was in a cloud of grey ash, on the ground. Blinking burning fire.

He felt gauntleted fingers close about his left ankle. His leg was viciously yanked upward.

And then the warrior began dragging him.

Where are we going?

'The Lady is harsh.'

The Lady?

'Is harsh.'

She awaits us at journey's end?

'She is not one who waits.'

He twisted as he was pulled along, found himself staring back at the furrow he'd made in the ashes. A track reaching to the horizon. And black blood was welling from that ragged gouge. How long has he been dragging me? Whom do I wound?

The thunder of hoofs.

'She comes.'

Udinaas turned onto his back, struggled to raise his head.

A piercing scream.

Then a sword ripped through the warrior dragging Udinaas. Cutting it in half. The hand fell away from his ankle and he rolled to one side as iron-shod hoofs thundered past.

She blazed, blinding white. A sword flickering like lightning in one hand. In the other, a double-bladed axe that dripped something molten in its wake. The horse—

Naught but bones, bound by fire.

The huge skeletal beast tossed its head as it wheeled round. The woman was masked in flat, featureless gold. A headdress of arching, gilt scales rose like hackles about her head. Weapons lifted.

And Udinaas stared into her eyes.

He flinched away, scrabbling to his feet, then running.

Hoofs pounded behind him.

Daughter Dawn. Menandore—

Before him were sprawled the warriors that had walked alongside the one dragging him. Flames licking along wounds, dull smoke rising from torn flesh. None moved. They keep dying, don't they? Again and again. They keep dying—

He ran.
Then was struck. A wall of ridged bone smashing into his right shoulder, spinning him through the air. He hit the ground, tumbled and rolled, limbs flopping.

His eyes stared up into swirling dust, the sky behind it spinning.

A shape appeared in its midst, and a hard-soled boot settled on his chest.

When she spoke, her voice was like the hissing of a thousand snakes. 'The blood of a Locqui Wyval... in the body of a slave. Which heart, mortal, will you ride?'

He could not draw breath. The pressure of the boot was building, crushing his chest. He clawed at it.

'Let your soul answer. Before you die.'

I *ride ... that which I have always ridden.*

'A coward's answer.'

Yes.

A moment remains. For you to reconsider.'

Blackness closed around him. He could taste blood in the grit filling his mouth. *Wyval! I ride the Wyval!*

The boot slipped to one side.

A gauntleted hand reached down to the rope he used as a belt. Fingers clenched and he was lifted from the ground, arching, head dangling. Before him, a world turned upside down. Lifted, until his hips pushed up against the inside of her thighs.

He felt his tunic pulled up onto his belly. A hand tearing his loincloth away. Cold iron fingers clamped round him.

He groaned.

And was pushed inside.

Fire in his blood. Agony in his hips and lower back as, with one hand, she drove him up again and again.

Until he spasmed.

The hand released him and he thumped back onto the ground, shuddering.

He did not hear her walk away.

He heard nothing. Nothing but the two hearts within him. Their beats drawing closer, ever closer.

After a time someone settled down beside Udinaas.

'Debtor.'

*Someone will pay.* He almost laughed.

A hand on his shoulder. 'Udinaas. Where is this place?'

'I don't know.' He turned his head, stared up into the frightened eyes of Feather Witch. 'What do the tiles tell you?'

'I don't have them.'

'Think of them. Cast them, in your mind.'

'What do you know of such things, Udinaas?'
He slowly sat up. The pain was gone. No bruises, not even a scratch beneath the layer of ash. He dragged his tunic down to cover his crotch. 'Nothing,' he replied.

'You do not need divination,' she said, 'to know what has just happened.'

His smile was bitter. 'I do. Dawn. The Edur's most feared Daughter. Menandore. She was here.'

'The Letherii are not visited by Tiste Edur’ gods—'

'I was.' He looked away. 'She, uh, made use of me.'

Feather Witch rose. 'Wyval blood has taken you. You are poisoned with visions, Debtor. Madness. Dreams that you are more than the man everyone else sees.'

'Look at the bodies around us, Feather Witch. She cut them down.'

'They are long dead.'

'Aye, yet they were walking. See this track – one of them dragged me and that is my trail. And there, her horse's hoofs made those.'

But she was not looking, her gaze instead fixed on Udinaas. 'This is a world of your own conjuring,' she said. 'Your mind is beset by false visions.'

'Cast your tiles.'

'No. This is a dead place.'

'The Wyval's blood is alive, Feather Witch. The Wyval's blood is what binds us to the Tiste Edur.'

'Impossible. Wyval are spawn of the Eleint. They are the mongrels of the dragons, and even the dragons do not control them. They are of the Hold, yet feral.'

'I saw a white crow. On the strand. That is what I was coming to tell you, hoping to reach you before you cast the tiles. I sought to banish it, and its answer was laughter. When you were attacked, I thought it was the White Crow. But don't you see? White, the face of Menandore, of Dawn. That is what the Fulcra were showing us.'

'I will not be devoured by your madness, Debtor.'

'You asked me to lie to Uruth and the other Edur. I did as you asked, Feather Witch.'

'But now the Wyval has taken you. And soon it will kill you, and even the Edur can do nothing. As soon as they realize that you are indeed poisoned, they will cut out your heart.'

'Do you fear that I will become a Wyval? Is that my fate?'

She shook her head. 'This is not the kiss of a Soletaken, Udinaas. It is a disease that attacks your brain. Poisons the clear blood of your thoughts.'

'Are you truly here, Feather Witch? Here, in my dream?'

With the question her form grew translucent, wavered, then scattered like windblown sand.

He was alone once more.

Will I never awaken?

Motion in the sky to his right drew him round.

Dragons. A score of the creatures, riding distant currents just above the uncertain horizon. Around them swarmed Wyval, like gnats.
And Udinaas suddenly understood something.

They are going to war.

Morok leaves covered the corpse. Over the next few days, those leaves would begin to rot, leaching into the amber wax a bluish stain, until the coin-sheathed body beneath became a blurred shape, as if encased in ice.

The shadow in the wax, enclosing the Beneda warrior for all time. A haven for wandering wraiths, there within the hollowed log.

Trull stood beside the corpse. The Blackwood bole was still being prepared in an unlit building to one side of the citadel. Living wood resisted the hands that would alter its shape. But it loved death and so could be cajoled.

Distant cries in the village as voices lifted in a final prayer to Daughter Dusk. Night was moments from arriving. The empty hours, when even faith itself must be held quiescent, lay ahead. Night belonged to the Betrayer. Who sought to murder Father Shadow at their very moment of triumph, and who very nearly succeeded.

There were prohibitions against serious discourse during this passage of time. In darkness prowled deceit, an unseen breath that any could draw in, and so become infected.

No swords were buried beneath the threshold of homes wherein maidens dwelt. To seal marriage now would be to doom its fate. A child delivered was put to death. Lovers did not touch one another. The day was dead.

Soon, however, the moon would rise and shadows would return once more. Just as Scabandari Bloodeye emerged from the darkness, so too did the world. Failure awaits the Betrayer. It could not be otherwise, lest the realms descend into chaos.

He stared down at the mound of leaves beneath which lay the body of the warrior. He had volunteered to stand guard this first night. No Edur corpse was ever left unattended when darkness prowled, for it cared naught whether its breath flowed into warm flesh or cold. A corpse could unleash dire events as easily as the acts of someone alive. It had no need for a voice or gestures of its own. Others were ever eager to speak for it, to draw blade or dagger.

Hannan Mosag had proclaimed this the greatest flaw among the Edur. Old men and the dead were the first whisperers of the word vengeance. Old men and the dead stood at the same wall, and while the dead faced it, old men held their backs to it. Beyond that wall was oblivion. They spoke from the end times, and both knew a need to lead the young onto identical paths, if only to give meaning to all they had known and all they had done.

Feuds were now forbidden. Crimes of vengeance sentenced an entire bloodline to disgraced execution.

Trull Sengar had watched, from where he stood in the gloom beneath a tree – the body before him – had watched his brother Rhulad walk out into the forest. In these, the dark hours, he had been furtive in his movement, stealing like a wraith from the village edge.

Into the forest, onto the north trail.

That led to the cemetery that had been chosen for the Beneda warrior’s interment.

Where a lone woman stood vigil against the night.

It may be an attempt ... that will fail. Or it is a repetition of meetings that have occurred before, many times. She is unknowable. As all women are unknowable. But he isn’t. He was too late to the war and so his belt is bare. He would draw blood another way.

Because Rhulad must win. In everything, he must win. That is the cliff-edge of his life, the narrow strand he himself fashions, with every slight observed – whether it be real or imagined matters not – every silent moment that, to him, screams scorn upon the vast emptiness of his achievements.
Rhulad. *Everything worth fighting for is gained without fighting. Every struggle is a struggle against doubt. Honour is not a thing to be chased, for it, as with all other forces of life, is in fact impelled, streaking straight for you. The moment of collision is where the truth of you is revealed.*

An attempt. Which she will refuse, with outrage in her eyes.

Or their arms are now entwined, and in the darkness there is heat and sweat. And betrayal.

And he could not move, could not abandon his own vigil above this anonymous Beneda warrior.

His brother Fear had made a sword, as was the custom. He had stood before Mayen with the blade resting on the backs of his hands. And she had stepped forward, witnessed by all, to take the weapon from him. Carrying it back to her home.

Betrothal.

A year from that day – less than five weeks from now – she would emerge from the doorway with that sword. Then, using it to excavate a trench before the threshold, she would set it down in the earth and bury it. Iron and soil, weapon and home. Man and woman.

Marriage.

Before that day when Fear presented the sword, Rhulad had not once looked at Mayen. Was it the uninterest of youth? No, the Edur were not like Letherii. A year among the Letherii was as a day among the Edur. There were a handful of prettier women among the maidens of noble-born households. But he had set his eyes upon her thereafter.

And that made it what it was.

He could abandon this vigil. A Beneda warrior was not a Hiroth warrior, after all. A sea-gnawed corpse clothed in copper, not gold. He could set out on that trail, padding through the darkness.

To find what? Certainty, the sharp teeth behind all that gnawed at his thoughts.

And the worth of that?

*It is these dark hours*—

Trull Sengar’s eyes slowly widened. A figure had emerged from the forest edge opposite him. Heart thudding, he stared.

It stepped forward. Black blood in its mouth. Skin a pallid, dulled reflection of moonlight, smeared in dirt, smudged by something like mould. Twin, empty scabbards of polished wood at its hips. Fragments of armour hanging from it. Tall, yet stoop-shouldered, as if height had become its own imposition.

Eyes like dying coals.

‘Ah,’ it murmured, looking down on the heap of leaves, ‘what have we here?’ It spoke the language of night, close kin to that of the Edur.

Trembling, Trull forced himself to step forward, shifting his spear into a two-handed grip, the iron blade hovering above the corpse. ‘He is not for you,’ he said, his throat suddenly parched and strangely tight.

The eyes glowed brighter for a moment as the white-skinned apparition glanced up at Trull. ‘Tiste Edur, do you know me?’

Trull nodded. ‘The ghost of darkness. The Betrayer.’

A yellow and black grin.

Trull flinched as it drew a step closer and then settled to a crouch on the other side of the leaves. ’Begone
from here, ghost,' the Edur said.

‘Or you will do what?’

‘Sound the alarm.’

‘How? Your voice is but a whisper now. Your throat is clenched. You struggle to breathe. Is it betrayal that strangles you, Edur? Never mind. I have wandered far, and have no desire to wear this man’s armour.’ It straightened. ‘Move back, warrior, if you wish to draw breath.’

Trull held himself where he was. The air hissed its way down his constricted throat, and he could feel his limbs weakening.

‘Well, cowardice was never a flaw among the Edur. Have it your way, then.’ The figure turned and walked towards the forest edge.

Blessed lungful of air, then another. Head spinning, Trull planted his spear and leaned on it. ‘Wait!’

The Betrayer halted, faced him once more.

‘This – this has never happened before. The vigil—’

‘Contested only by hungry earth spirits.’ The Betrayer nodded. ‘Or, even more pathetic, by the spirits of uprooted Blackwoods, sinking into the flesh to do ... what? Nothing, just as they did in life. There are myriad forces in this world, Tiste Edur, and the majority of them are weak.’

‘Father Shadow imprisoned you—’

‘So he did, and there I remain.’ Once again, that ghastly smile. ‘Except when I dream. Mother Dark’s reluctant gift, a reminder to me that She does not forget. A reminder to me that I, too, must never forget.’

‘This is not a dream,’ Trull said.

‘They were shattered,’ the Betrayer said. ‘Long ago. Fragments scattered across a battlefield. Why would anyone want them? Those broken shards can never be reunited. They are, each and every one, now folded in on themselves. So, I wonder, what did he do with them?’

The figure walked into the forest and was gone.

‘This,’ Trull whispered, ‘is not a dream.’

Udinaas opened his eyes. The stench of the seared corpse remained in his nose and mouth, thick in his throat. Above him, the longhouse’s close slanted ceiling, rough black bark and yellowed chinking. He remained motionless beneath the blankets.

Was it near dawn?

He could hear nothing, no voices from the chambers beyond. But that told him little. The hours before the moon rose were silent ones. As were, of course, the hours when everyone slept. He had nets to repair the coming day. And rope strands to weave.

Perhaps that is the truth of madness, when a mind can do nothing but make endless lists of the mundane tasks awaiting it, as proof of its sanity. Mend those nets. Wind those strands. See? I have not lost the meaning of my life.

The blood of the Wyval was neither hot nor cold. It did not rage. Udinaas felt no different in his body. But the clear blood of my thoughts, oh, they are stained indeed. He pushed the blankets away and sat up. This is the path, then, and I am to stay on it. Until the moment comes.

Mend the nets. Weave the strands.
Dig the hole for that Beneda warrior, who would have just opened his eyes, had he any. And seen not the blackness of the imprisoning coins. Seen not the blue wax, nor the morok leaves reacting to that wax and turning wet and black. Seen, instead, the face of... something else.

Wyval circled dragons in flight. He had seen that. Like hounds surrounding their master as the hunt is about to be unleashed. I know, then, why I am where I have arrived. And when is an answer the night is yet to whisper – no, not whisper, but howl. The call to the chase by Darkness itself.

Udinaas realized he was among the enemy. Not as a Letherii sentenced to a life of slavery. That was as nothing to the peril his new blood felt, here in this heart of Edur and Kurald Emurlahn.

*Feather Witch would have been better, I suppose, but Mother Dark moves unseen even in things such as these.*

He made his way into the main chamber.

And came face to face with Uruth.

'These are not the hours to wander, slave,' she said.

He saw that she was trembling.

Udinaas sank to the floor and set his forehead against the worn planks.

'Prepare the cloaks of Fear, Rhulad and Trull, for travel this night. Be ready before the moon's rise. Food and drink for a morning's repast.'

He quickly climbed to his feet to do as she bid, but was stopped by an outstretched hand.

'Udinaas,' Uruth said. 'You do this alone, telling no-one.'

He nodded.

Shadows crept out from the forest. The moon had risen, prison world to Menandore's true father, who was trapped within it. Father Shadow's ancient battles had made this world, shaped it in so many ways. Scabandari Bloodeye, stalwart defender against the fanatic servants of implacable certitude, whether that certitude blazed blinding white, or was the all-swallowing black. The defeats he had delivered – the burying of Brother Dark and the imprisonment of Brother Light there in that distant, latticed world in the sky – were both gifts, and not just to the Edur but to all who were born and lived only to one day die.

The gifts of freedom, a will unchained unless one affixed upon oneself such chains – the crowding host's uncountable, ever-rattling offers, each whispering promises of salvation against confusion – and wore them like armour.

Trull Sengar saw chains upon the Letherii. He saw the impenetrable net which bound them, the links of reasoning woven together into a chaotic mass where no beginning and no end could be found. He understood why they worshipped an empty throne. And he knew the manner in which they would justify all that they did. Progress was necessity, growth was gain. Reciprocity belonged to fools and debt was the binding force of all nature, of every people and every civilization. Debt was its own language, within which were used words like negotiation, compensation and justification, and legality was a skein of duplicity that blinded the eyes of justice.

An empty throne. Atop a mountain of gold coins.

Father Shadow had sought a world wherein uncertainty could work its insidious poison against those who chose intransigence as their weapon – with which they held wisdom at bay. Where every fortress eventually crumbled from within, from the very weight of those chains that exerted so inflexible an embrace.

In his mind he argued with that ghost – the Betrayer. The one who sought to murder Scabandari Bloodeye all those thousands of years ago. He argued that every certainty is an empty throne. That those who knew but one
path would come to worship it, even as it led to a cliff's edge. He argued, and in the silence of that ghost's indifference to his words he came to realize that he himself spoke – fierce with heat – from the foot of an empty throne.

Scabandari Bloodeye had never made that world. He had vanished in this one, lost on a path no-one else could follow.

Trull Sengar stood before the corpse and its mound of rotting leaves, and felt desolation in his soul. A multitude of paths waited before him, and they were all sordid, sodden with despair.

The sound of boots on the trail. He turned.

Fear and Rhulad approached. Wearing their cloaks. Fear carried Trull's own in his arms, and from the man's shoulders hung a small pack.

Rhulad's face was flushed, and Trull could not tell if it was born of anxiety or excitement.

'I greet you, Trull,' Fear said, handing him the cloak.

'Where are we going?'

'Our father passes this night in the temple. Praying for guidance.'

'The Stone Bowl,' Rhulad said, his eyes glittering. 'Mother sends us to the Stone Bowl.'

'Why?'

Rhulad shrugged.

Trull faced Fear. 'What is this Stone Bowl? I have never heard of it.'

'An old place. In the Kaschan Trench.'

'You knew of this place, Rhulad?'

His younger brother shook his head. 'Not until tonight, when Mother described it. We have all walked the edge of the Trench. Of course the darkness of its heart is impenetrable – how could we have guessed that a holy site hid within it?'

'A holy site? In absolute darkness?'

'The significance of that,' Fear said, 'will be made evident soon enough, Trull.'

They began walking, eldest brother in the lead. Into the forest, onto a trail leading northwest. 'Fear,' Trull said, 'has Uruth spoken to you of the Stone Bowl before?'

'I am Weapons Master,' Fear replied. 'There were rites to observe ...'

Among them, Trull knew, the memorization of every battle the Edur ever fought. He then wondered why that thought had come to him, in answer to Fear's words. What hidden linkages was his own mind seeking to reveal, and why was he unable to discern them?

They continued on, avoiding pools of moonlight unbroken by shadows. Tomad forbade us this journey,' Trull said after a time.

'In matters of sorcery,' Fear said, 'Uruth is superior to Tomad.'

'And this is a matter of sorcery?'

Rhulad snorted behind Trull. 'You stood with us in the Warlock King's longboat.'

'I did,' agreed Trull. 'Fear, would Hannan Mosag approve of what we do, of what Uruth commands of us?'
Fear said nothing.

‘You,’ Rhulad said, ‘are too filled with doubt, brother. It binds you in place—’

‘I watched you walk the path to the chosen cemetery, Rhulad. After Dusk's departure and before the moon's rise.’

If Fear reacted to this, his back did not reveal it, nor did his steps falter on the trail.

‘What of it?’ Rhulad asked, his tone too loose, too casual.

‘My words, brother, are not to be answered with flippancy.’

‘I knew that Fear was busy overseeing the return of weapons to the armoury,’ Rhulad said. ‘And I sensed a malevolence prowling the darkness. And so I stood in hidden vigil over his betrothed, who was alone in the cemetery. I may be unblooded, brother, but I am not without courage. I know you believe that inexperience is the soil in which thrive the roots of false courage. But I am not false, no matter what you think. For me, inexperience is unbroken soil, not yet ready for roots. I stood in my brother's place.’

‘Malevolence in the night, Rhulad? Whose?’

‘I could not be certain. But I felt it.’

‘Fear,’ Trull said, ‘have you no questions for Rhulad on this matter?’

‘No,’ Fear replied drily. ‘There is no need for that ... when you are around.’

Trull clamped his mouth shut, thankful that the night obscured the flush on his face.

There was silence for some time after that.

The trail began climbing, winding among outcrops of lichen-skinned granite. They climbed over fallen trees here and there, scrambled up steep slides. The moon's light grew diffuse, and Trull sensed it was near dawn by the time they reached the highest point of the trail.

The path now took them inland – eastward – along a ridge of toppled trees and broken boulders. Water trapped in depressions in the bedrock formed impenetrable black pools that spread across the trail. The sky began to lighten overhead.

Fear then led them off the path, north, across tumbled scree and among the twisted trees. A short while later Kaschan Trench was before them.

A vast gorge, like a knife's puncturing wound in the bedrock, its sides sheer and streaming with water, it ran in a jagged line, beginning beneath Hasana Inlet half a day to the west, and finally vanishing into the bedrock more than a day's travel to the east. They were at its widest point, two hundred or so paces across, the landscape opposite slightly higher but otherwise identical – scattered boulders looking as if they had been pushed up from the gorge and mangled trees that seemed sickened by some unseen breath from the depths.

Fear unclasped his cloak, dropped his pack and walked over to a misshapen mound of stones. He cleared away dead branches and Trull saw that the stones were a cairn of some sort. Fear removed the capstone, and reached down into the hollow beneath. He lifted clear a coil of knotted rope.

‘Remove your cloak and your weapons,’ he said as he carried the coil to the edge.

He found one end and tied his pack, cloak, sword and spear to it. Trull and Rhulad came close with their own gear and all was bound to the rope. Fear then began lowering it over the side.

‘Trull, take this other end and lead it to a place of shadow. A place where the shadow will not retreat before the sun as the day passes.’

He picked up the rope end and walked to a large, tilted boulder. When he fed the end into the shadows at its
base he felt countless hands grasp it. Trull stepped back. The rope was now taut.

Returning to the edge, he saw that Fear had already begun his descent. Rhulad stood staring down.

'We're to wait until he reaches the bottom,' Rhulad said. 'He will tug thrice upon the rope. He asked that I go next.'

'Very well.'

'She has the sweetest lips,' Rhulad murmured, then looked up and met Trull's eyes. 'Is that what you want me to say? To give proof to your suspicions?'

'I have many suspicions, brother,' Trull replied. 'We have sun-scorched thoughts, we have dark-swallowed thoughts. But it is the shadow thoughts that move with stealth, creeping to the very edge of the rival realms – if only to see what there is to be seen.'

'And if they see nothing?'

'They never see nothing, Rhulad.'

'Then illusions? What if they see only what their imagination conjures? False games of light? Shapes in the darkness? Is this not how suspicion becomes a poison? But a poison like white nectar, every taste leaving you thirsting for more.'

Trull was silent for a long moment. Then he said, 'Fear spoke to me not long ago. Of how one is perceived, rather than how one truly is. How the power of the former can overwhelm that of the latter. How, indeed, perception shapes truth like waves on stone.'

'What would you ask of me, Trull?'

He faced Rhulad directly. 'Cease your strutting before Mayen.'

A strange smile, then, 'Very well, brother.'

Trull's eyes widened slightly.

The rope snapped three times.

'My turn,' Rhulad said. He grasped hold of the rope and was quickly gone from sight.

_The knots of these words were anything but hose._ Trull drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, wondering at that smile. The peculiarity of it. A smile that might have been pain, a smile born of hurt.

Then he turned upon himself and studied what he was feeling. Difficult to find, to recognize, but... _Father Shadow forgive me. I feel ... sullied._

The three tugs startled him.

Trull took the heavy rope in his hands, feeling the sheath of beeswax rubbed into the fibres to keep them from rotting. Without the knots for foot- and hand-holds, the descent would be treacherous indeed. He walked out over the edge, facing inward, then leaned back and began making his way down.

Glittering streams ran down the raw stone before him. Red-stained calcretions limned the surface here and there. Flea-like insects skipped across the surface. The scrapes left by the passage of Rhulad and Fear glistened in the fading light, ragged furrows wounding all that clung to the rock.

Knot to knot, he went down the rope, the darkness deepening around him. The air grew cool and damp, then cold. Then his feet struck mossy boulders, and hands reached out to steady him.

His eyes struggled to make out the forms of his brothers. 'We should have brought a lantern.'

'There is light from the Stone Bowl,' Fear said. 'An Elder Warren. Kaschan.'
'That warren is dead,' Trull said. 'Destroyed by Father Shadow's own hand.'

'Its children are dead, brother, but the sorcery lingers. Have your eyes adjusted? Can you see the ground before you?'

A tumble of boulders and the glitter of flowing water between them. 'I can.'

'Then follow me.'

They made their way out from the wall. Footing was treacherous, forcing them to proceed slowly. Dead branches festooned with mushrooms and moss. Trull saw a pallid, hairless rodent of some kind slip into a crack between two rocks, tail slithering in its wake. 'This is the Betrayer's realm,' he said.

Fear grunted. 'More than you know, brother.'

'Something lies ahead,' Rhulad said in a whisper.

Vast, towering shapes. Standing stones, devoid of lichen or moss, the surface strangely textured, made, Trull realized as they drew closer, to resemble the bark of the Blackwood. Thick roots coiled out from the base of each obelisk, spreading out to entwine with those of the stones to each side. Beyond, the ground fell away in a broad depression, from which light leaked like mist.

Fear led them between the standing stones and they halted at the pit's edge.

The roots writhed downward, and woven in their midst were bones. Thousands upon thousands. Trull saw Kaschan, the feared ancient enemies of the Edur, reptilian snouts and gleaming fangs. And bones that clearly belonged to the Tiste. Among them, finely curved wing-bones from Wyval, and, at the very base, the massive skull of an Eleint, the broad, flat bone of its forehead crushed inward, as if by the blow of a gigantic, gauntleted fist.

Leafless scrub had grown up from the chaotic mat on the slopes, the branches and twigs grey and clenching. Then the breath hissed between Trull's teeth. The scrub was stone, growing not in the manner of crystal, but of living wood.

'Kaschan sorcery,' Fear said after a time, 'is born of sounds our ears cannot hear, formed into words that loosen the bindings that hold all matter together, that hold it to the ground. Sounds that bend and stretch light, as a tidal inflow up a river is drawn apart at the moment of turning. With this sorcery, they fashioned fortresses of stone that rode the sky like clouds. With this sorcery, they turned Darkness in upon itself with a hunger none who came too close could defy, an all-devouring hunger that fed first and foremost upon itself.' His voice was strangely muted as he spoke. 'Kaschan sorcery was sent into the warren of Mother Dark, like a plague. Thus was sealed the gate from Kurald Galain to every other realm. Thus was Mother Dark driven into the very core of the Abyss, witness to an endless swirl of light surrounding her – all that she would one day devour, until the last speck of matter vanishes into her. Annihilating Mother Dark. Thus the Kaschan, who are long dead, set upon Mother Dark a ritual that will end in her murder. When all Light is gone. When there is naught to cast Shadow, and so Shadow too is doomed to die.

'When Scabandari Bloodeye discovered what they had done, it was too late. The end, the death of the Abyss, cannot be averted. The journey of all that exists repeats on every scale, brothers. From those realms too small for us to see, to the Abyss itself. The Kaschan locked all things into mortality, into the relentless plunge towards extinction. This was their vengeance. An act born, perhaps, of despair. Or the fiercest hatred imaginable. Witness to their own extinction, they forced all else to share that fate.'

His brothers were silent. The dull echoes of Fear's last words faded away.

Then Rhulad grunted. 'I see no signs of this final convergence, Fear.'

'A distant death, aye. More distant than one could imagine. Yet it will come.'

'And what is that to us?'
'The Tiste Invasions drove the Kaschan to their last act. Father Shadow earned the enmity of every Elder god, of every ascendant. Because of the Kaschan ritual, the eternal game among Dark, Light and Shadow would one day end. And with it, all of existence.' He faced his brothers. 'I tell you this secret knowledge so that you will better understand what happened here, what was done. And why Hannan Mosag speaks of enemies far beyond the mortal Letherii.'

The first glimmerings of realization whispered through Trull. He dragged his gaze from Fear's dark, haunted eyes, and looked down into the pit. To the very base, to the skull of that slain dragon. 'They killed him.'

'They destroyed his corporeal body, yes. And imprisoned his soul.'

'Scabandari Bloodeye,' Rhulad said, shaking his head as if to deny all that he saw. 'He cannot be dead. That skull is not—'

'It is,' Fear said. 'They killed our god.'

'Who?' Trull demanded.

'All of them. Elder gods. And Eleint. The Elder gods loosed the blood in their veins. The dragons spawned a child of indescribable terror, to seek out and hunt down Scabandari Bloodeye. Father Shadow was brought down. An Elder god named Kilmandaros shattered his skull. They then made for Bloodeye's spirit a prison of eternal pain, of agony beyond measure, to last until the Abyss itself is devoured.

'Hannan Mosag means to avenge our god.'

Trull frowned. 'The Elder gods are gone, Fear. As are the Eleint. Hannan Mosag commands six tribes of Tiste Edur and a fragmented warren.'

'Four hundred and twenty-odd thousand Edur,' Rhulad said. 'And, for all our endless explorations, we have found no kin among the fragments of Kurald Emurlahn. Fear, Hannan Mosag sees through stained thoughts. It is one thing to challenge Letherii hegemony with summoned demons and, if necessary, iron blades. Are we now to wage war against every god in this world?'

Fear slowly nodded. 'You are here,' he told them, 'and you have been told what is known. Not to see you bend to one knee and praise the Warlock King's name. He seeks power, brothers. He needs power, and he cares nothing for its provenance, nor its taint.'

'Your words are treasonous,' Rhulad said, and Trull heard a strange delight in his brother's voice.

'Are they?' Fear asked. 'Hannan Mosag has charged us to undertake a perilous journey. To receive for him a gift. To then deliver it into his hands. A gift, brothers, from whom?'

'We cannot deny him,' Trull said. 'He will simply choose others to go in our stead. And we will face banishment, or worse.'

'Of course we shall not deny him, Trull. But we must not journey like blind old men.'

'What of Binadas?' Rhulad asked. 'What does he know of this?'

'Everything,' Fear replied. 'More, perhaps, than Uruth herself.'

Trull stared down once more at the mouldy dragon skull at the bottom of the pit. 'How are you certain that is Scabandari Bloodeye?'

'Because it was the widows who brought him here. The knowledge was passed down every generation among the women.'

'And Hannan Mosag?'

'Uruth knows he has been here, to this place. How he discovered the truth remains a mystery. Uruth would never have told me and Binadas, if not for her desperation. The Warlock King is drawing upon deadly powers.'
Are his thoughts stained? If not before, they are now.

Trull's eyes remained on that skull. A blunt, brutal execution, that mailed fist. 'We had better hope,' he whispered, 'that the Elder gods are indeed gone.'
There are tides beneath every tide
And the surface of water
Holds no weight

The Nerek believed the Tiste Edur were children of demons. There was ash in their blood, staining their skin. To look into an Edur’s eyes was to see the greying of the world, the smearing of the sun and the rough skin of night itself.

As the Hiroth warrior named Binadas strode towards the group, the Nerek began keening. Fists beating their own faces and chests, they fell to their knees.

Buruk the Pale marched among them, screaming curses and shrieking demands, but they were deaf to him. The merchant finally turned to where stood Seren Pedac and Hull Beddict, and began laughing.

Hull frowned. ‘This will pass, Buruk,’ he said.

‘Oh, will it now? And the world itself, will that too pass? Like a deathly wind, our lives swirling like dust amidst its headlong rush? Only to settle in its wake, dead and senseless – and all that frenzied cavorting empty of meaning? Hah! Would that I had hired Faraed!’

Seren Pedac’s attention remained on the approaching Tiste Edur. A hunter. A killer. One who probably also possessed the trait of long silences. She could imagine this Binadas, sharing a fire in the wilderness with Hull Beddict. In the course of an evening, a night and the following morning, perhaps a half-dozen words exchanged between them. And, she suspected, the forging of a vast, depthless friendship. These were the mysteries of men, so baffling to women. Where silences could become a conjoining of paths. Where a handful of inconsequential words could bind spirits in an ineffable understanding. Forces at play that she could sense, indeed witness, yet ever remaining outside them. Baffled and frustrated and half disbelieving.

Words knit the skein between and among women. And the language of gesture and expression, all merging to fashion a tapestry that, as every woman understood, could tear in but one direction, by deliberate, vicious effort. A friendship among women knew but one enemy, and that was malice.

Thus, the more words, the tighter the weave.

Seren Pedac had lived most of her life in the company of men, and now, on her rare visits to her home in Letheras, she was viewed by women who knew her with unease. As if her choice had made her loyalty uncertain, cause for suspicion. And she had found an unwelcome awkwardness in herself when in their company. They wove from different threads, on different frames, discordant with her own rhythms. She felt clumsy and coarse among them, trapped by her own silences.

To which she answered with flight, away from the city, from her past. From women.

Yet, in the briefest of moments, in a meeting of two men with their almost indifferent exchange of greetings, she was knocked a step back – almost physically – and shut out. Here, sharing this ground, this trail with its rocks and trees, yet in another world.

Too easy to conclude, with a private sneer, that men were simple. Granted, had they been strangers, they might well be circling and sniffing each other’s anuses right now. Inviting conclusions that swept aside all notions of complexity, in their place a host of comforting generalizations. But the meeting of two men who were friends destroyed such generalizations and challenged the contempt that went with them, invariably leading a woman to anger.
And the strange, malicious desire to step between them.

On a cobbled beach, a man looks down and sees one rock, then another and another. A woman looks down and sees ... rocks. But perhaps even this is simplistic. Man as singular and women as plural. More likely we are bits of both, some of one in the other.

We just don’t like admitting it.

He was taller than Hull, shoulders level with the Letherii's eyes. His hair was brown and bound in finger-length braids. Eyes the colour of wet sand. Skin like smeared ash. Youthful features, long and narrow barring the broad mouth.

Seren Pedac knew the Sengar name. It was likely she had seen this man’s kin, among the delegations she had treated with in her three official visits to Hannan Mosag’s tribe.

‘Hiroth warrior,’ Buruk the Pale said, shouting to be heard above the wailing Nerek, ‘I welcome you as guest. I am—’

‘I know who you are,’ Binadas replied.

At his words the Nerek voices trailed off, leaving only the wind moaning its way up the trail, and the constant trickling flow of melt water from the higher reaches.

‘I bring to the Hiroth,’ Buruk was saying, ‘ingots of iron—’

‘And would test,’ Hull Beddict interrupted, ‘the thickness of the ice.’

‘The season has turned,’ Binadas replied to Hull. ‘The ice is riven with cracks. There has been an illegal harvest of tusked seals. Hannan Mosag will have given answer.’

Seren Pedac swung to the merchant. Studied Buruk the Pale’s face. Alcohol, white nectar and the bitter wind had lifted the blood vessels to just beneath the pallid skin on his nose and cheeks. The man’s eyes were bleary and shot with red. He conveyed no reaction at the Edur’s words. ‘Regrettable. It is unfortunate that, among my merchant brethren, there are those who choose to disregard the agreements. The lure of gold. A tide none can withstand.’

‘The same can be said of vengeance,’ Binadas pointed out.

Buruk nodded. ‘Aye, all debts must be repaid.’

Hull Beddict snorted. ‘Gold and blood are not the same.’

‘Aren’t they?’ Buruk challenged. ‘Hiroth warrior, the interests I represent would adhere now and evermore to the bound agreements. Alas, Lether is a many-headed beast. The surest control of the more voracious elements will be found in an alliance – between the Edur and those Letherii who hold to the words binding our two peoples.’

Binadas turned away. ‘Save your speeches for the Warlock King,’ he said. ‘I will escort you to the village. That is all that need be understood between us.’

Shrugging, Buruk the Pale walked back to his wagon. ‘On your feet, Nerek! The trail is downhill from here on, isn’t it just!’

Seren watched the merchant climb into the covered back, vanishing from sight, as the Nerek began scurrying about. A glance showed Hull and Binadas facing each other once more. The wind carried their words to her.

‘I will speak against Buruk’s lies,’ Hull Beddict said. ‘He will seek to ensnare you with smooth assurances and promises, none of which will be worth a dock.’

Binadas shrugged. ‘We have seen the traps you laid out before the Nerek and the Tarthenal. Each word is a knot in an invisible net. Against it, the Nerek’s swords were too blunt. The Tarthenal too slow to anger. The
Faraed could only smile in their confusion. We are not as those tribes.'

'I know,' Hull said. 'Friend, my people believe in the stacking of coins. One atop another, climbing, ever climbing to glorious heights. The climb signifies progress, and progress is the natural proclivity of civilization. Progress, Binadas, is the belief from which emerge notions of destiny. The Letherii believe in destiny — their own. They are deserving of all things, born of their avowed virtues. The empty throne is ever there for the taking.'

Binadas was smiling at Hull's words, but it was a wry smile. He turned suddenly to Seren Pedac. 'Acquitor. Join us, please. Do old wounds mar Hull Beddict's view of Lether?'

'Destiny wounds us all,' she replied, 'and we Letherii wear the scars with pride. Most of us,' she added with an apologetic look at Hull.

'One of your virtues?'

'Yes, if you could call it that. We have a talent for disguising greed under the cloak of freedom. As for past acts of depravity, we prefer to ignore those. Progress, after all, means to look ever forward, and whatever we have trampled in our wake is best forgotten.'

'Progress, then,' Binadas said, still smiling, 'sees no end.'

'Our wagons ever roll down the hill, Hiroth. Faster and faster.'

'Until they strike a wall.'

'We crash through most of those.'

The smile faded, and Seren thought she detected a look of sadness in the Edur's eyes before he turned away. 'We live in different worlds.'

'And I would choose yours,' Hull Beddict said.

Binadas shot the man a glance, his expression quizzical. 'Would you, friend?'

Something in the Hiroth's tone made the hairs rise on the back of Seren Pedac's neck.

Hull frowned, suggesting that he too had detected something awry in that question.

No more words were exchanged then, and Seren Pedac permitted Hull and Binadas to take the lead on the trail, allowing them such distance that their privacy was assured. Even so, they seemed disinclined to speak.

She watched them, their matching strides, the way they walked. And wondered.

Hull was so clearly lost. Seeking to make the Tiste Edur the hand of his own vengeance. He would drive them to war, if he could. But destruction yielded only strife, and his dream of finding peace within his soul in the blood and ashes of slaughter filled her with pity for the man. She could not, however, let that blind her to the danger he presented.

Seren Pedac held no love for her own people. The Letherii's rapacious hunger and inability to shift to any perspective that did not serve them virtually assured a host of bloody clashes with every foreign power they met. And, one day, they would meet their match. The wagons will shatter against a wall more solid than any we have seen. Will it be the Tiste Edur? It did not seem likely. True, they possessed formidable sorcery, and the Letherii had yet to encounter fiercer fighters. But the combined tribes amounted to less than a quarter-million. King Diskanar's capital alone was home to over a hundred thousand, and there were a half-dozen cities nearly as large in Lether. With the protectorates across Dracons Sea and to the east, the hegemony could amass and field six hundred thousand soldiers, maybe more. Attached to each legion there would be a master of sorcery, trained by the Ceda, Kuru Qan himself. The Edur would be crushed. Annihilated.

And Hull Beddict...

She turned her thoughts from him with an effort. The choices were his to make, after all. Nor, she suspected,
would he listen to her warnings.

Seren Pedac acknowledged her own uncertainty and confusion. Would she advocate peace at any price? What were the rewards of capitulation? Letherii access to the resources now claimed by the Edur. The harvest from the sea. And the Blackwood ...

*Of course. It's the living wood that we hunger for, the source of ships that can heal themselves, that cut the waves faster than our sleekest galleys, that resist magic unleashed upon them. That is at the heart of this game.*

But King Diskanar was not a fool – he was not the one harbouring such aspirations. Kuru Qan would have seen to that. No, this gambit was the queen's. Such conceit, to believe the Letherii could master the living wood. That the Edur would so easily surrender their secrets, their arcane arts in coaxing the will of the Blackwood, in binding its power to their own.

Harvesting the tusked seals was a feint. The monetary loss was part of a much larger scheme, an investment with the aim of generating political dividends, which in turn would recoup the losses a hundredfold. And only someone as wealthy as the queen or Chancellor Triban Gnol could absorb such losses. Ships crewed by the Indebted, with the provision of clearing those debts upon the event of their deaths. Lives given up for the sake of children and grandchildren. They would have had no trouble manning those ships. Blood and gold, then.

She could not be certain of her suspicions, but they seemed to fit, and were as bitterly unpalatable to her as they probably were to Buruk the Pale. The Tiste Edur would not surrender the Blackwood. The conclusion was foregone. There was to be war. *And Hull Beddict will make of himself its fiercest proponent. The queen's own unwitting agent. No wonder Buruk tolerates his presence.*

And the part she would play? *I am the escort of this snarled madness. Nothing more than that. Keep your distance, Seren Pedac.* She was Acquitor. She would do as she had been charged to do. Deliver Buruk the Pale.

*Nothing will be decided. Not by us. The game's end awaits the Great Meeting.*

If only she could find comfort in that thought.

Twenty paces ahead, the forest swallowed Hull Beddict and Binadas Sengar. Darkness and shadows, drawing closer with every step she took.

Any criminal who could swim across the canal with a sack of docks strapped to his back won freedom. The amount of coin was dependent upon the nature of the transgression. Theft, kidnapping, failure to pay a debt, damage to property and murder yielded the maximum fine of five hundred docks. Embezzlement, assault without cause, cursing in public upon the names of the Empty Throne, the king or the queen, demanded three hundred docks in reparation. The least of the fines, one hundred docks, were levied upon loitering, voiding in public and disrespect.

These were the fines for men. Women so charged were accorded half-weights.

If someone could pay the fine, he did so, thus expunging his criminal record.

The canal awaited those who could not.

The Drownings were more than public spectacle, they were the primary event among a host of activities upon which fortunes were gambled every day in Letheras. Since few criminals ever managed to make it across the canal with their burden, distance and number of strokes provided the measure for wagering bets. As did Risings, Flailings, Flounderings and Vanishings.

The criminals had ropes tied to them, allowing for retrieval of the coins once the drowning was confirmed. The corpse was dumped back into the river. *Guilty as sludge.*

Brys Beddict found Finadd Gerun Eberict on the Second Tier overlooking the canal, amidst a crowd of similarly privileged onlookers to the morning's Drownings. Bookmakers swarmed through the press, handing out payment tiles and collecting wagers. Voices rang in the air above the buzz of excited conversation. Nearby, a woman squealed, then laughed. Male voices rose in response.
'Finadd.'

The flat, scarred face known to virtually every citizen swung to Brys, thin eyebrows lifting in recognition. 'King's Champion. You're just in time. Ublala Pung is about to take a swim. I've eight hundred docks on the bastard.'

Brys Beddict leaned on the railing. He scanned the guards and officials on the launch below. 'I've heard the name,' he said, 'but cannot recall his crime. Is that Ublala?' He pointed down to a cloaked figure towering above the others.

'That's him. Tarthenal half-blood. So they've added two hundred docks to his fine.'

'What did he do?'

'What didn't he do? Murder times three, destruction of property, assault, kidnapping times two, cursing, fraud, failure to pay debt and voiding in public. All in one afternoon.'

'The ruckus at Urum's Lenders?' The criminal had flung off his cloak. He was wearing naught but a loincloth. His burnished skin was lined with whip scars. The muscles beneath it were enormous.

'That's the one.'

'So what's he carrying?'

'Forty-three hundred.'

And Brys now saw the enormous double-lined sack being manhandled onto the huge man's back. 'Errant's blessing, he'll not manage a stroke.'

'That's the consensus,' Gerun said. 'Every call's on Flailing, Floundering and Vanishing. No strokes, no Risings.'

'And your call?'

'Seventy to one.'

Brys frowned. Odds like that meant but one thing. 'You believe he'll make it!' Heads turned at his exclamation, the buzz around them grew louder.

Gerun leaned on the railing, drawing a long breath through his teeth, making that now infamous whistling sound. 'Most half-blood Tarthenal get the worst traits,' he muttered in a low voice, then grinned. 'But not Ublala Pung.'

A roar from the crowds lining the walkway and tiers, and from the opposite side. The guards were leading the criminal down the launch. Ublala walked hunched over, straining with the weight of the sack. At the water's edge he pushed the guards away and turned.

Pulling down his loincloth. And urinating in an arcing stream.

Somewhere, a woman screamed.

'They'll collect that body,' one merchant said, awed, 'down at the Eddies. I've heard there're surgeons who can —'

'And wouldn't you pay a peak for that, Inchers!' his companion cut in.

'I'm not lacking, Hulbat – watch yourself! I was just saying—'

'And ten thousand women are dreaming!'

A sudden hush, as Ublala Pung turned to face the canal.

A moment later his head disappeared beneath the thick, foul water.

Not a flounder, not a flail. Those who had bet on Vanishing crowded. Crowds pulled apart, figures closing on bookmakers.

'Brys Beddict, what's the distance across?'

'A hundred paces.'

'Aye.'

They remained leaning on the railing. After a moment, Brys shot the Finadd a quizzical look. Gerun nodded towards the launch below. 'Look at the line, lad.'

There was some commotion around the retrieval line, and Brys saw – at about the same time as, by the rising voices, did others – that the rope was still playing out. 'He's walking the bottom!'

Brys found he could not pull his eyes from that uncoiling rope. A dozen heartbeats. Two dozen. A half-hundred. And still that rope snaked its way into the water.

The cries and shouts had risen to deafening pitch. Pigeons burst into the air from nearby rooftops, scattering in panic. Bettors were fighting with bookmakers for payment tiles. Someone fell from the Third Tier and, haplessly, missed the canal by a scant two paces. He struck flagstones and did not move, a circle of witnesses closing round his body.

'That's it,' Gerun Eberict sighed.

A figure was emerging on the far-side launch. Streaming mud.

'Four lungs, lad.'

Eight hundred docks. At seventy to one. 'You're a rich man who's just got richer, Finadd.'

'And Ublala Pung's a free one. Hey, I saw your brother earlier. Tehol. Other side of the canal. He was wearing a skirt.'

'Don't stand so close – no, closer, so you can hear me, Shand, but not too close. Not like we know each other.'

'You've lost your mind,' she replied.

'Maybe. Anyway, see that man?'

'Who?'

'That criminal, of course. The half-blood who tore apart Urum's – the extortionist deserved it by the way—'

'Tarthenal have four lungs.'

'And so does he. I take it you didn't wager?'

'I despise gambling.'

'Very droll, lass.'

'What about him?'

'Hire him.'

'With pleasure.'

'Then buy him some clothes.'
‘Do I have to?’

‘He’s not being employed because of his physical attributes – well, not those ones, anyway. You three need a bodyguard.’

‘He can guard my body any time.’

‘That’s it, Shand. I’m done talking with you today.’

‘No you’re not, Tehol. Tonight. The workshop. And bring Bugg.’

‘Everything is going as planned. There’s no need—’

‘Be there.’

* * *

Four years ago, Finadd Gerun Eberict single-handedly foiled an assassination attempt on King Diskanar. Returning to the palace late one night, he came upon the bodies of two guards outside the door to the king’s private chambers. A sorcerous attack had filled their lungs with sand, resulting in asphyxiation. Their flesh was still warm. The door was ajar.

The palace Finadd had drawn his sword. He burst into the king’s bedchamber to find three figures leaning over Ezgara Diskanar’s sleeping form. A mage and two assassins. Gerun killed the sorcerer first, with a chop to the back of the man’s neck, severing his spinal cord. He had then stop-thrust the nearest assassin’s attack, the point of his sword burying itself in the man’s chest, just beneath the left collarbone. It would prove to be a mortal wound. The second assassin thrust his dagger at the Finadd’s face. Probably he had been aiming for one of Gerun’s eyes, but the Finadd threw his head back and the point entered his mouth, slicing through both lips, then driving hard between his front teeth. Pushing them apart, upon which the blade jammed.

The sword in Gerun’s hand chopped down, shattering the outstretched arm. Three more wild hacks killed the assassin.

This last engagement was witnessed by a wide-eyed king.

Two weeks later, Finadd Gerun Eberict, his breath whistling through the new gap in his front teeth, knelt before Ezgara Diskanar in the throne room, and before the assembled masses was granted the King’s Leave. For the remainder of the soldier’s life, he was immune to criminal conviction. He was, in short, free to do as he pleased, to whomever he pleased, barring the king’s own line.

The identity of the person behind the assassination attempt was never discovered.

Since then, Gerun Eberict had been on a private crusade. A lone, implacable vigilante. He was known to have personally murdered thirty-one citizens, including two wealthy, highly respected and politically powerful merchants, and at least a dozen other mysterious deaths were commonly attributed to him. He had, in short, become the most feared man in Letheras.

He had also, in that time, made himself rich.

Yet, for all that, he remained a Finadd in the King’s Guard, and so was bound to the usual responsibilities. Brys Beddict suspected the decision to send Gerun Eberict with the delegation was as much to relieve the city of the pressure of his presence as it was a statement to the queen and the prince. And Brys wondered if the king had come to regret his sanction.

The two palace guards walked side by side across Soulan Bridge and into the Pursers’ District. The day was hot, the sky white with thin, high clouds. They entered Rild’s, an establishment known for its fish cuisine, as well as an alcoholic drink made from orange rinds, honey and Tusked Seal sperm. They sat in the inner courtyard, at Gerun’s private table.

As soon as drinks and lunch were ordered, Gerun Eberict leaned back in his chair and regarded Brys with
curiosity. 'Is my guest this day the King's Champion?'

'In a manner of speaking,' Brys admitted. 'My brother, Hull, is accompanying Buruk the Pale. It is believed that Buruk will remain with the Edur until the Great Meeting. There is concern about Hull.'

'What kind of concern?'

'Well, you knew him years ago.'

'I did. Rather well, in fact. He was my Finadd back then. And upon my promotion, he and I got roaring drunk at Porul's and likely sired a dozen bastards each with a visiting troupe of flower dancers from Trate. In any case, the company folded about ten months later, or so we heard.'

'Yes, well. He's not the same man, you know.'

'Isn't he?'

The drinks arrived, an amber wine for Brys, the Tusked Milk for Gerun.

'No,' Brys said in answer to the Finadd's question, 'I don't think so.'

'Hull believes in one thing, and that is loyalty. The only gift he feels is worth giving. Granted, it was sorely abused, and the legacy of that is a new list in your brother's head, with the names of every man and woman who betrayed him.' Gerun tossed back his drink and gestured for another one. 'The only difference between him and me is that I'm able to cross names off my list.'

'And what if,' Brys said quietly, 'the king's name is on Hull's list?'

Gerun's eyes went flat. 'As I said, I'm the only one crossing off names.'

'Then why is Hull with Buruk the Pale?'

'Buruk is not the king's man, Brys. The very opposite, in fact. I look forward to finally meeting him.'

A cold chill ran through Brys.

'In any case,' Gerun went on, 'it's your other brother who interests me.'

'Tehol? Don't tell me he's on your list.'

Gerun smiled, revealing the sideways tilt of his upper and lower teeth. 'And I'd tell you if he was? Relax, he isn't. Not yet, in any case. But he's up to something.'

'I find that hard to believe. Tehol stopped being up to anything a long time ago.'

'That's what you think.'

'I know nothing to suggest otherwise, but it seems that you do.'

Gerun's second drink arrived. 'Were you aware,' the Finadd said, dipping a finger into the thick, viscid liquid, 'that Tehol still possesses myriad interests, in property, licences, mercantile investments and transportation? He's raised pretty solid fronts, enough to be fairly sure that no-one else knows that he's remained active.'

'Not solid enough, it seems.'

Gerun shrugged. 'In many ways, Tehol walked the path of the King's Leave long before me, and without the actual sanction.'

'Tehol's never killed anyone—'

Gerun's smile grew feral. 'The day the Tolls collapsed, Brys, an even dozen financiers committed suicide. And that collapse was solely and exclusively by Tehol's hand. Perfectly, indeed brilliantly timed. He had his
‘But he went down, too.’

‘He didn’t kill himself over it, though, did he? Didn’t that tell you something? It should have.’

‘Only that he didn’t care.’

‘Precisely. Brys, tell me, who is Tehol’s greatest admirer?’

‘You?’

‘No. Oh, I’m suitably impressed. Enough to be suspicious as the Errant’s Pit now that he’s stirring the pot once more. No. Someone else.’

Brys looked away. Trying to decide if he liked this man sitting opposite him. Liked him enough for this conversation. He knew he hated the subject matter.

Their lunches arrived.

Gerun Eberict focused his attention on the grilled fillet on the silver plate in front of him, after ordering a third Tusked Milk.

It occurred to Brys that he had never seen a woman drink that particular concoction.

‘I don’t speak to Tehol,’ he said after a time, his gaze on his own serving as he slowly picked the white flesh apart, revealing the row of vertebrae and the dorsal spines.

‘You despise what he did?’

Brys frowned, then shook his head. ‘No. What he did after.’

‘Which was?’

‘Nothing.’

‘The water had to clear, lad. So he could look around once more and see what remained.’

‘You’re suggesting diabolical genius, Gerun.’

‘I am. Tehol possesses what Hull does not. Knowledge is not enough. It never is. It’s the capacity to do something with that knowledge. To do it perfectly. Absolute timing. With devastating consequences. That’s what Tehol has. Hull, Errant protect him, does not.’

Brys looked up and met the Finadd’s pale eyes. ‘Are you suggesting that Hull is Tehol’s greatest admirer?’

‘Hull’s very own inspiration. And that is why he is with Buruk the Pale.’

‘Do you intend to stand in his way at the Great Meeting?’

‘It might well be too late by that time, Brys. Assuming that is my intention.’

‘It isn’t?’

‘I haven’t decided.’

‘You want war?’

Gerun’s gaze remained level. ‘That particular tide stirs the deepest silts. Blinding everyone. A man with a goal can get a lot done in that cloud. And, eventually, it settles.’

‘And lo,’ Brys said, unable to hide his bitterness, ‘the world has changed.’
'Possibly.'

'War as the means—'

'To a peaceful end—'

'That you will find pleasing to your eye.'

Gerun pushed his plate away and sat back once more. 'What is life without ambition, Brys?'

Brys rose, his meal pried apart into a chaotic mass on the plate before him. 'Tehol would be better at answering that than am I, Finadd.'

Gerun smiled up at him. 'Inform Nifadas and Kuru Qan that I am not unaware of the complexities wrought through the impending Great Meeting. Nor am I blind to the need to usher me out of the city for a time. I have, of course, compensated for my own absence, in anticipation of my triumphant return.'

'I will convey your words, Finadd.'

'I regret your loss of appetite, Brys. The fish was excellent. Next time, we will speak of inconsequential things. I both respect and admire you, Champion.'

'Ah, so I am not on your list.'

'Not yet. A joke, Brys,' he added upon seeing the Champion's expression. 'Besides, you'd cut me to pieces. How can I not admire that? I see it this way – the history of this decade, for our dear Letheras, can be most succinctly understood by a faithful recounting of the three Beddict brothers. And, as is clear, the tale's not yet done.'

So it would seem. 'I thank you, Finadd, for the company and the invitation.'

Gerun leaned forward and picked up the Champion's plate. 'Take the back exit, if you please,' he said, offering Brys the plate. 'There's a starveling lad living in the alley. Mind, he's to return the silver – make sure he understands that. Tell him you were my guest.'

'Very well, Finadd.'

'Try these on.'

Tehol stared at the woollen trousers, then reached for them. 'Tell me, Bugg, is there any point in you continuing?'

'Do you mean these leggings, or with my sorry existence?'

'Have you hired your crew?' He stripped off his skirt and began donning the trousers.

'Twenty of the most miserable malcontents I could find.'

'Grievances?'

'Every one of them, and I'm pretty certain they are all legitimate. Granted, a few probably deserved their banishment from the trade.'

'Most de-certifications are political, Bugg. Just be sure none of them are incompetent. All we need is for them to keep a secret, and for that, spite against the guilds is the best motivation.'

'I'm not entirely convinced. Besides, we've had some warnings from the guilds.'

'In person?'

'Delivered missives. So far. Your left knee will stay warm.'
'Warm? It's hot out there, Bugg, despite what your old rheumy bones tell you.'

'Well, they're trousers for every season.'

'Really? Assure the guilds we're not out to underbid. In fact, the very opposite. Nor do we pay our crew higher rates. No benefits, either—'

'Barring a stake in the enterprise.'

'Say nothing of that, Bugg. Look at the hairs on my right thigh. They're standing on end.'

'It's the contrast they don't like.'

'The guilds?'

'No, your hairs. The guilds just want to know where by the Errant I came from. And how dare I register a company.'

'Don't worry about that, Bugg. Once they find out what you're claiming to be able to do, they'll be sure you'll fail and so ignore you thereafter. Until you succeed, that is.'

'I'm having second thoughts.'

'About what?'

'Put the skirt back on.'

'I'm inclined to agree with you. Find some more wool. Preferably the same colour, although that is not essential, I suppose. In any case, we have a meeting with the three darlings this evening.'

'Risky.'

'We must be circumspect.'

'That goes both ways. I stole that wool.'

Tehol wrapped the sheet once more about his waist. 'I'll be back down later to collect you. Clean up around here, will you?'

'If I've the time.'

Tehol climbed the ladder to the roof.

The sun's light was deepening, as it edged towards the horizon, bathing the surrounding buildings in a warm glow. Two artists had set up easels on the Third Tier, competing to immortalize Tehol and his bed. He gave them a wave that seemed to trigger a loud argument, then settled down on the sun-warmed mattress. Stared up at the darkening sky.

He had seen his brother Brys at the Drownings. On the other side of the canal, in conversation with Gerun Eberict. Rumour had it that Gerun was accompanying the delegation to the Tiste Edur. Hardly surprising. The King needed that wild man out of the city.

The problem with gold was the way it crawled. Where nothing else could. It seeped out from secrets, flowered in what should have been lifeless cracks. It strutted when it should have remained hidden, beneath notice. Brazen as any weed between the cobbles, and, if one was so inclined, one could track those roots all the way down. Sudden spending, from kin of dead hirelings, followed quickly – but not quickly enough – by sudden, inexplicable demises. A strange severing that left the king's inquisitors with no-one to question, no-one to torture to find the source of the conspiracy. Assassination attempts were no small thing, after all, especially when the king himself was the target. Extraordinary, almost unbelievable success – to have reached Diskanar's own bedchamber, to stand poised above the man, mere heartbeats from delivering death. That particular sorceror had never before shown such skill in the relevant arts. To conjure sand to fill the chests of two men.
was highest sorcery.

Natural curiosity and possible advantage, these had been Tehol's motives, and he'd been much quicker than the royal inquisitors. A fortune, he had discovered, had been spent on the conspiracy, a life's savings.

Clearly, only Gerun Eberict had known the full extent of the scheme. His hirelings would not have anticipated their employer's attacking them. Killing them. They'd fought back, and one had come close to succeeding. And the Finadd carried the scars still, lips and crooked teeth, to show the nearness of the thing.

Immunity from conviction. So that Gerun Eberict could set out and do what he wanted to do. Judge and executioner, for crimes real and imagined, for offences both major and minor.

In a way, Tehol admired the man. For his determination, if not his methods. And for devising and gambling all on a scheme that took one's breath away with its bold ... extremity.

No doubt Brys had official business with the man. As King's Champion.

Even so, worrying. It wouldn't do to have his young brother so close to Gerun Eberict.

For if Tehol possessed a true enemy, a foe to match his own cleverness who – it would appear – surpassed Tehol himself in viciousness – it was Finadd Gerun Eberict, possessor of the King's Leave.

And he'd been sniffing around, twisting arms. Safer, then, to assume Gerun knew that Tehol was not as destitute as most would believe. Nor entirely ... inactive.

Thus, a new fold to consider in this rumpled, tangled tapestry.

Gerun was immune. But not without enemies. Granted, deadly with a sword, and known to have a dozen sworn, blood-bound bodyguards to protect him when he slept. His estate was rumoured to be impregnable, and possessed of its own armoury, apothecary with resident alchemist well versed in poisons and their antidotes, voluminous storehouses, and independent source of water. All in all, Gerun had planned for virtually every contingency.

Barring the singular focus of the mind of one Tehol Beddict.

Sometimes the only solution was also the simplest, most obvious. See a weed between the cobbles ... putt it out.

'Bugg!'

A faint voice from below. 'What?'

'Who was holding Gerun's tiles on that bet this afternoon?'

His servant's grizzled head appeared in the hatch. 'You already know, since you own the bastard. Turble. Assuming he's not dead of a heart attack ... or suicide.'

'Turble? Not a chance. My guess is, the man's packing. A sudden trip to the Outer Isles.'

'He'll never make it to the city gates.'

'Meaning Gerun is on the poor bastard.'

'Wouldn't you be? With that payoff?'

Tehol frowned. 'Suicide, I'm now thinking, might well be Turble's conclusion to his sorry state of affairs. Unexpected, true, and all the more shocking for it. He's got no kin, as I recall. So the debt dies with him.'

'And Gerun is out eight hundred docks.'

'He might wince at that, but not so much as you'd notice. The man's worth a peak, maybe more.'
'You don't know?'

'All right, so I was generalizing. Of course I know, down to the last dock. Nay, the last stripling. In any case, I was saying, or, rather, suggesting, that the loss of eight hundred docks is not what would make Gerun sting. It's the escape. The one trail even Gerun can't doggedly follow – not willingly, anyway. Thus, Turble has to commit suicide.'

'I doubt he'll agree to it.'

'No, probably not. But set it in motion, Bugg. Down to the Eddies. Find us a suitable corpse. Fresh, and not yet drained. Get a bottle or two of Turble's blood from him in exchange—'

'What'll it be? Fire? Who commits suicide using fire?'

'The fire will be an unfortunate consequence of an unattended oil lamp. Unattended because of the suicide. Burnt beyond recognition, alas, but the scrivers will swear by the blood's owner. That's how they work, isn't it?'

'A man's veins never lie.'

'Right. Only, they can.'

'Right, if you're insane enough to drain a corpse and pump new blood into it.'

'A ghastly exercise, Bugg. Glad you're up to it.'

The wizened face at the hatch was scowling. 'And Turble?'

'We smuggle him out the usual way. He's always wanted to take up fishing. Put someone in the tunnel, in case he bolts sooner than we expect. Gerun's watchers will be our finest witnesses. Oh, and won't the Finadd spit.'

'Is this wise?' Bugg asked.

'No choice. He's the only man who can stop me. So I'm getting him first.'

'If he catches a whiff that it's you—'

'Then I'm a dead man.'

'And I'm out of work.'

'Nonsense. The lasses will carry on. Besides, you are my beneficiary – unofficially, of course.'

'Should you have told me that?'

'Why not? I'm lying.'

Bugg's head sank back down.

Tehol settled back onto the bed. *Now, I need to find me a thief. A good one.*

*Ah! I know the very one. Poor lass ...*

'Bugg!'

Shurq Elalle's fate had taken a turn for the worse. Nothing to do with her profession, for her skills in the art of thievery were legendary among the lawless class. An argument with her landlord, sadly escalating to attempted murder on his part, to which she of course – in all legality – responded by flinging him out the window. The hapless man's fall had, unfortunately, been broken by a waddling merchant on the street below. The landlord's neck broke. So did the merchant's.

Careless self-defence leading to the death of an innocent had been the charge. Four hundred docks, halved.
Normally, Shurq could have paid the fine and that would have been that. Alas, her argument with the landlord had been over a certain hoard of gold that had inexplicably vanished from Shurq's cache. Without a dock to her name, she had been marched down to the canal.

Even then, she was a fit woman. Two hundred docks were probably manageable – had not the retrieval rope snagged on the spines of a forty-stone lupe fish that had surfaced for a look at the swimmer, only to dive back down to the bottom, taking Shurq with it.

Lupe fish, while rare in the canal, ate only men. Never women. No-one knew why this was the case.

Shurq Ellale drowned.

But, as it turned out, there was dead and then there was dead. Unbeknownst to her, Shurq had been cursed by one of her past victims. A curse fully paid for and sanctified by the Empty Temple. So, though her lungs filled with foul water, though her heart stopped, as did all other discernible functions of the body and mind, there she stood when finally retrieved from the canal, sheathed in mud, eyes dull and the whites browned by burst vessels and lifeless blood, all in all most miserable and sadly bemused.

Even the lawless and the homeless shunned her thereafter. All the living, in fact. Walking past as if she was in truth a ghost, a dead memory.

Her flesh did not decay, although its pallor was noticeably unhealthy. Nor were her reactions and deft abilities in any way diminished. She could speak. See. Hear. Think. None of which improved her mood, much.

Bugg found her where Tehol had said she'd be found. In an alley behind a bordello. Listening, as she did every night, to the moans of pleasure – real and improvised – issuing from the windows above.

'Shurq Elalle.'

Listless, murky eyes fixed on him. 'I give no pleasure,' she said.

Alas, neither do I, these days. I am here to deliver to you an indefinite contract from my master.'

'And who would that be?'

'Not yet, I'm afraid. Thieving work, Shurq.'

'What need have I for riches?'

'Well, that would depend on their substance, I'd imagine.'

She stepped out from the shadowed alcove where she'd been standing. 'And what does your master imagine I desire?'

'Negotiable.'

'Does he know I'm dead?'

'Of course. And sends his regrets.'

'Does he?'

'No, I made that up.'

'No-one hires me any more.'

'That is why he knew you would be available.'

'No-one likes my company.'

'Well, a bath wouldn't hurt, but he's prepared to make allowances.'
'I will speak to him.'

'Very good. He has anticipated your wishes. Midnight.'

'Where?'

'A rooftop. With a bed.'

'Him?'

'Yes.'

'In his bed?'

'Urn, I'm not sure if that was in his mind—'

'Glad to hear it. I may be dead, but I'm not easy. I'll be there. Midnight, until a quarter past. No more. If he can convince me in that time, all and well. If not, too bad.'

'A quarter should be more than enough, Shurq.'

'You are foolish to be so confident of that.'

Bugg smiled. 'Am I?'

'Where's Bugg?'

'He'll be meeting us here.' Tehol walked over to the couch and settled down on it, drawing his legs up until he was in a reclining position. He eyed the three women. 'Now, what is so important that I must risk discovery via this reckless meeting?'

Shand ran a calloused palm over her shaved head. 'We want to know what you've been up to, Tehol.'

'That's right,' Rissarh said.

Hejun's arms were crossed, and there was a scowl on her face as she added, 'We don't need a bodyguard.'

'Oh, forgot about him. Where is he?'

'Said he had some belongings to collect,' Shand said. 'He should be here any time now. No, the others haven't met him yet.'

'Ah, so they are sceptical of your enthusiasm.'

'She's been known to exaggerate,' Rissarh said.

'Besides,' Hejun snapped, 'what's all that got to do with being a bodyguard? I don't care how big his—'

The warehouse door creaked, and everyone looked over.

Ublala Pung's round face peered timidly inside, from just under the overhang.

'Dear sir!' Tehol called out. 'Please, come in!'

'The half-blood hesitated. His pale eyes flitted among Shand, Rissarh and Hejun. 'There's ... three of them,' he said.

'Three of what?'

'Women.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Tehol. 'And ... ?'
Ublala frowned, lips drawing together into something much resembling a pout.

'Don't worry,' Tehol invited with a wave of a hand, 'I promise to protect you from them.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely. Come in, Ublala Pung, and be welcome.'

The huge man pushed the door back further and edged inside.

Ublala's belongings did not, it was clear, include trousers or loincloth. He was as naked as he had been down at the canal. Not that clothing would have much disguised his attributes, Tehol concluded after a moment of despondent reflection. Well, never mind that. 'Hungry? Thirsty? Relax, friend. Set your bag down ... yes, there is just fine. Sit down – no, the bench, not the chair – you'd end up wearing it, which, now that I think on it... no, probably not. Ublala, these women require a bodyguard. I assume you accepted the offer from Shand—'

'I thought it was just her.'

'And that makes a difference?'

'Makes it harder.'

'Granted. But, most of the time you'll be here ...' Tehol's voice trailed away, as he finally noticed that Shand, Rissarh and Hejun had neither moved since Ublala's arrival, nor said a word. Oh, now really..

Nisall had been the King's First Concubine for three years. No official power was accorded the title, barring what the personality of the woman in question could achieve. There had been considerable variation throughout history, often dependent upon the fortitude of the king at the time, as well as that of the queen and the chancellor.

At present, there were six concubines in all, the others young, minor daughters of powerful families. Potential investments in the future, there as much to capture the prince's attention as the king's. Like the queen's four consorts, they were housed in a private, isolated quarter of the palace. Only the First Consort, Turudal Brizad, and the First Concubine were permitted contact with anyone other than the royal personages themselves.

Brys Beddict bowed to Nisall, then saluted Preda Unnutal Hebaz. He was not surprised to find the First Concubine in the Preda's office. Nisall had decided her loyalties long ago.

'Champion,' the young woman smiled. 'Unnutal and I were just discussing you.'

'More precisely,' the Preda said, 'we were conjecturing on the content of your conversation with Finadd Gerun Eberict earlier today.'

'Preda, I regret my delay in reporting to you.'

'A well-rehearsed report by now,' Nisall said, 'given that you have already been required to provide it to the First Eunuch and Ceda Kuru Qan. Thus, we will allow you a certain lack of animation in your telling.'

Brys frowned, his eyes on his commander. 'Preda, it occurs to me that Gerun Eberict remains one of your officers, regardless of the King's Leave. I am surprised he has not already reported to you the details of today's conversation.'

'And who is to say he hasn't?' Unnutal enquired. Then she waved a hand. 'An uncharitable response on my part. I apologize, Brys. It has been a long day indeed.'

'No apology required, Preda. I spoke out of turn—'

'Brys,' Nisall interrupted. 'You are the King's Champion now. There is no place where you can speak out of turn. Even unto Ezgara himself. Forgive the Preda her brusque manner. Conversations with Gerun tend to make one exasperated.'
'He has a certain hauteur about him,' Brys said.

'Arrogance,' Unnutal snapped. 'He did not give you cause to call him out?'

'No.'

'How unfortunate,' Nisall sighed.

'Although I believe I was warned.'

Both women fixed their eyes on him.

Brys shrugged. 'I was reminded that his list is an ongoing project.'

'He considers killing Buruk the Pale.'

'I believe so. The First Eunuch has been made aware of that possibility.'

'Now,' Nisall said, beginning to pace in the room, 'should the king be informed of this development, he might be inclined to withdraw Gerun from the delegation. Which will be perceived as a victory by the queen and the Chancellor.'

'Perceptions can be made integral to strategy,' Brys said.

'Spoken as a duellist,' Nisall said. 'But the advantages to the queen granted by Gerun's absence perhaps outweigh any advantage we might fashion. Besides, we know Buruk the Pale proceeds under directions from her camp, so his loss will not hurt us.'

Brys considered this, uneasy at such a cavalier dismissal of a man's life. 'How well does Buruk sit with his burdens?'

'We have a spy close to him, of course,' the Preda said. 'The man is tortured by his conscience. He escapes with white nectar and drink, and dissolute sexual indulgences.'

'The queen ...'

'Wants war,' Nisall finished with a sharp nod. 'The irresponsible, greedy, short-sighted sea-cow. A fine partner to the stupidest chancellor in the history of Letheras. And a thick, easily led prince waiting impatiently to take the throne.'

Brys shifted uncomfortably. 'Perhaps, if Buruk's conscience is haunting him, he can be swayed to another course.'

'Beneath the hawk gaze of Moroch Nevath? Not likely.'

The Champion's eyes narrowed on Nisall. This was all leading to something. He just wasn't sure what.

The Preda sighed. 'Gerun needs to add a name to his list.'

'Moroch Nevath?'

'And that will be difficult.'

'It will. The man is singular. In every way imaginable. Incorruptible, with a history to match.'

'And to whom is the man sworn?'

'Why, the prince, of course. But the King's Leave does not include killing royalty.'

'Yet his history is far less pure.'

Nisall added, 'Gerun would not be able to act directly against the prince. He would need to attack obliquely.'
'First Concubine, I have little understanding of Gerun Eberict's motivations. I do not comprehend the nature of his cause.'

'I do,' the Preda said. 'I know precisely what he's up to. And I believe we can see that he adds to his list.'

'The concern is,' Nisall said, 'what role will his old Finadd, Hull Beddict, have during the playing out of all this.'

Brys looked away. He was beginning to feel under siege. If not one brother, then the other. 'I will give it some thought.'

'Not too long, Finadd,' Unnutal Hebaz said.

'A day or two, perhaps.'

'Agreed. Until then, Brys.'

'Goodnight Preda, First Concubine.'

He made his way out of the office.

In the corridor, five paces from the two guards standing vigil at the door through which he had just exited, his steps slowed to a halt. Unmindful of the curious eyes on his back, the King's Champion stood motionless.

In the minds of the two guards, three titles. Master of the Sword, Finadd and King's Champion – all were cause for envy and admiration. They might have wondered at him at that moment, however. The way he stood, as if entirely alone in a large, overwhelming world. Eyes clearly fixed on some inner landscape. Weariness in his shoulders. They might have wondered, but if so it was a brief, ephemeral empathy, quickly replaced by those harder sentiments, envy and admiration. And the gruff assertion that supreme ability purchased many things, including isolation. And the man could damn well live with it.

'There's no place for sentiment here,' Tehol said, 'sad to say. Letheras is unforgiving. We can't afford to make mistakes. For Errant's sake, Ublala, relax. You're turning blue. Anyway, as I was saying, Shand, it's careless being careless. In other words, we can't keep meeting like this.'

'Do you practise?' Rissarh asked.

'At what?'

Bugg cleared his throat. 'I have a meeting tomorrow with the royal architects.'

'Finally!' Shand sighed from where she sat at the table, knuckling her eyes before continuing, 'As far as we could tell nothing was happening about anything.'

'Well,' Tehol said, 'that's precisely the impression we want.'

'Fine, but that's the outside impression. It's not supposed to apply to us, you idiot. If we aren't in on the scheme then no-one is.'

'Preparation, Shand. The groundwork. This can't be rushed. Now, I've got to go.'

'What?'

'It's late. My bed beckons. Fix up a room for Ublala. Get him some clothes. Maybe even a weapon he knows how to use.'

'Don't leave me here!' Ublala moaned.

'This is all business,' Tehol assured him. 'You're safe here. Isn't he, Shand?'

'Of course,' she murmured.
'Cut that out. Or I'll hire a bodyguard for our bodyguard.'

'Maybe Ublala has a brother.'

Tehol gestured for Bugg to follow as he headed for the door. 'I suppose meetings like this are useful. Every now and then.'

'No doubt,' Bugg replied.

They emerged onto the street. The night crowd was bustling. Shops stayed open late in the summer, to take advantage of the season's frenzy. Heat made for restlessness, which made for a certain insatiability. Later in the season, when the temperatures became unbearable, there would be enervation, and debt.

Tehol and Bugg left the high street fronting the canal and made their way down various alleys, gradually leaving the spending crowds behind and finding themselves among the destitute. Voices called out from shadows. Dishevelled children followed the two men, a few reaching out grubby hands to pluck at Tehol's skirt before running away laughing. Before long, they too were gone, and the way ahead was empty.

'Ah, the welcoming silence of our neighbourhood,' Tehol said as they walked towards their house. 'It's the headlong rush that always troubles me. As if the present is unending.'

'Is this your contemplative moment?' Bugg asked.

'It was. Now over, thankfully.'

They entered and Tehol strode straight for the ladder. 'Clean the place up tomorrow morning.'

'Remember, you'll have a visitor tonight.'

'Not just in my dreams?'

Tehol clambered onto the roof. He closed the hatch then stood and studied the stars overhead until she emerged from the darkness to one side and spoke. 'You're late.'

'No, I'm not. Midnight. Still a quarter off.'

'Is it? Oh.'

'And how's life, Shurq? Sorry, I couldn't resist.'

'And I've never heard that particular quip before. It's a miserable existence. Day after day, night after night. One step in front of the other, on and on to nowhere in particular.'

'And being dead has changed all that?'

'Don't make me laugh, Tehol Beddict. I cough up stuff when I laugh. You want to offer me a contract. To do what?'

'Well, a retainer, actually.'

'Ongoing employment. I refused all retainers when I was alive; why should I do anything else now?'

'Job security, of course. You're not young any more.' He walked over to his bed and sat down, facing her. 'All right. Consider the challenges I offer. I have targets in mind that not a thief alive today would touch. In fact, only a high mage or someone who's dead could defeat the wards and leave no trail. I don't trust high mages, leaving only you.'

'There are others.'

'Two others, to be precise. And neither one a professional thief.'

'How did you know there were two others?'
'I know lots of things, Shurq. One is a woman who cheated on her husband, who in turn spent his life savings on the curse against her. The other is a child, origin of curse unknown, who dwells in the grounds of the old tower behind the palace.'

'Yes. I visit her on occasion. She doesn't know who cursed her. In fact, the child has no memory of her life at all.'

'Probably an addition to the original curse,' Tehol mused. 'But that is curious indeed.'

'It is. Half a peak was the going price. How much for sorcery to steal her memories?'

'Half as much again, I'd think. That's a lot to do to a ten-year-old child. Why not just kill her and bury her in some out of the way place, or dump her in the canal?' He sat forward. 'Tell you what, Shurq, we'll include the pursuit of that mystery – I suspect it interests you in spite of yourself.'

'I would not mind sticking a knife in the eye of whoever cursed the child. But I have no leads.'

'Ah, so you've not been entirely apathetic, then.'

'Never said I was, Tehol. But, finding no trail at all, I admit to a diminishment in motivation.'

'I'll see what I can do.'

The dead woman cocked her head and regarded him in silence for a moment. 'You were a genius once.'

'Very true.'

'Then you lost everything.'

'That's right.'

'And with that, presumably, a similar loss in confidence.'

'Oh, hardly, Shurq Elalle.'

'All part of your diabolical plan.'

'Every worthwhile plan is diabolical.'

'Don't make me laugh.'

'I'm trying not to, Shurq. Do we have a deal?'

'The secret of the curse upon the child was not your intended payment for my services, Tehol. What else?'

'I'm open to suggestions. Do you want the curse undone? Do you long for eternal night? The final stealthy departure of your slinking soul? Do you want to be resurrected in truth? Gifted life once more? Revenge against the one who cursed you?'

'I already did that.'

'All right. I admit I'm not surprised. Who was blamed for it?'

'Gerun Eberict.'

'Oh, that's clever. Speaking of him ...'

'Is he one of your targets?'

'Very much so.'

'I don't like assassination, in principle. Besides, he's killed more than one knave.'
'I don't want you to kill him, Shurq. Just steal his fortune.'

'Gerun Eberict has been getting more brazen, it's true.'

'An actual liability.'

'Assuming maintaining the status quo is a worthwhile endeavour.'

'Make no assumptions, Shurq. It's more a matter of who's controlling the dissolution of said status quo. The Finadd is losing control of his own appetites.'

'Are you one of his targets, Tehol?'

'Not that I'm aware of, not yet, anyway. Preferably not at all.'

'It would be quite a challenge defeating his estate's defensive measures.'

'I'm sure it would.'

'As for my retainer, I'm not interested in living again. Nor in dying with finality. No, what I want is to be granted the semblance of life.'

Tehol's brows rose.

'I want my skin glowing with palpable vigour. I want a certain dark allure to my eyes. My hair needs styling. New clothes, a flowery scent lingering in my wake. And I want to feel pleasure again.'

'Pleasure?'

'Sexual.'

'Maybe it's just the company you've been keeping.'

'Don't make me laugh.'

'You'll cough up stuff.'

'You don't want to know, Tehol Beddict. Maybe we can do something about that, too. That fiver water is three years old.'

'I'm curious. How do you manage to speak without breath?'

'I don't know. I can draw air into my throat. It starts drying out after a while.'

'I've noticed. All right, some of those things can be achieved easily enough, although we'll have to be circumspect. Others, for example the reawakening of pleasure, will obviously be more problematic. But I'm sure something can be managed—'

'It won't be cheap.'

'I'm sure Gerun Eberict will be happy to pay for it.'

'What if it takes all he has?'

Tehol shrugged. 'My dear, the money is not the point of the exercise. I was planning on dumping it in the river.'

She studied him in silence for a moment longer, then said, 'I could take it with me.'

'Don't make me laugh, Shurq. Seriously.'

'Why?'
'Because it's a very infectious laugh.'

'Ah. Point taken.'

'And the retainer?' Tehol asked.

'Taken, as well. Presumably, you don't want me hanging around you.'

'Midnight meetings like this one should suffice. Come by tomorrow night, and we'll make of you a new woman.'

'So long as I smell new.'

'Don't worry. I know just the people for the task at hand.'

The thief left by climbing down the outside wall of the building. Tehol stood at the roof's edge and watched her progress, then, when she had reached the alley below, he permitted himself a roll of the eyes. He turned away and approached his bed.

Only to hear voices down below. Surprised tones from Bugg, but not alarm. And loud enough to warn Tehol in case Shurq had lingered.

Tehol sighed. Life had been better – simpler – only a few weeks ago. When he'd been without plans, schemes, goals. Without, in short, purpose. A modest stir, and now everyone wanted to see him.

Creaks from the ladder, then a dark figure climbed into view.

It was a moment before Tehol recognized him, and his brows rose a moment before he stepped forward. 'Well, this is unexpected.'

'Your manservant seemed sure that you'd be awake. Why is that?'

'Dear brother, Bugg's talents are veritably preternatural.'

Brys walked over to the bed and studied it for a moment. 'What happens when it rains?'

'Alas, I am forced to retire to the room below. There to suffer Bugg's incessant snoring.'

'Is that what's driven you to sleeping on the roof?'

Tehol smiled, then realized it was not likely Brys could see that smile in the darkness. Then decided it was all for the best. 'King's Champion. I have been remiss in congratulating you. Thus, congratulations.'

Brys was motionless. 'How often do you visit the crypt? Or do you ever visit?'

Crossing his arms, Tehol swung his gaze to the canal below. A smeared gleam of reflected stars, crawling through the city. 'It's been years, Brys.'

'Since you last visited?'

'Since they died. We all have different ways of honouring their memory. The family crypt?' He shrugged. 'A stone-walled sunken room containing nothing of consequence.'

'I see. I'm curious, Tehol, how precisely do you honour their memory these days?'

'You have no idea.'

'No, I don't.'

Tehol rubbed at his eyes, only now realizing how tired he was. Thinking was proving a voracious feeder on his energies, leading him to admit he'd been out of practice. Not just thinking, of course. The brain did other things, as well, even more exhausting. The revisiting of siblings, of long-estranged relationships, saw old,
burnished armour donned once more, weapons reached for, old stances once believed abandoned proving to have simply been lying dormant. 'Is this a festive holiday, Brys? Have I missed something? Had we cousins, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, we could gather to walk the familiar ruts. Round and round the empty chairs where our mother and father once sat. And we could make our language unspoken in a manner to mimic another truth — that the dead speak in silences and so never leave us in peace—'

'I need your help, Tehol.'

He glanced up, but could make nothing of his brother's expression in the gloom.

'It's Hull,' Brys went on. 'He's going to get himself killed.'

'Tell me,' Tehol said, 'have you ever wondered why not one of us has found a wife?'

'I was talking about—'

'It's simple, really. Blame our mother, Brys. She was too smart. Errant take us, what an understatement. It wasn't Father who managed the investments.'

'And you are her son, Tehol. More than me and Hull, by far. Every time I look at you, every time I listen to you, struggle to follow your lines of thought. But I don't see how that—'

'Our expectations reside in the clouds, Brys. Oh, we try. All of us have tried, haven't we?'

'Damn it, Tehol, what's your point?'

'Hull, of course. That's who you came here to talk about, isn't it? Well. He met a woman. As smart as our mother, in her own way. Or, rather, she found him. Hull's greatest gift, but he didn't even recognize it for what it was, when it was right there in his hands.'

Brys stepped closer, hands lifting as if about to grasp his brother by the throat. 'You don't understand,' he said, his voice cracking with emotion. After a moment his hands fell away. 'The prince will see him killed. Or, if not the prince, then the First Eunuch — should Hull speak out against the king. But wait!' He laughed without humour. 'There's also Gerun Eberict! Who'll also be there! Have I left anyone out? I'm not sure. Does it matter? Hull will be at the parley. The only one whose motives are unknown — to anyone. You can't play your game if a stranger wades in at the last moment, can you?'

'Calm yourself, brother,' Tehol said. 'I was getting to my point.'

'Well, I can't see it!'

'Quietly, please. Hull found her, then lost her. But she's still there — that much is clear. Seren Pedac, Brys. She'll protect him—'

Brys snarled and turned away. 'Like Mother did Father?'

Tehol winced, then sighed. 'Mitigating circumstances—'

'And Hull is our father's son!'

'You asked, a moment ago, how I honour the memory of our parents. I can tell you this, Brys. When I see you. How you stand. The deadly grace — your skill, taught you by his hand — well, I have no need for memory. He stands before me, right now. More than with Hull. Far more. And, I'd hazard, I am much as you say — like her. Thus,' he spread his hands helplessly, 'you ask for help, but will not hear what I tell you. Need there be reminders of the fates of our parents? Need there be memory, Brys? We stand here, you and I, and play out once more the old familial tortures.'

'You describe, then,' he said hoarsely, 'our doom.'

'She could have saved him, Brys. If not for us. Her fear for us. The whole game of debt, so deftly contrived to snare Father — she would have torn it apart, except that, like me, she could see nothing of the world that
would rise from the ashes. And, seeing nothing, she feared.'

'Without us, then, she would have saved him – kept him from that moment of supreme cowardice?'

Brys was facing him now, his eyes glittering.

'I think so,' Tehol answered. 'And from them, we have drawn our lessons of life. You chose the protection of the King's Guard, and now the role of Champion. Where debt will never find you. As for Hull, he walked away – from gold, from its deadly traps – and sought honour in saving people. And even when that failed ... do you honestly imagine Hull would ever consider killing himself? Our father's cowardice was betrayal, Brys. Of the worst sort.'

'And what of you, Tehol? What lesson are you living out right now?'

'The difference between me and our mother is that I carry no burden. No children. So, brother, I think I will end up achieving the very thing she could not do, despite her love for Father.'

'By dressing in rags and sleeping on your roof?'

'Perception enforces expectation, Brys.' And thought he saw a wry smile from his brother.

'Even so, Tehol, Gerun Eberict is not as deceived as you might believe. As, I admit, I was.'

'Until tonight?'

'I suppose so.'

'Go home, Brys,' Tehol said. 'Seren Pedac stands at Hull's back, and will continue to do so no matter how much she might disagree with whatever he seeks to do. She cannot help herself. Even genius has its flaws.'

Another grin. 'Even with you, Tehol?'

'Well, I was generalizing to put you at ease. I never include myself in my own generalizations. I am ever the exception to the rule.'

'And how do you manage that?'

'Well, I define the rules, of course. That's my particular game, brother.'

'By the Errant, I hate you sometimes, Tehol. Listen. Do not underestimate Gerun Eberict—'

'I'll take care of Gerun. Now, presumably you were followed here?'

'I hadn't thought of that. Yes, probably I was. Do you think our voices carried?'

'Not through the wards Bugg raises every night before he goes to sleep.'

'Bugg?'

Tehol clapped his brother on the shoulder and guided him towards the hatch. 'He's only mostly worthless. We ever seek out hidden talents, an exercise assuring endless amusement. For me, at least.'

'Did he not embalm our parents? The name—'

'That was Bugg. That's where I first met him, and saw immediately his lack of potential. The entrance can be viewed in secret from one place and no other, Brys. Normally, you could make no approach without being detected. And then there'd be a chase, which is messy and likely to fail on your part. You will have to kill the man – Gerun's, I suspect. And not in a duel. Outright execution, Brys. Are you up to it?'

'Of course. But you said there was no approach that could not—'

'Ahh, well, I forgot to mention our tunnel'
Brys paused at the hatch. 'You have a tunnel.'

'Keeping Bugg busy is an eternal chore.'

Still five paces from the shadowed section of the warehouse wall that offered the only hiding place with a clear line of sight to the doorway of Tehol's house, Brys Beddict halted. His eyes were well adjusted, and he could see that no-one was there.

But he could smell blood. Metallic and thick.

Sword drawn, he approached.

No man could have survived such a loss. It was a black pool on the cobbles, reluctant to seep into the cracks between the set stones. A throat opened wide, the wound left to drain before the corpse had been dragged away. And the trail was plain, twin heel tracks alongside the warehouse wall, round a corner and out of sight.

The Finadd considered following it.

Then, upon seeing a single footprint, traced in dried dust on the dust, he changed his mind.

The footprint left by a child. Bared. As it dragged the dead man away.

Every city had its darkness, its denizens who prowled only at night in their own game of predator and prey. Brys knew it was not his world, nor did he wish to hunt down its secrets. These hours belonged to the white crow, and it was welcome to them.

He turned the other way, began his walk back to the palace.

His brother's formidable mind had not been idle, it seemed. His indifference no more than a feint. Which made Tehol a very dangerous man. *Thank the Errant he's on my side ...*

*He is on my side, isn't he?*

The old palace, soon to be entirely abandoned in favour of the Eternal Domicile, sat on a sunken hill, the building proper a hundred paces in from the river's seasonally uncertain banks. Sections of a high wall indicated that there had been an enclosure once, extending from the palace to the river, in which an assortment of structures had been effectively isolated from the rest of the city.

Not so much in a proprietary claim to ownership, for the structures in question predated even the founding First Empire. Perhaps, for those original builders, there had been a recognition, of sorts, of something verging on the sacred about these grounds, although, of course, not holy to the colonizers. Another possibility was that the first Letherii were possessors of a more complete arcane knowledge – secrets long since lost – that inspired them to do honour to the Jaghut dwellings and the single, oddly different tower in their midst.

The truth had crumbled along with the enclosure walls, and no answers could be found sifting the dust of crumbled mortar and flakes of exfoliated schist. The area, while no longer sealed, was by habit avoided. The land itself was worthless, by virtue of a royal proclamation six centuries old that prohibited demolition of the ancient structures, and subsequent resettlement. Every legal challenge or, indeed, enquiry regarding that proclamation was summarily dismissed without even so much as recourse to the courts.

All very well. Skilled practitioners of the tiles of the Holds well knew the significance of that squat, square, leaning tower with its rumpled, overgrown grounds. And indeed of the Jaghut dwellings, representative as they were of the Ice Hold. Many held that the Azath tower was the very first true structure of the Azath on this world.

From her new perspective, Shurq Elalle was less sceptical than she might have once been. The grounds surrounding the battered grey stone tower exerted an ominous pull on the dead thief. There were kin there, but not of blood. No, this was the family of the undead, of those unable or unwilling to surrender to oblivion. In the case of those interred in the lumpy, clay-shot earth around the tower, their graves were prisons. The Azath did not give up its children.
She sensed as well that there were living creatures buried there, most of them driven mad by centuries upon centuries snared in ancient roots that held them fast. Others remained ominously silent and motionless, as if awaiting eternity's end.

The thief approached the forbidden grounds behind the palace. She could see the Azath tower, its third and uppermost storey edging above the curved walls of the Jaghut dwellings. Not one of the structures stood fully upright. All were tilted in some fashion, the subsurface clay squeezing out from beneath their immense weight or lenses of sand washed away by underground runoff. Vines had climbed the sides in chaotic webs, although those that had reached out to the Azath died there, withered against the foundation stones amidst yellowed grasses.

She did not need to see the blood trail in order to follow it. The smell was heavy in the sultry night air, invisible streaks riding the currents, and she pursued its wake until she came to the low, crooked wall surrounding the Azath tower.

Just beyond, at the base of a twisted tree, sat the child Kettle. Nine or ten years old ... for ever. Naked, her pale skin smeared, her long hair clotted with coagulating blood. The corpse before her was already half under the earth, being dragged down into the darkness.

To feed the Azath? Or some ravenous denizen? Shurq had no idea. Nor did she care. The grounds swallowed bodies, and that was useful.

Kettle looked up, black eyes dully reflecting starlight. There were moulds that, if left unattended, could blind, and the film was thick over the girl's dead eyes. She slowly rose and walked over.

'Why won't you be my mother?'

'I've already told you, Kettle. I am no-one's mother.'

'I followed you tonight.'

'You're always following me,' Shurq said.

'Just after you left that roof, another man came to the house. A soldier. And he was followed.'

'And which of the two did you kill?'

'Why, the one who followed, of course. I'm a good girl. I take care of you. Just as you take care of me—'

'I take care of no-one, Kettle. You were dead long before I was. Living here in these grounds. I used to bring you bodies.'

'Never enough.'

'I don't like killing. Only when I have no choice. Besides, I wasn't the only one employing your services.'

'Yes you were.'

Shurq stared at the girl for a long moment. 'I was?'

'Yes. And you wanted to know my story. Everyone else runs from me, just like they run from you now. Except that man on the roof. Is he another one not like everyone else?'

'I don't know, Kettle. But I am working for him now.'

'I am glad. Grown-ups should work. It helps fill their minds. Empty minds are bad. Dangerous. They fill themselves up. With bad things. Nobody's happy.'

Shurq cocked her head. 'Who's not happy?'

Kettle waved one grubby hand at the rumpled yard. 'Restless. All of them. I don't know why. The tower
sweats all the time now.'

'I will bring you some salt water,' Shurq said, 'for your eyes. You need to wash them out.'

'I can see easily enough. With more than my eyes now. My skin sees. And tastes. And dreams of light.'

'What do you mean?'

Kettle pushed bloody strands of hair from her heart-shaped face. 'Five of them are trying to get out. I don't like those five – I don't like most of them, but especially those five. The roots are dying. I don't know what to do. They whisper how they'll tear me to pieces. Soon. I don't want to be torn to pieces. What should I do?'

Shurq was silent. Then she asked, 'How much do you sense of the Buried Ones, Kettle?'

'Most don't talk to me. They have lost their minds. Others hate me for not helping them. Some beg and plead. They talk through the roots.'

'Are there any who ask nothing of you?'

'Some are ever silent.'

'Talk to them. Find someone else to speak to, Kettle. Someone who might be able to help you.' Someone else to be your mother ... or father. 'Ask for opinions, on any and all matters. If one remains then who does not seek to please you, who does not attempt to twist your desires so that you free it, and who holds no loyalty to the others, then you will tell me of that one. All that you know. And I will advise you as best I can – not as a mother, but as a comrade.'

'All right.'

'Good. Now, I came here for another reason, Kettle. I want to know, how did you kill that spy?'

'I bit through his throat. It's the quickest, and I like the blood.'

'Why do you like the blood?'

'In my hair, to keep it from my face. And it smells alive, doesn't it? I like that smell.'

'How many do you kill?'

'Lots. The ground needs them.'

'Why does the ground need them?'

'Because it's dying.'

'Dying? And what would happen if it does die, Kettle?'

'Everything will get out.'

'Oh.'

'I like it here.'

'Kettle, from now on,' Shurq said, 'I will tell you who to kill – don't worry, there should be plenty.'

'All right. That's nice of you.'

Among the hundreds of creatures buried in the grounds of the Azath, only one was capable of listening to the conversation between the two undead on the surface above. The Azath was relinquishing its hold on this denizen, not out of weakness, but out of necessity. The Guardian was anything but ready. Indeed, might never be ready. The choice itself had been flawed, yet another sign of faltering power, of age crawling forward to claim the oldest stone structure in the realm.
The Azath tower was indeed dying. And desperation forced a straying onto unprecedented paths.

Among all the prisoners, a choice had been made. And preparations were under way, slow as the track of roots through stone, but equally inexorable. But there was so little time.

The urgency was a silent scream that squeezed blood from the Azath tower. Five kin creatures, taken and held since the time of the K'Chain Che'Malle, were almost within reach of the surface.

And this was not good, for they were Toblakai.
CHAPTER FIVE

Against the flat like thunder
Where the self dwells between the eyes,
Beneath the blow the bone shattered
And the soul was dragged forth
To writhe in the grip
Of unredeemed vengeance...

The Last Night of Bloodeye
Author unknown
(compiled by Tiste Andii scholars of Black Coral)

The Shadow's laughter was low, a sound that promised madness to all who heard it. Udinaas let the netting fall away from his fingers and leaned back against the sun-warmed rock. He squinted up at the bright sky. He was alone on the beach, the choppy waves of the bay stretching out before him. Alone, except for the wraith that now haunted him at every waking moment.

Conjured, then forgotten. Wandering, an eternal flight from the sun, but there were always places to hide.

'Stop that,' Udinaas said, closing his eyes.

'Why ever? I smell your blood, slave. Growing colder. I once knew a world of ice. After I was killed, yes, after. Even darkness has flaws, and that's how they stole me. But I have dreams.'

'So you're always saying. Then follow them, wraith, and leave me alone.'

'I have dreams and you understand nothing, slave. Was I pleased to serve? Never. Never ever never and again, never. I'm following you.'

Udinaas opened his eyes and stared down at the sliver of shadow between two rocks, from which the voice was emerging. Sand fleas scampered and darted on the flanking stone, but of the wraith itself there was no visible sign. 'Why?'

'Why ever why? That which you cast beckons me, slave. You promise a worthy journey – do you dream of gardens, slave? I know you do – I can smell it. Half dead and overgrown, why ever not? There is no escape. So, with my dreams, it serves me to serve. Serves to serve. Was I not once a Tiste Andii? I believe I was. Murdered and flung into the mud, until the ice came. Then torn loose, after so long, to serve my slayers. My slavers, whose diligence then wavered. Shall we whisper of betrayers, slave?'

'You would bargain?'

'Hither when you call me, call me Wither. I have dreams. Give me that which you cast. Give me your shadow, and I will become yours. Your eyes behind you, whom no-one else can see or hear, unless they guess and have power but why would they guess? You are a slave. Who behaves. Be sure to behave, slave, until the moment you betray.'

'I thought Tiste Andii were supposed to be dour and miserable. And please, Wither, no more rhymes.'

'Agreed, once you give me your shadow.'

'Can other wraiths see you? Hannan Mosag's—'

'That oaf? I will hide in your natural casting. Hidden. Never found. See, no rhymes. We were bold in those days, slave. Soldiers in a war, an invasion. Soaked in the cold blood of K'Chain Che'Malle. We followed the
youngest child of Mother Dark herself. And we were witness.'

'To what?'

'To Bloodeye's betrayal of our leader. To the dagger driven into our lord's back. I myself fell to a blade wielded by a Tiste Edur. Unexpected. Sudden slaughter. We stood no chance. No chance at all.'

Udinaas made a face, studied the tossing waves that warred with the river's outpouring current. 'The Edur claim it was the other way round, Wither.'

'Then why am I dead and they alive? If we were the ambushers that day?'

'How should I know? Now, if you intend to lurk in my shadow, Wither, you must learn to be silent. Unless I speak to you. Silent, and watchful, and nothing more.'

'First, slave, you must do something for me.'

Udinaas sighed. Most of the noble-born Edur were at the interment ceremony for the murdered fisherman, along with a half-dozen kin from the Beneda, since the Edur's identity had finally been determined. Fewer than a dozen warriors remained in the compound behind him. Shadow wraiths seemed to grow bolder at such times, emerging to flit across the ground, between longhouses and along the palisade walls.

He had often wondered at that. But now, if Wither was to be believed, he had his answer. Those wraiths are not ancestral kin to the mortal Edur. They are Tiste Andii, the bound souls of the slain. And, I was desperate for allies... 'Very well, what do you wish me to do, Wither?'

'Before the seas rose in this place, slave, the Hasana Inlet was a lake. To the south and west, the land stretched out to join with the westernmost tip of the Reach. A vast plain, upon which the last of my people were slaughtered. Walk the shoreline before you, slave. South. There is something of mine – we must find it.'

Udinaas rose and brushed the sand from his coarse woollen trousers. He looked about. Three slaves from the Warlock King's citadel were down by the river mouth, beating clothes against rocks. A lone fisherboat was out on the water, but distant. 'How far will I need to walk?'

'It lies close.'

'If I am perceived to be straying too far, I will be killed outright.'

'Not far, slave—'

'I am named Udinaas, and so you will address me.'

'You claim the privilege of pride?'

'I am more than a slave, Wither, as you well know.'

'But you must behave as if you were not. I call you "slave" to remind you of that. Fail in your deception, and the pain they shall inflict upon you in the search for all you would hide from them shall be without measure—'

'Enough.' He walked down to the waterline. The sun threw his shadow into his wake, pulled long and monstrous.

The rollers had built a humped sweep of sand over the stones, on which lay tangled strands of seaweed and a scattering of detritus. A pace inland of this elongated rise was a depression filled with slick pebbles and rocks. 'Where should I be looking?'

'Among the stones. A little further. Three, two paces. Yes. Here.'

Udinaas stared down, scanning the area. 'I see nothing.'

'Dig. No, to your left – those rocks, move those. That one. Now, deeper. There, pull it free.'
A misshapen lump that sat heavy in his hand. Finger-length and tapered at one end, the metal object within swallowed by thick calcifications. 'What is it?'

'An arrowhead, slave. Hundreds of millennia, crawling to this shore. The passage of ages is measured by chance. The deep roll of tides, the succession of wayward storms. This is how the world moves—'

'Hundreds of millennia? There would be nothing left—'

'A blade of simple iron without sorcerous investment would indeed have vanished. The arrowhead remains, slave, because it will not surrender. You must chip away at all that surrounds it. You must resurrect it.'

'Why?'

'I have my reasons, slave.'

There was nothing pleasing in this, but Udinaas straightened and tucked the lump in his belt pouch. He returned to his nets. 'I shall not,' he muttered, 'be the hand of your vengeance.'

Wither's laugh followed him in the crunch of stones.

* * *

There was smoke hanging above the lowlands, like clouds dragged low and now shredded by the dark treetops.

'A funeral,' Binadas said.

Seren Pedac nodded. There had been no storms, and besides, the forest was too wet to sustain a wildfire. The Edur practice of burial involved a tumulus construction, which was then covered to form a pyre. The intense heat baked the coin-sheathed corpse as if it was clay, and stained the barrow stones red. Shadow wraiths danced amidst the flames, twisted skyward with the smoke, and would linger long after the mourners were gone.

Seren drew her knife and bent to scrape mud from her boots. This side of the mountains the weather daily crept in from the sea shedding rain and mist in pernicious waves. Her clothes were soaked through. Three times since morning the heavily burdened wagons had skidded off the trail, once crushing a Nerek to death beneath the solid, iron-rimmed wheels.

Straightening, she cleaned her knife between two gloved fingers, then sheathed it at her side.

Moods were foul. Buruk the Pale had not emerged from his wagon in two days, nor had his three half-blood Nerek concubines. But the descent was finally done, and ahead was a wide, mostly level trail leading to Hannan Mosag's village.

Binadas stood and watched as the last wagon rocked clear of the slope, and Seren sensed the Edur's impatience. Someone had died in his village, after all. She glanced over at Hull Beddict, but could sense nothing from him. He had withdrawn deep into himself, as if building reserves in anticipation of what was to come. Or, equally likely, struggling to bolster crumbling resolve. She seemed to have lost her ability to read him. Pain worn without pause and for so long could itself become a mask.

'Binadas,' Seren said, 'the Nerek need to rest. The journey before us is clear. There is no need for you to remain with us as escort. Go to your people.'

His eyes narrowed on her, suspicious of her offer.

She added nothing more. He would believe what he would believe, after all, no matter how genuine her intent.

'She speaks true,' Hull said. 'We would not constrain you, Binadas.'

'Very well. I shall inform Hannan Mosag of your impending visit.'

They watched the Edur set off down the trail. In moments the trees swallowed him.
'Do you see?' Hull asked her.

'I saw only conflicting desires and obligations,' Seren replied, turning away.

'Only, then, what you chose to.'

Seren's shrug was weary. 'Oh, Hull, that is the way of us all.'

He stepped close. 'But it need not be so, Acquitor.'

Surprised, she met his gaze, and wondered at the sudden earnestness there. 'How am I supposed to respond to that?' she asked. 'We are all like soldiers, crouching behind the fortifications we have raised. You will do what you believe you must, Hull.'

'And you, Seren Pedac? What course awaits you?'

_Ever the same course._ 'The Tiste Edur are not yours to use. They may listen, but they are not bound to follow.'

He turned away. 'I have no expectations, Seren, only fears. We should resume the journey.'

She glanced over at the Nerek. They sat or squatted near the wagons, steam rising from their backs. Their expressions were slack, strangely indifferent to the dead kin they had left behind in his makeshift grave of rutted mud, rocks and roots. How much could be stripped from a people before they began stripping away themselves? The steep slope of dissolution began with a skid, only to become a headlong run.

The Letherii believed in cold-hearted truths. Momentum was an avalanche and no-one was privileged with the choice of stepping aside. The division between life and death was measured in incremental jostling for position amidst all-devouring progress. No-one could afford compassion. Accordingly, none expected it from others either.

_We live in an inimical time. But then, they are all inimical times._

It began to rain once more.

Far to the south, beyond the mountains they had just crossed, the downfall of the Tiste Edur was being plotted. And, she suspected, Hull Beddict's life had been made forfeit. They could not afford the risk he presented, the treason he had as much as promised. The irony existed in their conjoined desires. Both sought war, after all. It was only the face of victory that was different.

But Hull possessed little of the necessary acumen to play this particular game and stay alive.

And she had begun to wonder if she would make any effort to save him.

A shout from Buruk's wagon. The Nerek climbed wearily to their feet. Seren drew her cloak tighter about her shoulders, eyes narrowed on the path ahead. She sensed Hull coming to her side, but did not look over.

'What temple was it you were schooled at?'

She snorted, then shook her head. 'Thurlas, the Shrouded Sisters of the Empty Throne.'

'Just opposite Small Canal. I remember it. What sort of child were you, Seren?'

'Clearly, you have an image in your mind.'

She caught his nod in her periphery, and he said, 'Zealous. Proper to excess. Earnest.'

'There are ledgers, recording the names of notable students. You will find mine in them, again and again. For example, I hold title to the most punishments inflicted in a year. Two hundred and seventy-one. I was more familiar with the Unlit Cell than my own room. I was also accused of seducing a visiting priest. And before you ask, yes, I was guilty. But the priest swore otherwise, to protect me. He was excommunicated. I later heard he
killed himself. Had I still possessed any innocence, I would have lost it then.'

He came round to stand before her, as the first wagon was pulled past by the Nerek. She was forced to look at him. Hesitated, then offered him a wry smile. 'Have I shocked you, Hull Beddict?'

'The ice has broken beneath me.'

A flash of anger, then she realized the self-mockery in his confession. 'We are not born innocent, simply unmeasured.'

'And, presumably, immeasurable as well.'

'For a few years at least. Until the outside is inflicted upon the inside, then the brutal war begins. We are not born to compassion either – large wide eyes and sweet demeanour notwithstanding.'

'And you came to recognize your war early.'

Seren shrugged. 'My enemy was not authority, although perhaps it seemed so. It was childhood itself. The lowered expectations of adults, the eagerness to forgive. It sickened me—'

'Because it was unjust.'

'A child's sense of injustice is ever self-serving, Hull. I couldn't fool myself with that indignation. Why are we speaking of this?'

'Questions I forgot to ask. Back then. I think I was a child myself in those days. All inside, no outside.'

Her brows rose, but she said nothing.

Hull understood anyway. 'You might be right. In some things, that is. But not when it comes to the Edur.'

The second wagon trundled past. Seren studied the man before her. 'Are you so certain of that?' she asked. 'Because I see you driven by your own needs. The Edur are the sword but the hand is your own, Hull. Where is the compassion in that?'

'You have it wrong, Seren. I intend to be the sword.'

The chill in her bones deepened. 'In what way?'

But he shook his head. 'I cannot trust you, Seren. Like everyone else, you shall have to wait. One thing, however. Do not stand in my way. Please.'

I cannot trust you. Words that cut to her soul. Then again, the issue of trust stood on both sides of the path, didn't it?

The third wagon halted beside them. The curtain in the door window was dragged aside and Buruk's deathly face peered out. 'And this is guidance? Who blazes the trail? Are we doomed now to wander lost? Don't tell me you have become lovers once more! Seren, you look positively besieged. Such is the curse of love, oh, my heart weeps for you!'

'Enough, Buruk,' Seren said. She wiped the rain from her face and, ignoring Hull, moved past onto the path. Nerek stepped to either side to let her pass.

The forest trail was flanked by Blackwood trees, planted to assert Edur possession of these lands. Rough midnight bark that had been twisted into nightmarish images and arcane script by the shadow wraiths that clung to every groove and fissure in the rugged skin. Wraiths that now rose into view to watch Seren and those following in her wake.

There seemed more than usual. Flowing restless like black mist between the huge boles. Scores, then hundreds, crowding either side of the trail. Seren's steps slowed.
She could hear the Nerek behind her, low moans, the clack of the wagons slowing, then halting.

Hull came alongside her. 'They have raised an army,' he whispered.

There was dark satisfaction in his tone.

'Are they truly the ancestors of the Edur?'

His gaze snapped to her, feverish. 'Of course. What else could they be?'

She shook herself. 'Urge the Nerek onward, Hull. They'll listen to you. Two days remaining, that's all—' And then she fell silent.

For a figure was standing upon the trail. Skin the colour of bleached linen, tall as an Edur, a face obscured by dark streaks, as if blood-stained fingers had drawn down the gaunt cheeks. An apparition, the dull red eyes burning from those deep sockets dead. Mould hung in ragged sheets from rotting armour. Two scabbards, both empty.

Wraiths swarmed at the figure's feet, as if in worship.

A wagon door clattered and Buruk staggered out, wrapped in a blanket that dragged the ground behind him as he came to Seren's side.

'Barrow and Root!' the merchant hissed. 'The tiles did not lie!'

Seren took a step forward.

Hull reached out a hand. 'No—'

'Would you have us stand here for ever?' she snapped, pulling herself free. Despite the bravado of her words, she was terrified. Ghosts revealed themselves in childhood tales and legends, and in the occasional fevered rumour in the capital. She had believed in such apparitions in a halfhearted way, an idea made wilfully manifest. A whispery vision of history, risen as harbinger, as silent warning. A notion, then, as much symbolic as actual.

And even then, she had imagined something far more ... ephemeral. Lacking distinction, a face comprised of forlorn hints, features blurred by the fading of their relevance. Half seen in currents of darkness, there one moment, gone the next.

But there was a palpability in the tall conjuration standing before her, an assertion of physical insistence. Etched details on the long, pallid face, the flat, filmed eyes watching her approach with fullest comprehension.

As if he has just clambered free of one of the barrows in this forest. But he is not... is not Edur.

'A dragon,' the apparition said in the language of the Tiste, 'once dragged itself down this trail. No forest back then. Naught but devastation. Blood in the broken earth. The dragon, mortal, made this trail. Do you feel this? Beneath you, the scattering of memory that pushes the roots away, that bows the trees to either side. A dragon.' The figure then turned, looked down the path behind it. 'The Edur – he ran unseeing, unmindful. Kin of my betrayer. Yet... an innocent.' He faced her once more. 'But you, mortal, are not nearly so innocent, are you?'

Taken aback, Seren said nothing.

Behind her, Hull Beddict spoke. 'Of what do you accuse her, ghost?'

'A thousand. A thousand upon a thousand misdeeds. Her. You. Your kind. The gods are as nothing. Demons less than children. Every Ascendant an awkward mummer. Compared to you. Is it ever the way, I wonder? That depravity thrives in the folds of the flower, when its season has come. The secret seeds of decay hidden beneath the burgeoning glory. All of us, here in your wake, we are as nothing.'

'What do you want?' Hull demanded.
The wraiths had slipped away, back among the trees. But a new tide had come to swarm about the ghost's tattered boots. Mice, a seething mass pouring up the trail. Ankle deep, the first reached Seren's feet, scampereD round them. A grey and brown tide, mindless motion. A multitude of tiny selves, seized by some unknown and unknowable imperative. From here ... to there.

There was something terrible, horrifying, about them. Thousands, tens of thousands – the trail ahead, for as far as she could see, was covered with mice.

'The land was shattered,' the apparition said. 'Not a tree left standing. Naught but corpses. And the tiny creatures that fed on them. Hood's own legion. Death's sordid tide, mortals, fur-backed and rising. It seems so ... facile.' The undead seemed to shake himself. 'I want nothing from you. The journeys are all begun. Do you imagine that your path has never before known footfalls?'

'We are not so blind as to believe that,' Seren Pedac said. She struggled against kicking away the mice swarming around her ankles, fearing the descent into hysteria. 'If you will not – or cannot – clear this trail, then we've little choice—'

The apparition's head tilted. 'You would deliver countless small deaths? In the name of what? Convenience?'

'I see no end to these creatures of yours, ghost.'

'Mine? They are not mine, mortal. They simply belong to my time. To the age of their squalid supremacy on this land. A multitude of tyrants to rule over the ash and dust we left in our wake. They see in my spirit a promise.'

'And,' Hull growled, 'are we meant to see the same?'

The apparition had begun fading, colours bleeding away. 'If it pleases you,' came the faint, derisive reply. 'Of course, it may be that the spirit they see is yours, not mine.'

Then the ghost was gone.

The mice began flowing out to the forest on either side of the trail, as if suddenly confused, blinded once more to whatever greater force had claimed them. They bled away into the mulch, the shadows and the rotted wood of fallen trees. One moment there, the next, gone.

Seren swung to Buruk the Pale. 'What did you mean when you said the tiles didn't lie? Barrow and Root, those are tiles in the Hold of the Azath, are they not? You witnessed a casting before you began this journey. In Trate. Do you deny it?'

He would not meet her eyes. His face was pale. 'The Holds are awakening, Acquitor. All of them.'

'Who was he, then?' Hull Beddict asked.

'I do not know.' Abruptly Buruk scowled and turned away. 'Does it matter? The mud stirs and things clamber free, that is all. The Seventh Closure draws near – but I fear it will be nothing like what all of us have been taught. The birth of empire, oh yes, but who shall rule it? The prophecy is perniciously vague. The trail has cleared – let us proceed.'

He clambered back into his wagon.

'Are we to make sense of that?' Hull asked.

Seren shrugged. 'Prophecies are like the tiles themselves, Hull. See in them what you will.' The aftermath of her terror was sour in her throat, and her limbs felt loose and weak. Suddenly weary, she unstrapped her helm and lifted it off. The fine rain was like ice on her brow. She closed her eyes.

_I can't save him. I can't save any of us._

Hull Beddict spoke to the Nerek.
Blinking her eyes open, Seren shook herself. She tied her helm to her pack.

The journey resumed. Clattering, groaning wagons, the harsh breathing of the Nerek. Motionless air and the mist falling through it like the breath of an exhausted god.

Two days. Then it is done.

Thirty paces ahead, unseen by any of them, an owl sailed across the path, silent on its broad, dark wings. There was blood on its talons, blood around its beak.

Sudden bounties were unquestioned. Extravagance unworthy of celebration. The hunter knew only hunting, and was indifferent to the fear of the prey. Indifferent, as well, to the white crow that sailed in its wake.

A random twist of the wind drew the remnants of the pyre’s smoke into the village. It had burned for a day and a night, and Trull Sengar emerged from his father’s longhouse the following morning to find the mist drifting across the compound bitter with its taint.

He regretted the new world he had found. Revelations could not be undone. And now he shared secrets and the truth was, he would rather have done without them. Once familiar faces had changed. What did they know? How vast and insidious this deceit? How many warriors had Hannan Mosag drawn into his ambitions? To what extent had the women organized against the Warlock King?

No words on the subject had been exchanged among the brothers, not since that conversation in the pit, the stove-in dragon skull the only witness to what most would call treason. The preparations for the impending journey were under way. There would be no slaves accompanying them, after all. Hannan Mosag had sent wraiths ahead to the villages lying between here and the ice-fields, and so provisions would await them, mitigating the need for burdensome supplies, at least until the very end.

A wagon drawn by a half-dozen slaves had trundled across the bridge, in its bed newly forged weapons. Iron-tipped spears stood upright in bound bundles. Copper sheathing protected the shafts for fully half their length. Cross-hilted swords were also visible, hand-and-a-half grips and boiled leather scabbards. Billhooks for unseating riders, sheaves of long arrows with leather fletching. Throwing axes, as favoured by the Arapay. Broad cutlasses in the Merude style.

The forges hammered the din of war once more.

Trull saw Fear and Rhulad stride up to the wagon, more slaves trailing them, and Fear began directing the storage of the weapons.

Rhulad glanced over as Trull approached. ‘Have you need of more spears, brother?’ he asked.

‘No, Rhulad. I see Arapay and Merude weapons here – and Beneda and Den-Ratha—’

‘Every tribe, yes. So it is now among all the forges, in every village. A sharing of skills.’

Trull glanced over at Fear. ‘Your thoughts on this, brother? Will you now be training the Hiroth warriors in new weapons?’

‘I have taught how to defend against them, Trull. It is the Warlock King’s intention to create a true army, such as those of the Letherii. This will involve specialist units.’ Fear studied Trull for a moment, before adding, ‘I am Weapons Master for the Hiroth, and now, at the Warlock King’s command, for all of the tribes.’

‘You are to lead this army?’

‘If war should come, yes, I will lead it into battle.’

‘Thus are the Sengar honoured,’ Rhulad said, his face expressionless, the tone without inflection.

Thus are we rewarded.

‘Binadas returned at dawn,’ Fear said. ‘He will take this day in rest. Then we shall depart.’
Trull nodded.

'A Letherii trader caravan is coming,' Rhulad said. 'Binadas met them on the trail. The Acquitor is Seren Pedac. And Hull Beddict is with them.'

Hull Beddict, the Sentinel who betrayed the Nerek, the Tarthenal and the Faraed. What did he want? Not all Letherii were the same, Trull knew. Opposing views sang with the clash of swords. Betrayals abounded among the rapacious multitude in the vast cities and indeed, if rumours were true, in the palace of the king himself. The merchant was charged to deliver the words of whoever had bought him. Whilst Seren Pedac, in the profession of Acquitor, would neither speak her mind nor interfere with the aims of the others. He had not been in the village during her other visits, and so could judge no more than that. But Hull, the once Sentinel – it was said he was immune to corruption, such as only a man once betrayed could be.

Trull was silent as he watched the slaves drag the weapon bundles from the cart bed and carry them off to the armory.

Even his brothers seemed ... different somehow. As if shadows stretched taut between them, unseen by anyone else, and could make the wind drone with weighted trepidation. Darkness, then, in the blood of brothers. None of this served the journey about to begin. None of it.

I was ever the worrier. I do not see too much, I see only the wrong things. And so the fault is mine, within me. I need to remain mindful of that. Such as with my assumptions about Rhulad and Mayen. Wrong things, wrong thoughts, they are the ones that seem to be ... tireless ...

'Binadas says Buruk carries Letherii iron,' Rhulad said, breaking Trull's reverie. 'That will prove useful. Dapple knows, the Letherii are truly fools—'

'They are not,' Fear said. 'They are indifferent. They see no contradiction in selling us iron at one moment and waging war with us the next.'

'Nor the harvesting of tusked seals,' Trull added, nodding. 'They are a nation of ten thousand grasping hands, and none can tell which ones are true, which ones belong to those in power.'

'King Ezgara Diskanar is not like Hannan Mosag,' Fear said. 'He does not rule his people with absolute ...'

Trull glanced over as his brother's voice trailed off.

Fear swung away. 'Mayen is guest tonight,' he said. 'Mother may request you partake in the supper preparations.'

'And so we shall,' Rhulad said, meeting Trull's eyes a moment before fixing his attention once more on the slaves.

Absolute power ... no, we have undone that, haven't we? And indeed, perhaps it never existed at all. The women, after all...

The other slaves were busy in the longhouse, scurrying back and forth across the trusses as Udinaas entered and made his way to his sleeping pallet. He was to serve this night, and so was permitted a short period of rest beforehand. He saw Uruth standing near the central hearth but was able to slip past unnoticed in the confusion, just another slave in the gloom.

Feather Witch's assertions remained with him, tightening his every breath. Should the Edur discover the truth that coursed through his veins, they would kill him. He knew he must hide, only he did not know how.

He settled onto his mat. The sounds and smells of the chambers beyond drifted over him. Lying back, he closed his eyes.

This night he would be working alongside Feather Witch. She had visited him that one time, in his dream. Apart from that, he had had no occasion to speak with her. Nor, he suspected, was she likely to invite an exchange of words. Beyond the mundane impropriety established by their respective class, she had seen in him
the blood of the Wyval – or so she had claimed in the dream. Unless that was not her at all. Nothing more than a conjuration from my own mind, a reshaping of dust. He would, if possible, speak to her, whether invited or not.

Rugs had been dragged outside and laid across trestles. The thump of the clubs the slaves used to beat the dust from them was like distant, hollow thunder.

A flitting thought, vague wondering where the shadow wraith had gone, then sleep took him.

He was without form, an insubstantial binding of senses. In ice. A blue, murky world, smeared with streaks of green, the grit of dirt and sand, the smell of cold. Distant groaning sounds, solid rivers sliding against each other. Lenses of sunlight delivering heat into the depths, where it built until a thundering snap shook the world.

Udinaas flowed through this frozen landscape, which to all eyes in the world beyond was locked motionless, timeless. And nothing of the pressures, the heaved weights and disparate forces, was revealed, until that final explosive moment when things broke.

There were shapes in the ice. Bodies lifted from the ground far below and held in awkward poses. Fleshed, eyes half open. Blossoms of blood suspended in motionless clouds around wounds. Flows of bile and waste. Udinaas found himself travelling through scenes of slaughter. Tiste Edur and darker-skinned kin. Enormous reptilian beasts, some with naught but blades for hands. In multitudes beyond counting.

He came to a place where the reptilian bodies formed a near-solid mass. Flowing among them, he suddenly recoiled. A vertical stream of melt water rose through the ice before him, threading up and out from the heaped corpses. The water was pink, mud-streaked, pulsing as it climbed upward, as if driven by some deep, subterranean heart.

And that water was poison.

Udinaas found himself fleeing through the ice, clashing with corpses, rock-hard flesh. Then past, into fissure-twisted sweeps devoid of bodies. Down solid channels. Racing, ever faster, the gloom swallowing him.

Massive brown-furred creatures, trapped standing upright, green plants in their mouths. Herds held suspended above black earth. Ivory tusks and glittering eyes. Tufts of uprooted grasses. Long shapes – wolves, steep-shouldered and grey – caught in the act of leaping, running alongside an enormous homed beast. This was yet another scene of slaughter, lives stolen in an instant of catastrophic alteration – the world flung onto its side, the rush of seas, breathless cold that cut through flesh down to bone.

The world ... the world itself betrays. Errant take us, how can this be?

Udinaas had known many for whom certainty was a god, the only god, no matter the cast of its features. And he had seen the manner in which such belief made the world simple, where all was divisible by the sharp cleaving of cold judgement, after which no mending was possible. He had seen such certainty, yet had never shared it.

But he had always believed the world itself was ... unquestionable. Not static – never static – but capable of being understood. It was undoubtedly cruel at times, and deadly ... but you could almost always see it coming. Creatures frozen in mid-leap. Frozen whilst standing, grasses hanging from their mouths. This was beyond comprehension. Sorcery. It must have been. Even then, the power seemed unimaginable, for it was a tenet that the world and all that lived on it possessed a natural resistance to magic. Self-evident, else mages and gods would have reshaped and probably destroyed the balance of all things long ago. Thus, the land would resist. The beasts that dwelt upon it would resist. The flow of air, the seep of water, the growing plants and the droning insects – all would resist.

Yet they failed.

Then, in the depths, a shape. Squatting on bedrock, a stone tower. A tall narrow slash suggested a doorway, and Udinaas found himself approaching it through solid ice.

Into that black portal.
Something shattered, and, suddenly corporeal, he stumbled onto his knees. The stone was cold enough to tear the skin from his knees and the palms of his hands. He staggered upright, and his shoulder struck something that tottered with the impact.

The cold made the air brutal, blinding him, shocking his lungs. Through freezing tears he saw, amidst a faint blue glow, a tall figure. Skin like bleached vellum, limbs too long and angular with too many joints. Black, frosted eyes, an expression of faint surprise on its narrow, arched features. The clothes it wore consisted of a harness of leather straps and nothing more. It was unarmed. A man, but anything but a man.

And then Udinaas saw, scattered on the floor around the figure, corpses twisted in death. Dark, greenish skin, tusked. A man, a woman, two children. Their bodies had been broken, the ends of shattered bone jutting out from flesh. The way they lay suggested that the white-skinned man had been their killer.

Udinaas was shivering uncontrollably. His hands and feet were numb. 'Wither? Shadow wraith? Are you with me?'

Silence.

His heart began hammering hard in his chest. This did not feel like a dream. It was too real. He felt no dislocation, no whispering assurance of a body lying on its sleeping pallet in an Edur longhouse.

He was here, and he was freezing to death.

\textit{Here. In the depths of ice, this world of secrets where time has ceased.}

He turned and studied the doorway.

And only then noticed the footprints impressed upon the frost-laden flagstones. Leading out. Bared feet, human, a child’s.

There was no ice visible beyond the portal. Naught but opaque silver, as if a curtain had fallen across the entrance.

Feeling ebbing from his limbs, Udinaas backtracked the footprints. To behind the standing figure. Where he saw, after a numbed moment, that the back of the man’s head had been stove in. Hair and skin still attached to the shattered plates of the skull that hung down on the neck. Something like a fist had reached into the figure’s head, tearing through the grey flesh of the brain.

The break looked unaccountably recent.

Tiny tracks indicated that the child had stood behind the figure – no, had \textit{appeared} behind it, for there were no others to be found. Had appeared ... \textit{to do what? Reach into a dead man’s skull?} Yet the figure was as tall as an Edur. The child would have had to climb.

His thoughts were slowing. There was a pleasurable languor to his contemplation of this horrid mystery. And he was growing sleepy. Which amused him. A dream that made him sleepy. A \textit{dream that will kill me.} Would they find a frozen corpse on the sleeping pallet? Would it be taken as an omen?

\textit{Oh well, follow the prints ... into that silver world. What else could he do?}

With a final glance back at the immobile scene of past murder and recent desecration, Udinaas staggered slowly towards the doorway.

The silver enveloped him, and sounds rushed in from all sides. Battle. Screams, the ringing hammering of weapons. But he could see nothing. Heat rolled over him from the left, carrying with it a cacophony of inhuman shrieks.

Contact with the ground beneath vanished, and the sounds dropped, swiftly dwindled to far below. Winds howled, and Udinaas realized he was flying, held aloft on leathery wings. Others of his kind sailed the tortured currents – he could see them now, emerging from the cloud. Grey-scaled bodies the size of oxen, muscle-
bunched necks, taloned hands and feet. Long, sloping heads, the jaws revealing rows of dagger-like teeth and the pale gums that held them. Eyes the colour of clay, the pupils vertical slits.

Locqui Wyval. That is our name. Spawn of Starvald Demelain, the squalid children whom none would claim as their own. We are as flies spreading across a rotting feast, one realm after another. D'isthal Wyvalla, Enkar'al, Trol, we are a plague of demons in a thousand pantheons.

Savage exultation. There were things other than love upon which to thrive.

A tide of air pushed – drove him and his kind to one side. Bestial screams from his kin as something loomed into view.

Eleint! Soletaken but oh so much draconic blood. Tiam's own.

Bone-white scales, the red of wounds smeared like misty paint, monstrously huge, the dragon the Wyval had chosen to follow loomed alongside them.

And Udinaas knew its name.

Silchas Ruin. Tiste Andii, who fed in the wake of his brother – fed on Tiam's blood, and drank deep. Deeper than Anomander Rake by far. Darkness and chaos. He would have accepted the burden of godhood ... had he been given the chance.

Udinaas knew now what he was about to witness. The sembling on the hilltop far below. The betrayal. Shadow's murder of honour in the breaking of vows. A knife in the back and the screams of the Wyval here in the roiling skies above the battlefield. The shadow wraith had not lied. The legacy of the deed remained in the Edur's brutal enslavement of Tiste Andii spirits. Faith was proved a lie, and in ignorance was found weakness. The righteousness of the Edur stood on shifting sands.

Silchas Ruin. The weapons of those days possessed terrifying power, but his had been shattered. By a K'Chain Che'Malle matron's death-cry.

The silver light flickered. A physical wrenching, and he found himself lying on his sleeping pallet in the Sengar longhouse.

The skin had been torn from his palms, his knees. His clothes were sodden with melted frost.

A voice murmured from the shadows, 'I sought to follow, but could not. You travelled far.'

Wither. Udinaas rolled onto his side. 'Your place of slaughter,' he whispered. 'I was there. What do you want of me?'

'What does anyone want, slave? Escape. From the past, from their past. I will lead you onto the path. The blood of the Wyval shall protect you—'

'Against the Edur?'

'Leave the threat of the Edur to me. Now, ready yourself. You have tasks before you this night.'

A sleep that had left him exhausted and battered. Grimacing, he climbed to his feet.

With two of her chosen slaves, Mayen walked across the threshold then paused two strides into the main chamber. She was willow thin, the shade of her skin darker than most. Green eyes framed by long, umber hair in which glistered beads of onyx. A traditional tunic of silver sealskin and a wide belt of pearlescent shells. Bracelets and anklets of whale ivory.

Trull Sengar could see in her eyes a supreme awareness of her own beauty, and there was darkness within that heavy-lidded regard, as if she was not averse to wielding that beauty, to achieving dominance, and with it a potentially unpleasant freedom in which to indulge her desires.

There were all kinds of pleasure, and hungers which spoke naught of virtues, only depravity. Once again,
however, Trull was struck by self-doubt as he watched his mother stride to stand before Mayen to voice the household’s welcome. Perhaps he once more saw through shadows of his own casting.

Leaning until his back was to the wall, he glanced over at Fear. Uncertain pride. There was also unease in his brother’s expression, but it could have been born of anything – the journey they would undertake on the morrow, the very future of his people. Just beyond him, Rhulad, whose eyes devoured Mayen as if her mere presence answered his cruelest appetites.

Mayen herself held Uruth in her gaze.

_She absorbs. These tumbling waves of attention, drawn in and fed upon. Dusk shield me, am I mad, to find such thoughts spilling from the dark places in my own soul?_

The formal greeting was complete. Uruth stepped to one side and Mayen glided forward, towards the Blackwood table on which the first course had already been arrayed. She would take her place at the nearest end, with Tomad opposite her at the table’s head. On her left, Fear, on her right, Uruth. Binadas beside Uruth and Trull beside Fear. Rhulad was to Binadas’s right.

'Mayen,' Tomad said once she had seated herself, ‘welcome to the hearth of the Sengar. It grieves me that this night also marks, for the next while, the last in which all my sons are present. They undertake a journey for the Warlock King, and I pray for their safe return.’

'I am led to believe the ice-fields pose no great risks for warriors of the Edur,' Mayen replied. 'Yet I see gravity and concern in your eyes, Tomad Sengar.'

'An aged father’s fretting,' Tomad said with a faint smile. 'Nothing more.'

Rhulad spoke, 'The Arapay rarely venture onto the icefields, for fear of hauntings. More, ice can blind, and the cold can steal life like the bleeding of an unseen wound. It is said there are beasts as well—'

Fear cut in, 'My brother seeks resounding glory in the unknown, Mayen, so that you may look upon us all with awe and wonder.'

'I am afraid he has left me with naught but dread,' she said. 'And now I must worry for your fates.'

'We are equal to all that might assail us,' Rhulad said quickly.

Barring the babbling tongue of an unblooded fool.

Wine goblets were refilled, and a few moments passed, then Uruth spoke. 'When one does not know what one seeks, caution is the surest armour.' She faced Binadas. 'Among us, you alone have ventured beyond the eastern borders of Arapay land. What dangers do the ice-fields pose?'

Binadas frowned. 'Old sorcery, Mother. But it seems inclined to slumber.' He paused, thinking. 'A tribe of hunters who live on the ice – I have seen naught but tracks. The Arapay say they hunt at night.'

'Hunt what?' Trull asked.

His brother shrugged.

'There will be six of us,' Rhulad said. 'Theradas and Midik Buhn, and all can speak to Theradas’s skills. Although unblooded,' he added, 'Midik is nearly my equal with the sword. Hannan Mosag chose well in choosing the warrior sons of Tomad Sengar.'

This last statement hung strange in the air, as if rife with possible meanings, each one tumbling in a different direction. Such was the poison of suspicion. The women had their beliefs, Trull well knew, and now probably looked upon the six warriors in question, wondering at Hannan Mosag’s motivations, his reasons for choosing these particular men. And Fear, as well, would hold to his own thoughts, knowing what he knew – as we Sengar all know, now.

Trull sensed the uncertainty and began wondering for himself. Fear, after all, was Weapons Master for all the
tribes, and indeed had been tasked with reshaping the Edur military structure. From Weapons Master to War Master, then. It seemed capricious to so risk Fear Sengar. And Binadas was considered by most to be among the united tribes' more formidable sorcerors. Together, Fear and Binadas had been crucial during the campaigns of conquest, whilst Theradas Buhn was unequalled in leading raids from the sea. The only expendable members of this expedition are myself, Rhulad and Midik. Was the issue, therefore, one of trust?

What precisely was this gift they were to recover?

'There have been untoward events of late,' Mayen said, with a glance at Uruth.

Trull caught his father's scowl, but Mayen must have seen acquiescence in Uruth's expression, for she continued, 'Spirits walked the darkness the night of the vigil. Unwelcome of aspect, intruders upon our holy sites – the wraiths fled at their approach.'

'This is the first I have heard of such things,' Tomad said.

Uruth reached for her wine cup and held it out to be refilled by a slave. 'They are known none the less, husband. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan have stirred deep shadows. The tide of change rises – and soon, I fear, it will sweep us away.'

'But it is we who are rising on that tide,' Tomad said, his face darkening. 'It is one thing to question defeat, but now you question victory, wife.'

'I speak only of the Great Meeting to come. Did not our own sons tell of the summoning from the depths that stole the souls of the Letherii seal-hunters? When those ships sail into the harbour at Trate, how think you the Letherii will react? We have begun the dance of war.'

'If that were so,' Tomad retorted, 'then there would be little point to treat with them.'

'Except,' Trull cut in, recalling his father's own words when he first returned from the Calach beds, 'to take their measure.'

'It was taken long ago,' Fear said. 'The Letherii will seek to do to us as they have done to the Nerek and the Tarthenal. Most among them see no error or moral flaw in their past deeds. Those who do are unable or unwilling to question the methods, only the execution, and so they are doomed to repeat the horrors, and see the result – no matter its nature – as yet one more test of firmly held principles. And even should the blood run in a river around them, they will obsess on the details. One cannot challenge the fundamental beliefs of such people, for they will not hear you.'

'Then there will be war,' Trull whispered.

'There is always war, brother,' Fear replied. 'Faiths, words and swords: history resounds with their interminable clash.'

'That, and the breaking of bones,' Rhulad said, with the smile of a man with a secret.

Foolish conceit, for Tomad could not miss it and he leaned forward. 'Rhulad Sengar, you speak like a blind elder with a sack full of wraiths. I am tempted to drag you across this table and choke the gloat from your face.'

Trull felt sweat prickle beneath his clothes. He saw the blood leave his brother's face. 'Oh, Father, you deliver a wound deeper than you could ever have imagined. He glanced over at Mayen and was startled to see something avid in her eyes, a malice, a barely constrained delight.

'I am not so young, Father,' Rhulad said in a rasp, 'nor you so old, to let such words pass—'

Tomad's fist thumped the tabletop, sending cups and plates clattering. 'Then speak like a man, Rhulad! Tell us all this dread knowledge that coils your every strut and has for the past week! Or do you seek to part tender thighs with your womanish ways? Do you imagine you are the first young warrior who seeks to walk in step with women? Sympathy, son, is a poor path to lust—'
Rhulad was on his feet, his face twisting with rage. 'And which bitch would you have me bed, Father? To whom am I promised? And in whose name? You have leashed me here in this village and then you mock when I strain.' He glared at the others, fixing at last on Trull. 'When the war begins, Hannan Mosag will announce a sacrifice. He must. A throat will be opened to spill down the bow of the lead ship. He will choose me, won't he?'

'Rhulad,' Trull said, 'I have heard no such thing—'

'He will! I am to bed three daughters! Sheltatha Lore, Sukul Ankhadu and Menandore!'

A plate skittered out from the hands of a slave and cracked onto the tabletop, spilling the shellfish it held. As the slave reached forward to contain the accident, Uruth's hands snapped out and grasped the Letherii by the wrists. A savage twist to reveal the palms.

The skin had been torn from them, raw, red, glittering wet and cracked.

'What is this, Udinaas?' Uruth demanded. She rose and yanked him close.

'I fell—' the Letherii gasped.

'To weep your wounds onto our food? Have you lost your mind?'

'Mistress!' another slave ventured, edging forward. 'I saw him come in earlier – he bore no such wounds then, I swear it!'

'He is the one who fought the Wyval!' another cried, backing away in sudden terror.

'Udinaas is possessed!' the other slave shrieked.

'Quiet!' Uruth set a hand against Udinaas's forehead and pushed back hard. He grunted in pain.

Sorcery swirled out to surround the slave. He spasmed, then went limp, collapsing at Uruth's feet.

'There is nothing within him,' she said, withdrawing a trembling hand.

Mayen spoke. 'Feather Witch, attend to Uruth's slave.'

The young Letherii woman darted forward. Another slave appeared to help her drag the unconscious man away.

'I saw no insult in the slave's actions,' Mayen continued. 'The wounds were indeed raw, but he held cloth against them.' She reached out and lifted the plate to reveal the bleached linen that Udinaas had used to cover his hands.

Uruth grunted and slowly sat. 'None the less, he should have informed me. And for that oversight he must be punished.'

'You just raped his mind,' Mayen replied. 'Is that not sufficient?'

Silence.

Daughters take us, the coming year should prove interesting. One year, as demanded by tradition, and then Fear and Mayen would take up residence in a house of their own.

Uruth simply glared at the younger woman, then, to Trull's surprise, she nodded. 'Very well, Mayen. You are guest this night, and so I will abide by your wishes.'

Through all of this Rhulad had remained standing, but now he slowly sat once more.

Tomad said, 'Rhulad, I know of no plans to resurrect the ancient blood sacrifice to announce a war. Hannan Mosag is not careless with the lives of his warriors, even those as yet unblooded. I cannot fathom how you came to believe such a fate awaited you. Perhaps,' he added, 'this journey you are about to undertake will
provide you with the opportunity to become a blooded warrior, and so stand with pride alongside your brothers. So I shall pray.’

It was a clear overture, this wish for glory, and Rhulad displayed uncharacteristic wisdom in accepting it with a simple nod.

Neither Feather Witch nor Udinaas returned, but the remaining slaves proved sufficient in serving the rest of the meal.

And for all this, Trull still could not claim any understanding of Mayen, Fear's betrothed.

A stinging slap and he opened his eyes.

To see Feather Witch's face hovering above his own, a face filled with rage. 'You damned fool!' she hissed.

Blinking, Udinaas looked around. They were huddled in his sleeping niche. Beyond the cloth hanging, the low sounds of eating and soft conversation.

Udinaas smiled.

Feather Witch scowled. 'She—'

'I know,' he cut in. 'And she found nothing.'

He watched her beautiful eyes widen. 'It is true, then?'

'It must be.'

'You are lying, Udinaas. The Wyval hid. Somehow, somewhere, it hid itself from Uruth.'

'Why are you so certain of that, Feather Witch?’

She sat back suddenly. 'It doesn't matter—'

'You have had dreams, haven't you?’

She started, then looked away. 'You are a Debtor's son. You are nothing to me.'

'And you are everything to me, Feather Witch.'

'Don't be an idiot, Udinaas! I might as well wed a hold rat! Now, be quiet, I need to think.'

He slowly sat up, drawing their faces close once again. 'There is no need,' he said. 'I trust you, and so I will explain. She looked deep indeed, but the Wyval was gone. It would have been different, had Uruth sought out my shadow.’

She blinked in sudden comprehension, then: 'That cannot be,' she said, shaking her head. 'You are Letherii. The wraiths serve only the Edur—'

'The wraiths bend a knee because they must. They are as much slaves to the Edur as we are, Feather Witch. I have found an ally ...'

'To what end, Udinaas?’

He smiled again, and this time it was a much darker smile. 'Something I well understand. The repaying of debts, Feather Witch. In full.'
BOOK TWO

PROWS OF THE DAY
We are seized in the age
of our youth
dragged over this road's stones
spent and burdened
by your desires.
And unshod hoofs clatter beneath bones
to remind us of every
fateful charge
upon the hills you have sown
with frozen seeds
in this dead earth.
Swallowing ground
and grinding bit
we climb into the sky so alone
in our fretted ways
a heaving of limbs
and the iron stars burst from your heels
baffling urgency
warning us of your savage bite.

Destriers (Sons to Fathers)
Fisher kel Tath
CHAPTER SIX

The Errant bends fate,
As unseen armour
Lifting to blunt the blade
On a field sudden
With battle, and the crowd
Jostles blind their eyes gouged out
By the strait of these affairs
Where dark fools dance on tiles
And chance rides a spear
With red bronze
To spit worlds like skulls
One upon the other
Until the seas pour down
To thicken metal-clad hands
So this then is the Errant
Who guides every fate
Unerring
Upon the breast of men.

The Casting of Tiles
Ceda Ankaran Qan (1059 Burn's Sleep)

The Tarancede tower rose from the south side of Trate's harbour. Hewn from raw basalt it was devoid of elegance or beauty, reaching like a gnarled arm seven storeys from an artificial island of jagged rocks. Waves hammered it from all sides, flinging spume into the air. There were no windows, no doors, yet a series of glossy obsidian plates ringed the uppermost level, each one as tall as a man and almost as wide.

Nine similar towers rose above the borderlands, but the Tarancede was the only one to stand above the harsh seas of the north.

The sun's light was a lurid glare against the obsidian plates, high above a harbour already swallowed by the day's end. A dozen fisherboats rode the choppy waters beyond the bay, plying the shelf of shallows to the south. They were well out of the sea-lanes and probably heedless of the three ships that appeared to the north, their full-bellied sails as they drove on down towards the harbour, the air around them crowded with squalling gulls.

They drew closer, and a ship's pilot scow set out from the main pier to meet them.

The three harvest ships were reflected in the tower's obsidian plates, sliding in strange ripples from one to the next, the gulls smudged white streaks around them.

The scow's oars suddenly backed wildly, twisting the craft away.

Shapes swarmed across the rigging of the lead ship. The steady wind that had borne the sails fell, sudden as a drawn breath, and canvas billowed down. The figures flitting above the deck, only vaguely human-shaped, seemed to drift away, like black banners, across the deepening gloom. The gulls spun from their paths with shrill cries.

From the scow an alarm bell began clanging. Not steady. Discordant, a cacophony of panic.

No sailor who had lived or would ever live discounted the sea's hungry depths. Ancient spirits rode the currents of darkness far from the sun's light, stirring silts that swallowed history beneath endless layers of indifferent silence. Their powers were immense, their appetites insatiable. All that came down from the lit world above
settled into their embrace.

The surface of the seas, every sailor knew, was ephemeral. Quaint sketchings across an ever-changing slate, and lives were but sparks, so easily quenched by the demon forces that could rise from far below to shake their beast hides and so up-end the world.

Propitiation was aversion, a prayer to pass unnoticed, to escape untaken. Blood before the bow, dolphins dancing to starboard and a gob of spit to ride blessed winds. The left hand scrubs, the right hand dries. Wind widdershins on the cleats, sun-bleached rags tied to the sea-anchor's chain. A score of gestures, unquestioned and bound in tradition, all to slide the seas in peace.

None sought to call up the ravelled spirits from those water-crushed valleys that saw no light. They were not things to be bound, after all. Nor bargained with. Their hearts beat in the cycles of the moon, their voice was the heaving storm and their wings could spread from horizon to horizon, in towering white-veined sheets of water that swept all before them.

Beneath the waves of Trate Harbour, with three dead ships like fins on its back, the bound spirit clambered in a surge of cold currents towards shore. The last spears of sunlight slanted through its swirling flesh, and the easing of massive pressures made the creature grow in size, pushing onto the rocky coastlines ahead and to the sides the bay's own warmer waters, so that the fish and crustaceans of the shallows tumbled up from the waves in mangled shreds of flesh and shattered shell, granting the gulls and land crabs a sudden feast of slaughter.

The spirit lifted the ships, careering wild now, on a single wave that rose high as it swelled shoreward. The docks, which had a few moments earlier been crowded with silent onlookers, became a swarm of fleeing figures, the streets leading inland filling with stampedes that slowed to choking, crushing masses of humanity.

The wave tumbled closer, then suddenly fell away. Hulls thundered at the swift plunge, spars snapped and, on the third ship, the main mast exploded in a cloud of splintered wood. Rocking, trailing wreckage, the harvesters coasted between the piers.

Pressures drawing inward, building once more, the spirit withdrew from the bay. In its wake, devastation.

Glimmering in its obsidian world, the first ship crunched and slid against a pier, and came to a gentle rest. The white flecks of the gulls plunged down to the deck, to begin at long last their feeding. The Tarancede Tower had witnessed all, the smooth tiles near its pinnacle absorbing every flickering detail of the event, despite the failing light.

And, in a chamber beneath the old palace in the city of Letheras, far to the southeast, Ceda Kuru Qan watched. Before him lay a tile that matched those of the distant tower above Trate's harbour, and, as he stared at the enormous black shadow that had filled the bay and most of the inlet, and was now beginning its slow withdrawal, the sorceror blinked sweat from his eyes and forced his gaze back to those three harvest ships now lolling against the piers.

The gulls and the gathering darkness made it difficult to see much, barring the twisted corpses huddled on the deck, and the last few flickering wraiths.

But Kuru Qan had seen enough.

Five wings to the Eternal Domicile, of which only three were complete. Each of the latter consisted of wide hallways with arched ceilings sheathed in gold-leaf. Between elaborate flying buttresses to either side and running the entire length were doorways leading to chambers that would serve as offices and domiciles of the Royal Household's administrative and maintenance staff. Towards the centre the adjoining rooms would house guards, armouries and trapdoors leading to private passages – beneath ground level – that encircled the entire palace that was the heart of the Eternal Domicile.

At the moment, however, those passages were chest-deep in muddy water, through which rats moved with no particular purpose barring that of, possibly, pleasure. Brys Beddict stood on a landing three steps from the silt-laden flood and watched the up-thrust heads swimming back and forth in the gloom. Beside him stood a palace engineer covered in drying mud.
'The pumps are next to useless,' the man was saying. 'We went with big hoses, we went with small ones, made no difference. Once the pull got strong enough in went a rat, or ten, plugging things up. Besides, the seep's as steady as ever. Though the Plumbs still swear we're above the table here.'

'I'm sure the Ceda will consent to attaching a mage to your crew.'

'I'd appreciate it, Finadd. All we need is to hold the flow back for a time, so's we can bucket the water out and the catchers can go down and collect the rats. We lost Ormly last night, the palace's best catcher. Likely drowned – the fool couldn't swim. If the Errant's looking away, we might be spared finding much more than bones. Rats know when it's a catcher they've found, you know.'

'These tunnels are essential to maintaining the security of the king—'

'Well, ain't nobody likely to try using them if they're flooded—'

'Not as a means of ingress for assassins,' Brys cut in. 'They are to permit the swift passage of guards to any area above that is breached.'

'Yes, yes. I was only making a joke, Finadd. Of course, you could choose fast swimmers among your guards ... all right, never mind. Get us a mage to sniff round and tell us what's going on and then to stop the water coming in and we'll take care of the rest.'

'Presumably,' Brys said, 'this is not indicative of subsidence—'

'Like the other wings? No, nothing's slumped – we'd be able to tell. Anyway, there's rumours that those ones are going to get a fresh look at. A new construction company has been working down there, nearby. Some fool bought up the surrounding land. There's whispers they've figured out how to shore up buildings.'

'Really? I've heard nothing about it.'

'The guilds aren't happy about it, that's for sure, since these upstarts are hiring the Unwelcomes – those malcontents who made the List. Paying 'em less than the usual rate, though, which is the only thing going for them, I suppose. The guilds can't close them down so long as they do that.' The engineer shrugged, began prying pieces of hardened clay from his forearms, wincing at the pulled hairs. 'Of course, if the royal architects decide that Bugg's shoring works, then that company's roll is going sky-high.'

Brys slowly turned from his study of the rats and eyed the engineer. 'Bugg?'

'Damn, I need a bath. Look at my nails. Yeah, Bugg's Construction. There must be a Bugg, then, right? Else why name it Bugg's Construction?'

A shout from a crewman down on the lowest step, then a scream. Wild scrambling up to the landing, where the worker spun round and pointed.

A mass of rats, almost as wide as the passageway itself, had edged into view. Moving like a raft, it crept into the pool of lantern light towards the stairs. In its centre – the revelation eliciting yet another scream from the worker and a curse from the engineer – floated a human head. Yellow-tinted silver hair, a pallid, deeply lined face with a forehead high and broad above staring, narrow-set eyes.

Other rats raced away as the raft slipped to nudge against the lowest step.

The worker gasped, 'Errant take us, it's Ormly!'

The eyes flickered, then the head was rising, lifting the nearest rats in the raft with it, humped over shoulders, streaming glimmering water. 'Who in the Hold else would it be?' the apparition snapped, pausing to hawk up a mouthful of phlegm and spitting it into the swirling water. 'Like my trophies?' he asked, raising his arms beneath the vast cape of rats. 'Strings and tails. Damned heavy when wet, though.'

'We thought you were dead,' the engineer muttered, in a tone suggesting that he would rather it were true.

'You thought. You're always thinking, ain't ya, Grum? Maybe this, probably that, could be, might be, should
be – hah! Think these rats scared me? Think I was just going to drown? Hold's welcoming pit, I'm a catcher and not any old catcher. They know me, all right. Every rat in this damned city knows Ormly the Catcher! Who's this?"

'Finadd Brys Beddict.' The King's Champion introduced himself. 'That is an impressive collection of trophies you've amassed there, Catcher.'

The man's eyes brightened. 'Isn't it just! Better when it's floating, though. Right now, damned heavy. Damned heavy.'

'Best climb out from under it,' Brys suggested. 'Engineer Grum, I think a fine meal, plenty of wine and a night off is due Ormly the Catcher.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I will speak with the Ceda regarding your request.'

'Thanks.'

Brys left them on the landing. It seemed increasingly unlikely that the Eternal Domicile would be ready for the birth of the Eighth Age. Among the populace, there seemed to be less than faint enthusiasm for the coming celebration. The histories might well recount prophecies about the glorious empire destined to rise once more in less than a year from now, but in truth, there was little in this particular time that supported the notion of a renaissance, neither economically nor militarily. If anything, there was a slight uneasiness, centred on the impending treaty gathering with the tribes of the Tiste Edur. Risk and opportunity; the two were synonymous for the Letherii. Even so, war was never pleasant, although thus far always satisfactory in its conclusion. Thus risk led to opportunity, with few thoughts spared for the defeated.

Granted, the Edur tribes were now united. At the same time, other such alliances had formed in opposition to Letherii ambitions in the past, and not one had proved immune to divisive strategies. Gold bought betrayal again and again. Alliances crumbled and the enemy collapsed. What likelihood that it would be any different this time round?

Brys wondered at the implicit complacency of his own people. He was not, he was certain, misreading public sentiment. Nerves were on edge, but only slightly. Markets remained strong. And the day-in, day-out mindless yearnings of a people for whom possession was everything continued unabated.

Within the palace, however, emotions were more fraught. The Ceda's divinations promised a fundamental alteration awaiting Lether. Kuru Qan spoke, in a meandering, bemused way, of some sort of Ascension. A transformation ... from king to emperor, although how such a progression would manifest itself remained to be seen. The annexation of the Tiste Edur and their rich homelands would indeed initiate a renewed vigour, a frenzy of profit. Victory would carry its own affirmation of the righteousness of Lether and its ways.

Brys emerged from the Second Wing and made his way down towards Narrow Canal. It was late morning, almost noon. Earlier that day, he had exercised and sparred with the other off-duty palace guards in the compound backing the barracks, then had breakfasted at a courtyard restaurant alongside Quillas Canal, thankful for this brief time of solitude, although his separation from the palace – permitted only because the king was visiting the chambers of the First Concubine and would not emerge until mid-afternoon – was an invisible tether that gradually tightened, until he felt compelled to resume his duties by visiting the Eternal Domicile and checking on progress there. And then back to the old palace.

To find it, upon passing through the main gate and striding into the Grand Hall, in an uproar.

Heart thudding hard in his chest, Brys approached the nearest guard. 'Corporal, what has happened?'

The soldier saluted. 'Not sure, Finadd. News from Trate, I gather. The Edur have slaughtered some Letherii sailors. With foulest sorcery.'

'The king?"
'Has called a council in two bells' time.'

'Thank you, Corporal.'

Brys continued on into the palace.

He made his way into the inner chambers. Among the retainers and messengers rushing along the central corridor he saw Chancellor Triban Gnol standing with a handful of followers, a certain animation to his whispered conversation. The man's dark eyes flicked to Brys as the Champion strode past, but his lips did not cease moving. Behind the Chancellor, Brys saw, was the Queen's Consort, Turudal Brizad, leaning insouciantly against the wall, his soft, almost feminine features displaying a faint smirk.

Brys had always found the man strangely disturbing, and it had nothing to do with his singular function as consort to Janall. He was a silent presence, often at meetings dealing with the most sensitive issues of state, ever watchful despite his studied indifference. And it was well known that he shared his bed with more than just the queen, although whether Janall herself knew of that was the subject of conjecture in the court. Among his lovers, it was rumoured, was Chancellor Triban Gnol.

An untidy nest, all in all.

The door to the First Eunuch's office was closed and guarded by two of Nifadas's own Rulith, eunuch bodyguards, tall men with nothing of the common body-fat one might expect to see. Heavy kohl lined their eyes and red paint broadened their mouths into a perpetual downturned grimace. Their only weapons were a brace of hooked daggers sheathed under their crossed arms, and if they wore any armour it was well disguised beneath long, crimson silk shirts and tan pantaloons. They were barefoot.

Both nodded and stepped aside to permit Brys to pass.

He tugged the braided tassel and could faintly hear the dull chime sound in the chamber beyond.

The door clicked open.

Nifadas was alone, standing behind his desk, the surface of which was crowded with scrolls and unfurled maps. His back was to the room, and he seemed to be staring at a wall. 'King's Champion. I have been expecting you.'

'This seemed the first in order, First Eunuch.'

'Just so.' He was silent for a few heartbeats, then: 'There are beliefs that constitute the official religion of a nation, but those beliefs and that religion are in truth little more than the thinnest gold hammered on far older bones. No nation is singular, or exclusive — rather, it should not be, for its own good. There is much danger in asserting for oneself a claim to purity, whether of blood or of origin. Few may acknowledge it, but Lether is far richer for its devouring minorities, provided that digestion remains eternally incomplete.'

'Be that as it may, Finadd, I confess to you a certain ignorance. The palace isolates those trapped within it, and its roots nurture poorly. I would know of the people's private beliefs.'

Brys thought for a moment, then asked, 'Can you be more specific, First Eunuch?'

Nifadas still did not turn to face him. 'The seas. The denizens of the deep. Demons and old gods, Brys.'

'The Tiste Edur call the dark waters the realm of Galain, which is said to belong to kin, for whom Darkness is home. The Tarthenal, I have heard, view the seas as a single beast with countless limbs — including those that reach inland as rivers and streams. The Nerek fear it as their netherworld, a place where drowning is eternal, a fate awaiting betrayers and murderers.'

'And the Letherii?'

Brys shrugged. 'Kuru Qan knows more of this than I, First Eunuch. Sailors fear but do not worship. They make sacrifices in the hopes of avoiding notice. On the seas, the arrogant suffer, whilst only the meek survive,'
although it's said if abasement is carried too far, the hunger below grows irritated and spiteful. Tides and currents reveal the patterns one must follow, which in part explains the host of superstitions and rituals demanded of those who would travel by sea.'

'And this ... hunger below. It has no place among the Holds?'

'Not that I know of, First Eunuch.'

Nifadas finally turned, regarded Brys with half-closed eyes. 'Does that not strike you as odd, Finadd Beddict? Lether was born of colonists who came here from the First Empire. That First Empire was then destroyed, the paradise razed to lifeless desert. Yet it was the First Empire in which the Holds were first discovered. True, the Empty Hold proved a later manifestation, at least in so far as it related to ourselves. Thus, are we to imagine that yet older beliefs survived and were carried to this new land all those millennia ago? Or, conversely, does each land – and its adjoining seas – evoke an indigenous set of beliefs? If that is the case, then the argument supporting the presence of physical, undeniable gods is greatly supported.'

'But even then,' Brys said, 'there is no evidence that such gods are remotely concerned with mortal affairs. I do not think sailors envisage the hunger I spoke of as a god. More as a demon, I think.'

'To answer the unanswerable, a need from which we all suffer.' Nifadas sighed. 'Finadd, the independent seal harvesters were all slain. Three of their ships survived the return journey to Trate, crewed up to the very piers by Edur wraiths, yet carried on seas that were more than seas. A demon, such as the sailors swear upon ... yet, it was something far more, or so our Ceda believes. Are you familiar with Faraed beliefs? Theirs is an oral tradition, and if the listing of generations is accurate and not mere poetic pretence, then the tradition is ancient indeed. The Faraed creation myths centre on Elder gods. Each named and aspected, a divisive pantheon of entirely unwholesome personalities. In any case, among them is the Elder Lord of the Seas, the Dweller Below. It is named Mael. Furthermore, the Faraed have singled out Mael in their oldest stories. It once walked this land, Finadd, as a physical manifestation, following the death of an Age.'

'An Age? What kind of Age?'

'Of the time before the Faraed, I think. There are ... contradictions and obscurities.'

'Ceda Kuru Qan believes the demon that carried the ships was this Mael?'

'If it was, then Mael has suffered much degradation. Almost mindless, a turgid maelstrom of untethered emotions. But powerful none the less.'

'Yet the Tiste Edur have chained it?'

Nifadas's thin brows rose. 'Clear a path through a forest and every beast will use it. Is this control? Of a sort, perhaps.'

'Hannan Mosag sought to make a statement.'

'Indeed, Finadd, and so he has. Yet is it a true statement or deceptive bravado?'

Brys shook his head. He had no answer to offer.

Nifadas swung away once more. 'The king has deemed this of sufficient import. The Ceda even now prepares the ... means. None the less, you deserve the right to be asked rather than commanded.'

'What is it I am asked to do, First Eunuch?'

A faint shrug. 'Awaken an Elder god.'

'There is great flux in the composite. Is this relevant? I think not.' Ceda Kuru Qan pushed his wire-bound lenses further up the bridge of his nose and peered at Brys. 'This is a journey of the mind, King's Champion, yet the risk to you is such that you might as well travel into the netherworld in truth. If your mind is slain, there is no return. Extreme necessity, alas; the king wills that you proceed.'
'I did not imagine that there would be no danger, Ceda. Tell me, will my martial skills be applicable?'

'Unknown. But you are young, quick-witted and resilient.' He turned away and scanned the cluttered worktop behind him. 'Great flux, alas. Leaving but one choice.' He reached out and picked up a goblet. A pause, a dubious squint at its contents, then he took a cautious sip. 'Ah! As suspected. The flux in the composite is due entirely to curdled milk. Brys Beddict, are you ready?'

The King's Champion shrugged.

Kuru Qan nodded. 'I was going to have you drink this.'

'Curdled milk will not harm me,' Brys said, taking the goblet from the Ceda. He quickly tossed it down, then set the silver cup on the table. 'How long?'

'For what?'

'Until the potion takes effect.'

'What potion? Come with me. We shall use the Cedance for this journey.'

Brys followed the old sorceror from the chamber. At the door he cast a glance back at the goblet. The mixture had tasted of citrus and sour goat's milk; he could already feel it bubbling ominously in his stomach. 'I must now assume there was no purpose to what I just drank.'

'A repast. One of my experiments. I was hoping you'd enjoy it, but judging by your pallor it would seem that that was not the case.'

'I'm afraid you are correct.'

'Ah well, if it proves inimical you will no doubt bring it back up.'

'That's comforting knowledge, Ceda.'

The remainder of the journey to the palace depths was mercifully uneventful. Ceda Kuru Qan led Brys into the vast chamber where waited the tiles of the Holds. 'We shall employ a tile of the Fulcra in this effort, King's Champion. Dolmen.'

They walked out across the narrow causeway to the central disc. The massive tiles stretched out on all sides beneath them.

The roiling in Brys's stomach had subsided somewhat. He waited for the Ceda to speak.

'Some things are important. Others are not. Yet all would claim a mortal's attention. It falls to each of us to remain ever mindful, and thus purchase wisdom in the threading of possibilities. It is our common failing, Brys Beddict, that we are guided by our indifference to eventualities. The moment pleases, the future can await consideration.

'The old histories we brought with us from the First Empire recount similar failings. Rich ports at river mouths that were abandoned after three centuries, due to silting caused by the clearing of forests and poorly conceived irrigation methods. Ports that, were you to visit their ruins now, you would find a league or more inland of the present coast. The land crawls to the sea; it was ever thus. Even so, what we humans do can greatly accelerate the process.

'Is all that relevant? Only partly, I admit. As I must perforce admit to many things, I admit to that. There are natural progressions that, when unveiled, are profoundly exemplary of the sheer vastness of antiquity. Beyond even the age of the existence of people, this world is very, very old, Brys Beddict.' Kuru Qan gestured.

Brys looked down to where he had indicated, and saw the tile of the Dolmen. The carved and painted image depicted a single, tilted monolith half-buried in lifeless clay. The sky behind it was colourless and devoid of features.
'Even seas are born only to one day die,' Kuru Qan said. 'Yet the land clings to its memory, and all that it has endured is clawed onto its visage. Conversely, at the very depths of the deepest ocean, you will find the traces of when it stood above the waves. It is this knowledge that we shall use, Brys.'

'Nifadas was rather vague as to my task, Ceda. I am to awaken Mael, presumably to apprise the Elder god that it is being manipulated. But I am not a worshipper, nor is there a single Letherii who would claim otherwise for him or herself – why would Mael listen to me?'

'I have no idea, Brys. You shall have to improvise.'

'And if this god is truly and absolutely fallen, until it is little more than a mindless beast, then what?'

Kuru Qan blinked behind the lenses, and said nothing.

Brys shifted uneasily. 'If my mind is all that shall make the journey, how will I appear to myself? Can I carry weapons?'

'How you manifest your defences is entirely up to you, Finadd. Clearly, I anticipate you will find yourself as you are now. Armed and armoured. All conceit, of course, but that is not relevant. Shall we begin?'

'Very well.'

Kuru Qan stepped forward, one arm snapping out to grasp Brys by his weapons harness. A savage, surprisingly powerful tug pitched him forward, headlong over the edge of the disc. Shouting in alarm, he flailed about, then plummeted down towards the tile of the Dolmen.

'Even in the noblest of ventures, there's the occasional stumble.'

Bugg's eyes were flat, his lined face expressionless, as he stared steadily at Tehol without speaking.

'Besides, it's only a small failing, all things considered. As for myself, why, I am happy enough. Truly. Yours is the perfectly understandable disappointment and, dare I say it, a modest battering of confidence, that comes with an effort poorly conceived. No fault in the deed itself, I assure you.' As proof he did a slow turn in front of his manservant. 'See? The legs are indeed of matching length. I shall remain warm, no matter how cool the nights become. Granted, we don't have cool nights. Sultry is best we can manage, I'll grant you, but what's a little sweat between ... uh ... the legs?'

'That shade of grey and that tone of yellow are the worst combination I have ever attempted, master,' Bugg said. 'I grow nauseous just looking at you.'

'But what has that to do with the trousers?'

'Very little, admittedly. My concern is with principles, of course.'

'Can't argue with that. Now, tell me of the day's doings, and hurry up, I've a midnight date with a dead woman.'

'The extent of your desperation, master, never fails to astonish me.'

'Did our favourite money-lender commit suicide as woefully anticipated?'

'With nary a hitch.'

'Barring the one by which he purportedly hung himself?'

'As you say, but that was before fire tragically swept through his premises.'

'And any word on Finadd Gerun Eberict's reaction to all this?'

'Decidedly despondent, master.'

'But not unduly suspicious?'
'Who can say? His agents have made inquiries, but more directly towards a search for a hidden cache of winnings, an attempt to recoup the loss and such. No such fortune, however, has surfaced.'

'And it had better not. Eberict needs to swallow the loss entire, not that it was in truth a loss, only a denial of increased fortune. His primary investments remain intact, after all. Now, stop blathering, Bugg. I need to do some thinking.' Tehol hitched up his trousers, wincing at Bugg's sudden frown. 'Must be losing weight,' he muttered, then began pacing.

Four steps brought him to the roof's edge. He wheeled and faced Bugg. 'What's that you're wearing?'

'It's the latest fashion among masons and such.'

'The Dusty Few.'

'Exactly.'

'A wide leather belt with plenty of loops and pouches.'

Bugg nodded.

'Presumably,' Tehol continued, 'there are supposed to be tools and assorted instruments in those loops and pouches. Things a mason might use.'

'Well, I run the company. I don't use those things.'

'But you need the belt.'

'If I'm to be taken seriously, master, yes.'

'Oh yes, that is important, isn't it? Duly noted in expenses, I presume?'

'Of course. That and the wooden hat.'

'You mean one of those red bowl-shaped things?'

'That's right.'

'So why aren't you wearing it?'

'I'm not working right now. Not as sole proprietor of Bugg's Construction, anyway.'

'Yet you've got the belt.'

'It's comforting, master. I suppose this must be what it's like wearing a sword-belt. There's something immensely reassuring about a solid weight on the hips.'

'As if you were eternally duelling with your materials.'

'Yes, master. Are you done with your thinking?'

'I am.'

'Good.' Bugg unstrapped his belt and tossed it to the rooftop. 'Makes my hips lopsided. I walk in circles.'

'How about some herbal tea?'

'I'd love some.'

'Excellent.'

They stared at one another for a moment longer, then Bugg nodded and made his way to the ladder. As soon as his back was turned, Tehol tugged the trousers higher once more. Glancing down at the belt, he hesitated, then shook his head. That would be a presumption.
Bugg climbed down and out of sight. Tehol strode to his bed and settled down on the creaking frame. He stared up at the murky stars. A holiday festival was approaching, this one dedicated to the Errant, that eternally mysterious purveyor of chance, fateful circumstance and ill-chosen impulses. Or some such thing. Tehol was never certain. The Holds and their multitude of denizens were invented as dependable sources of blame for virtually anything, or so he suspected. Evading responsibility was a proclivity of the human species, it seemed.

There would be vast senseless celebration, in any case. Of something, perhaps nothing, and certainly involving everything. Frenzied wagers at the Special Drownings, in which the most notorious criminals would try to swim like swans. People who liked to be seen would make a point of being seen. Spectacle was an investment in worthy indolence, and indolence bespoke wealth. And meanwhile, housebound guards in empty estates would mutter and doze at their posts.

A scuffing sound from the gloom to his right. Tehol glanced over. 'You're early.'

Shurq Elalle stepped closer. 'You said midnight.'

'Which is at least two bells from now.'

'Is it? Oh.'

Tehol sat up. 'Well, you're here. No point in sending you away. Even so, we're not to visit Selush until a chime past midnight.'

'We could go early.'

'We could, although I'd rather not alarm her. She indicated she'd need lots of supplies, after all.'

'What makes me worse than any other corpse?'

'Other corpses don't fight back, for one thing.'

The undead woman came closer. 'Why would I feel compelled to resist? Is she not simply making me pretty?'

'Of course. I was just making conversation. And how have you been, Shurq Elalle?'

'The same.'

'The same. Which is?'

'I've been better. Still, many would call consistency a virtue. Those are extraordinary trousers.'

'I agree. Not to everyone's taste, alas—' 

'I have no taste.'

'Ah. And is that a consequence of being dead, or a more generic self-admission?'

The flat, lifeless eyes, which had until now been evading direct contact, fixed on Tehol. 'I was thinking ... the night of Errant's Festival.'

Tehol smiled. 'You anticipate me, Shurq.'

'There are sixteen guards on duty at all times, with an additional eight sleeping or gambling in the barracks, which is attached to the estate's main house via a single covered walkway that is nineteen strides in length. All outer doors are double-barred. There are four guards stationed in cubbies at each corner of the roof, and wards skeined over every window. The estate walls are twice the height of a man.'

'Sounds formidable.'

Shurq Elalle's shrug elicited a wet-leather sound, though whether from her clothes or from somewhere else could not be determined.
Bugg reappeared, climbing one-handed, the other balancing a tray made from a crate lid. Two clay cups were on the tray, their contents steaming. He slowly edged onto the roof, then, glancing up and seeing the two of them, he halted in consternation. 'My apologies. Shurq Elalle, greetings. Would you care for some tea?'

'Don't be absurd.'

'Ah, yes. Thoughtless of me. Your pardon.' Bugg walked over with the tray.

Tehol collected his cup and cautiously sniffed. Then he frowned at his manservant.

Who shrugged. 'We don't have no herbs, master. I had to improvise.'

'With what? Sheep hide?'

Bugg's brows rose. 'Very close indeed. I had some leftover wool.'

'The yellow or the grey?'

'The grey.'

'Well, that's all right, then.' He sipped. 'Smooth.'

'Yes, it would be.'

'We're not poisoning ourselves, are we?'

'Only mildly, master.'

'There are times,' Shurq Elalle said, 'when I regret being dead. This is not one of those times, however.'

The two men eyed her speculatively, sipping at their tea.

'Ideally,' she continued, 'I would now clear my throat to cover this moment of awkwardness. But I am incapable of feeling any more awkward than is my normal state. Secondly, clearing my throat has unpleasant consequences.'

'Ah, but Selush has devised a pump,' Tehol said. 'The operation will be, uh, not for the delicate. Even so, soon you shall exude the perfume of roses.'

'And how will she manage that?'

'With roses, I imagine.'

Shurq raised a thin brow. 'I am to be stuffed with dried flowers?'

'Well, not everywhere, of course.'

'A practical question, Tehol Beddict. How am I to be stealthy if I crackle with every step I take?'

'A good question. I suggest you bring that up with Selush.'

'Along with everything else, it would seem. Shall I resume my account of the potential victim's estate? I assume your manservant is trustworthy.'

'Exceptionally so,' Tehol replied. 'Please continue.'

'Finadd Gerun Eberict will be attending the Special Drownings, whereupon, at its conclusion, he will be a guest at an event hosted by Turudal Brizad—'

'The Queen's Consort?'

'Yes. I once robbed him.'
'Indeed! And what did you take?'

'His virginity. We were very young – well, he was, anyway. This was long before he danced at the palace and so earned the interest of the queen.'

'Now that's an interesting detail. Were you his true love, if I may ask such a personal question?'

'Turudal's only love is for himself. As I said, he was younger and I the older. Of course, he's now older than me, which is a curious fact. Somewhat curious, anyway. In any case, there was no shortage of men and women pursuing him even back then. I imagine he believed the conquest was his. Perhaps he still does. The measure of the perfect theft is when the victim remains blissfully unaware that he or she has been stolen from.'

'I'd think,' observed Bugg, 'that Turudal Brizad did not regret his surrender.'

'None the less,' Shurq Elalle said. She was silent, then: 'There is nothing in this world that cannot be stolen.'

'And with that thought swirling like lanolin in our stomachs,' Tehol said, setting his cup down, 'you and I should take a walk, Shurq.'

'How far to Selush's?'

'We can stretch it out. Thank you, dear Bugg, for the delightfully unique refreshment. Clean up around here, will you?'

'If I've the time.'

Shurq hesitated. 'Should I climb down the wall then shadow you unseen?'

Tehol frowned. 'Only if you must. You could just draw that hood up and so achieve anonymity.'

'Very well. I will meet you in the street, so that I am not seen exiting a house I never entered.'

'There are still watchers spying on me?'

'Probably not, but it pays to be cautious.'

'Very good. I will see you in a moment, then.'

Tehol descended the ladder. The single room reeked of sheep sweat, and the heat from the hearth was fierce. He quickly made his way outside, turned right instead of left and came to what had once been a sort of unofficial mews, now cluttered with refuse and discarded building materials, the fronts facing onto it sealed by bricks or doors with their latches removed.

Shurq Elalle emerged from the shadows, her hood drawn about her face. 'Tell me more about this Selush.'

They began walking, threading single file down a narrow lane to reach the street beyond. 'A past associate of Bugg's. Embalmers and other dealers of the dead are a kind of extended family, it seems. Constantly exchanging techniques and body parts. It's quite an art, I gather. A body's story can be unfurled from a vast host of details, to be read like a scroll.'

'What value assembling a list of flaws when the subject is already dead?'

'Morbid curiosity, I imagine. Or curious morbidity.'

'Are you trying to be funny?'

'Never, Shurq Elalle. I have taken to heart your warnings on that.'

'You, Tehol Beddict, are very dangerous to me. Yet I am drawn, as if you were intellectual white nectar. I thirst for the tension created by my struggle to avoid being too amused.'

'Well, if Selush succeeds in what she intends, the risk associated with laughter will vanish, and you may
chortle fearlessly.’

‘Even when I was alive, I never chortled. Nor do I expect to do so now that I am dead. But what you suggest invites ... disappointment. A releasing of said tension, a dying of the sparks. I now fear getting depressed.’

‘The risk of achieving what you wish for,’ Tehol said, nodding as they reached Trench Canal and began to walk along its foul length. ‘I empathize, Shurq Elalle. It is a sore consequence to success.’

‘Tell me what you know of the old tower in the forbidden grounds behind the palace.’

‘Not much, except that your undead comrade resides in the vicinity. The girl.’

‘Yes, she does. I have named her Kettle.’

‘We cross here.’ Tehol indicated a footbridge. ‘She means something to you?’

‘That is difficult to answer. Perhaps. It may prove that she means something to all of us, Tehol Beddict.’

‘Ah. And can I be of some help in this matter?’

‘Your offer surprises me.’

‘I endeavour to remain ever surprising, Shurq Elalle.’

‘I am seeking to discover her ... history. It is, I think, important. The old tower appears to be haunted in some way, and that haunting is in communication with Kettle. It poses desperate need.’

‘For what?’

‘Human flesh.’

‘Oh my.’

‘In any case, this is why Gerun Eberict is losing the spies he sets on you.’

Tehol halted. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Kettle kills them.’

Steeply sloped, the black wall of rock reached up into the light. The currents swept across its rippled face with unceasing ferocity, and all that clung to it to draw sustenance from that roiling stream was squat, hard-shelled and stubborn. Vast flats stretched out from the base of the trench wall, and these were scoured down to bedrock. Enormous tangled islands of detritus, crushed and bound together by unimaginable pressures, crawled across the surface, like migrating leviathans in the flow of dark water.

Brys stood on the plain, watching the nearest tumbling mass roll past. He knew he was witness to sights no mortal had ever seen, where natural eyes would see only darkness, where the pressures would have long since killed corporeal flesh descending from the surface far above. Yet here he stood, to his own senses as real, as physical, as he had been in the palace. Clothed, armoured, his sword hanging at his hip. He could feel the icy water and its wild torrent in a vague, remote fashion, but the currents could not challenge his balance, could not drag him off his feet. Nor did the cold steal the strength from his limbs.

He drew breath, and the air was cool and damp – it was, he realized, the air of the subterranean chamber of the Cedance.

That recognition calmed his heart, diminished his disorientation.

A god dwells in this place. It seemed well suited for such a thing. Primal, fraught with extremes, a realm of raw violence and immense, clashing forces of nature.

Another mass of wreckage shambled past, and Brys saw, amidst pale, skeletal branches and what seemed to be bundles of unravelled rope, flattened pieces of metal whose edges showed extruded white tendrils. By the
Errant, that metal is armour, and those tendrils are ...

The detritus tumbled away. As it did, Brys saw something beyond it. Stationary, blockish, vertical shapes rearing from the plain.

He walked towards them.

Dolmens.

This beggared comprehension. It seemed impossible that the plain before him had once known air, sunlight and dry winds.

And then he saw that the towering stones were of the same rock as the plain, and that they were indeed part of it, lifting as solid projections. As Brys drew nearer, he saw that their surfaces were carved, an unbroken skein of linked glyphs.

Six dolmens in all, forming a row that cut diagonally from the angle of the trench wall.

He halted before the nearest one.

The glyphs formed a silver latticework over the black stone, and in the uneven surface beneath the symbols he saw the hints of a figure. Multi-limbed, the head small, sloping and squat, a massive brow ridge projecting over a single eye socket. The broad mouth appeared to be a row of elongated tendrils, the end of each sporting long, thin fangs, and it was closed to form an interlocking, spiny row. Six segmented arms, two – possibly four – legs, barely suggested in the black stone's undulations.

The glyphs shrouded the figure, and Brys suspected they formed a prison of sorts, a barrier that prevented the emergence of the creature.

The silver seemed to flow in its carved grooves.

Brys circled the dolmen, and saw other shapes on every side, no two alike, a host of nightmarish, demonic beasts. After a long moment's regard, he moved on to the next standing stone. And found more.

The fourth dolmen was different. On one side the glyphs had unravelled, the silver bled away, and where a figure should have been there was a suggestive indentation, a massive, hulking creature, with snaking tentacles for limbs.

The mute absence was chilling. Something was loose, and Brys did not think it was a god.

Mael, where are you? Are these your servants?

Or your trophies?

He stared up at the indentation. The absence here was more profound than that which reared before him. His soul whispered... abandonment. Mael was gone. This world had been left to the dark, torrid currents and the herds of detritus.

‘Come for another one, have you?’

Brys whirled. Ten paces away stood a huge figure sheathed in armour. Black, patinated iron studded with rivets green with verdigris. A great helm with full cheek guards vertically slatted down to the jawline, reinforced along the bridge of the nose to the chin. The thin eye slits were caged in a grille mesh that extended down beneath the guards to hang ragged and stiff on shoulders and breastplate. Barnacles crusted the joints of arms and legs, and tendrils of brightly coloured plants clinging to joins in the armour streamed in the current. Gauntlets of overlapping plates of untarnished silver held on to a two-handed sword, the blade as wide as Brys's hands were long. The sword's blunt end rested on the bedrock. From those metal-clad hands, he now saw, blood streamed.

The Letherii drew his own longsword. The roiling currents suddenly tugged at him, as if whatever had held him immune to the ravages of this deep world had vanished. The blade was turned and twisted in his hand with
every surge of water. To counter such a weapon as that wielded by the warrior, he would need speed, his primary tactic one of evasion. The Letherii steel of his longsword would not break clashing in hard parry, but his arms might.

And now, the currents buffeted him, battled with the sword in his hand. He had no hope of fighting this creature.

The words the warrior had spoken were in a language unknown to Brys, yet he understood it. ‘Come for another one? I am not here to free these demons from their sorcerous cages—’

The apparition stepped forward. ‘Demons? There are no demons here. Only gods. Forgotten gods. You think the skein of words is a prison?’

‘I do not know what to think. I do not know the words written—’

‘Power is remembrance. Power is evocation – a god dies when it becomes nameless. Thus did Mael offer this gift, this sanctuary. Without their names, the gods vanish. The crime committed here is beyond measure. The obliteration of the names, the binding of a new name, the making of a slave. Beyond measure, mortal. In answer I was made, to guard those that remain. It is my task.’ The sword lifted and the warrior took another step closer.

Some fighters delivered an unseen wound before weapons were even drawn. In them, raised like a penumbra, was the promise of mortality. It drew blood, weakened will and strength. Brys had faced men and women with this innate talent before. And he had answered it with ... amusement.

The guardian before him promised such mortality, with palpable force.

Another heavy step. A force to match the roiling waters. In sudden understanding, Brys smiled.

The vicious current ceased its maelstrom. Speed and agility returned in a rush.

The huge sword slashed horizontally. Brys leapt back, the point of his sword darting out and up in a stop-thrust against the only target within reach.

Letherii steel slipped in between the silver plates of the left gauntlet, sank deep.

Behind them a dolmen exploded, the concussion thundering through the bedrock underfoot. The warrior staggered, then swung his sword in a downward chop. Brys threw himself backward, rolling over one shoulder to regain his feet in a crouch.

The warrior's sword had driven into the basalt a quarter of its length. And was stuck fast.

He darted to close. Planting his left leg behind the guardian, Brys set both hands against the armoured chest and shoved.

The effort failed as the guardian held himself upright by gripping the embedded sword.

Brys spun and hammered his right elbow into the iron-sheathed face. Pain exploded in his arm as the head was snapped back, and the Letherii pitched to one side, his left hand taking the longsword from his fast-numbing right.

The warrior tugged on his own sword, but it did not budge.

Brys leapt forward once again, driving his left boot down onto the side of the guardian's nearest leg, low, a hand's width above the ankle.

Ancient iron crumpled. Bones snapped.

The warrior sank down on that side, yet remained partly upright by leaning on the jammed sword.

Brys quickly backed away. 'Enough. I have no desire to kill any more gods.'
The armoured face lifted to regard him. 'I am defeated. We have failed.'

The Letherii studied the warrior for a long moment, then spoke. 'The blood seeping from your hands – does it belong to the surviving gods here?'

'Diminished, now.'

'Can they heal you?'

'No. We have nothing left.'

'Why does the blood leak? What happens when it runs out?'

'It is power. It steals courage – against you it failed. It was expected that the blood of slain enemies would ... it does not matter now.'

'What of Mael? Can you receive no help from him?'

'He has not visited in thousands of years.'

Brys frowned. Kuru Qan had said to follow his instincts. He did not like what had come to pass here. 'I would help. Thus, I would give you my own blood.'

The warrior was silent for a long time. Then, 'You do not know what you offer, mortal.'

'Well, I don't mean to die. I intend to survive the ordeal. Will it suffice?'

'Blood from a dying or dead foe has power. Compared to the blood from a mortal who lives, that power is minuscule. I say again, you do not know what you offer.'

'I have more in mind, Guardian. May I approach?'

'We are helpless before you.'

'Your sword isn't going anywhere, even with my help. I would give you mine. It cannot be broken, or so I am told. And indeed I have never seen Letherii steel break. Your two-handed weapon is only effective if your opponent quails and so is made slow and clumsy.'

'So it would seem.'

Brys was pleased at the wry tone in the warrior's voice. While there had been no self-pity in the admissions of failure, he had disliked hearing them. He reversed grip on his longsword and offered the pommel to the warrior. 'Here.'

'If I release my hands I will fall.'

'One will do.'

The guardian prised a hand loose and grasped the longsword. 'By the Abyss, it weighs as nothing!'

'The forging is a secret art, known only to my people. It will not fail you.'

'Do you treat all your defeated foes in this manner?'

'No, only the ones I had no wish to harm in the first place.'

'Tell me, mortal, are you considered a fine swordsman in your world?'

'Passing.' Brys tugged off the leather glove on his right hand, then drew his dagger. 'This arm is still mostly numb—'

'I am pleased. Although I wish I could say the same for my face.'
Brys cut his palm, watched as blood blossomed out to whip away on the current. He set the bleeding hand down on the warrior's left, which was still closed about the grip of the embedded weapon. He felt his blood being drawn between the silver plates.

The warrior's hand twisted round to grasp his own in a grip hard as stone. A clenching of muscles, and the guardian began straightening.

Brys glanced down and saw that the shattered leg was mending in painful-looking spasms, growing solid beneath the huge warrior's weight.

Sudden weakness rushed through him.

'Release my hand,' the warrior said, 'lest you die.'

Nodding, Brys pulled his hand free, and staggered back.

'Will you live?'

'I hope so,' he gasped, his head spinning. 'Now, before I go, tell me their names.'

'What?'

'I have a good memory, Guardian. There will be no more enslavement, so long as I remain alive. And beyond my life, I will ensure that those names are not forgotten—'

'We are ancient gods, mortal. You risk—'

'You have earned your peace, as far as I am concerned. Against the Tiste Edur – those who came before to chain one of your kin – you will be ready next time. My life can add to your strength, and hopefully it will be sufficient for you to resist.'

The guardian straightened to its full height. 'It shall, mortal. Your sacrifice shall not be forgotten.'

'The names! I feel – I am fading—'

Words filled his mind, a tumbling avalanche of names, each searing a brand in his memory. He screamed at the shock of the assault, of countless layers of grief, dreams, lives and deaths, of realms unimaginable, of civilizations crumbling to ruins, then dust.

Stories. So many stories – ah, Errant—

'Errant save us, what have you done?'

Brys found himself lying on his back, beneath him a hard, enamelled floor. He blinked open his eyes and saw Kuru Qan's wizened face hovering over him.

'I could not find Mael,' the King's Champion said. He felt incredibly weak, barely able to lift a hand to his face.

'You've scarcely a drop of blood left in you, Finadd. Tell me all that happened.'

_The Holds forsake me, stories without end..._ 'I discovered what the Tiste Edur have done, Ceda. An ancient god, stripped of its names, bound by a new one. It now serves the Edur.'

Kuru Qan's eyes narrowed behind the thick lenses. 'Stripped of its names. Relevant? Perhaps. Can one of those names be found? Will it serve to pry it loose from Hannan Mosag's grasp?'

Brys closed his eyes. Of all the names now held within him ... had any of the other gods known its kin's identity? 'I may have it, Ceda, but finding it will take time.'

'You return with secrets, Finadd Brys Beddict.'
'And barely a handful of answers.'

The Ceda leaned back. 'You need time to recover, my young friend. Food, and wine, and plenty of both. Can you stand?'

'I will try ...'

The humble manservant Bugg walked through the darkness of Sherp's Last Lane, so named because poor Sherp died there a few decades past. He had been a fixture in this neighbourhood, Bugg recalled. Old, half blind and muttering endlessly about a mysterious cracked altar long lost in the clay beneath the streets. Or, more specifically, beneath this particular lane.

His body had been found curled up within a scratched circle, amidst rubbish and a half-dozen neck-wrung rats. Peculiar as that had been, there were few who cared or were curious enough to seek explanations. People died in the alleys and streets all the time, after all.

Bugg missed old Sherp, even after all these years, but some things could not be undone.

He had been awakened by a rattling of the reed mat that now served as a door to Tehol's modest residence. A dirt-smeared child delivering an urgent summons. She now scampered a few paces ahead, glancing back every now and then to make sure she was still being followed.

At the end of Sherp's Last Lane was another alley, this one running perpendicular, to the left leading down to a sinkhole known as Errant's Heel which had become a refuse pit, and to the right ceasing after fifteen paces in a ruined house with a mostly collapsed roof.

The child led Bugg to that ruin.

One section remained with sufficient headroom to stand, and in this chamber a family now resided. Nerek: six children and a grandmother who'd wandered down from the north after the children's parents died of Truce Fever – which itself was a senseless injustice, since Truce Fever was easily cured by any Letherii healer, given sufficient coin.

Bugg did not know them, but he knew of them, and clearly they in turn had heard of the services he was prepared to offer, in certain circumstances, free of charge.

A tiny hand reached out to close about his own and the girl led him through the doorway into a corridor where he was forced to crouch beneath the sagging, sloping ceiling. Three paces along and the lower half of another doorway was revealed and, beyond it, a crowded room.

Smelling of death.

Murmured greetings and bowed heads as Bugg entered, his eyes settling on the motionless form lying on a bloody blanket in the room's centre. After a moment's study, he glanced up and sought out the gaze of the eldest of the children, a girl of about ten or eleven years of age – though possibly older and stunted by malnutrition, or younger and prematurely aged by the same. Large, hard eyes met his.

'Where did you find her?'

'She made it home,' the girl replied, her tone wooden.

Bugg looked down at the dead grandmother once more. 'From how far away?'

'Buried Round, she said.'

'She spoke, then, before life left her.' Bugg's jaw muscles bunched. Buried Round was two, three hundred paces distant. An extraordinary will, in the old woman, to have walked all that distance with two mortal sword-thrusts in her chest. 'She knew great need, I think.'

'To tell us who killed her, yes.'
And not to simply disappear, as so many of the destitute do, thus raising the spectre of abandonment – a scar these children could do without.

'Who, then?'

'She was crossing the Round, and found herself in the path of an entourage. Seven men and their master, all armed. The master was raging, something about all his spies disappearing. Our grandmother begged for coin. The master lost his mind with anger and ordered his guards to kill her. And so they did.'

'And is the identity of this master known?'

'You will find his face on newly minted docks.'

Ah.

Bugg knelt beside the old woman. He laid a hand on her cold, lined forehead, and sought the remnants of her life. 'Urusan of the Clan known as the Owl. Her strength was born of love. For her grandchildren. She is gone, but she has not gone far.' He raised his head and met the eyes of each of the six children. 'I hear the shifting of vast stones, the grinding surrender of a long closed portal. There is cold clay, but it did not embrace her.' He drew a deep breath. 'I will prepare this flesh for Nerek interment—'

'We would have your blessing,' the girl said.

Bugg's brows lifted. 'Mine? I am not Nerek, nor even a priest—'

'We would have your blessing.'

The manservant hesitated, then sighed. 'As you will. But tell me, how will you live now?'

As if in answer there was a commotion at the doorway, then a huge figure lumbered into the small room, seeming to fill it entirely. He was young, his size and features evincing Tarthenal and Nerek blood both. Small eyes fixed upon Urusan's corpse, and the whole face darkened.

'And who is this?' Bugg asked. A shifting of vast stones – now this ... this shoving aside of entire mountains. What begins here?

'Our cousin,' the girl said, her eyes wide and adoring and full of pleading as she looked up at the young man. 'He works on the harbour front. Unn is his name. Unn, this is the man known as Bugg. A dresser of the dead.'

Unn's voice was so low-pitched it could barely be heard. 'Who did this?'

Oh, Finadd Gerun Eberict, to your senseless feast of blood you shall have an uninvited guest, and something tells me you will come to regret it.

Selush of the Stinking House was tall and amply proportioned, yet her most notable feature was her hair. Twenty-seven short braids of the thick black hair, projecting in all directions, each wrapped round an antler tine, which meant that the braids curved and twisted in peculiar fashion. She was somewhere between thirty-five and fifty years of age, the obscurity the product of her formidable talent as a disguiser of flaws. Violet eyes, produced by an unusual ink collected from segmented worms that lived deep in the sand of the south island beaches, and lips kept full and red by a mildly toxic snake venom that she painted on every morning.

As she stood before Tehol and Shurq Elalle at the threshold of her modest and unfortunately named abode, she was dressed in skin-tight silks, inviting Tehol against his own sense of decorum to examine her nipples beneath the gilt sheen – and so it was a long moment before he looked up to see the alarm in her eyes.

'You're early! I wasn't expecting you. Oh! Now I'm all nervous. Really, Tehol, you should know better than to do the unexpected! Is this the dead woman?'

'If not,' Shurq Elalle replied, 'then I'm in even deeper trouble, wouldn't you say?'

Selush stepped closer. 'This is the worst embalming I've ever seen.'
‘I wasn’t embalmed.’

‘Oh! An outrage! How did you die?’

Shurq raised a lifeless brow. ‘I am curious. How often is that question answered by your clients?’

Selush blinked. ‘Enter, if you must. So early!’

‘My dear,’ Tehol said reasonably, ‘it’s less than a couple of hundred heartbeats from the midnight bell.’

‘Precisely! See how flustered you’ve made me? Quickly, inside, I must close the door. There! Oh, the dark streets are so frightening. Now, sweetie, let me look more closely at you. My servant was unusually reticent, I’m afraid.’ She abruptly leaned close until her nose was almost touching Shurq’s lips.

Tehol flinched, but luckily neither woman noticed.

‘You drowned.’

‘Really.’

‘In Quillas Canal. Just downstream of Windlow’s Meatgrinders on the last day of a summer month. Which one? Wanderer’s Month? Watcher’s?’

‘Betrayer’s.’

‘Oh! Windlow must have had unusually good business that month, then. Tell me, do people scream when they see you?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Me too.’

‘Do you,’ Shurq asked, ‘get compliments on your hair?’

‘Never.’

‘Well, that was pleasing small-talk,’ Tehol said hastily. ‘We haven’t got all night, alas—’

‘Why, yes we have, you silly man,’ Selush said.

‘Oh, right. Sorry. In any case. Shurq was a victim of the Drownings, and, it turned out, an abiding curse.’

‘Isn’t it always the way?’ Selush sighed, turning to walk to the long table along the back wall of the room.

‘Tehol mentioned roses,’ Shurq said, following.

‘Roses? Dear me, no. Cinnamon and patchouli, I would think. But first, we need to do something about all that mould, and the moss in your nostrils. And then there’s the ootooloo—’

‘The what?’ Shurq and Tehol asked in unison.

‘Lives in hot springs in the Bluerose Mountains.’ She swung about and regarded Shurq with raised brows. ‘A secret among women. I’m surprised you’ve never heard of them.’

‘It would seem my education is lacking.’

‘Well, an ootooloo is a small soft-bodied creature that feeds through a crevice, a sort of vertical slit for a mouth. Its skin is covered in cilia with the unusual quality of transmitting sensation. These cilia can take root in membranous flesh—’

‘Hold on a moment,’ Tehol said, aghast, ‘you’re not suggesting—’

‘Most men can’t tell the difference, but it enhances pleasure many times... or so I am led to believe. I have
never invited one inside, since the emplacement of an ootooloo is permanent, and it needs, uhm, constant feeding.'

'How often?' Shurq demanded, and Tehol heard suitable alarm in her tone.

'Daily.'

'But Shurq's nerves are dead – how can she feel what this ottoolie thing feels?'

'Not dead, Tehol Beddict, simply unawakened. Besides, before too long, the ootooloo's cilia will have permeated her entire body, and the healthier the organism the brighter and more vigorous her glowing flesh!'

'I see. And what of my brain? Will these roots grow in it as well?'

'Well, we can't have that, can we, lest you live out the remainder of existence drooling in a hot bath. No, we shall infuse your brain with a poison – well, not a true poison, but the exudation of a small creature that shares those hot springs with the ootooloo. Said exudation is unpalatable to the ootooloo. Isn't nature wonderful?'

Grainy-eyed, Bugg staggered inside his master's home. It was less than an hour before dawn. He felt drained, more by the blessing he had given than by preparing the old woman's corpse for burial. Two strides into the single room and he halted.

Seated on the floor and leaning against the wall opposite was Shand. 'Where is the bastard, Bugg?'

'Working, although I imagine you are sceptical. I've not slept this night and so am unequal to conversation, Shand—'

'And I care? What kind of work? What's he doing that has to be done when the rest of the world's asleep?'

'Shand, I—'

'Answer me!'

Bugg walked over to the pot sitting on a grille above the now cool hearth. He dipped a cup into the tepid, stewed tea. 'Twelve lines of investment, like unseen streams beneath foundations, eating away but yet to reveal a tremor. There are essential trusses to every economy, Shand, upon which all else rests.'

'You can't do business in the middle of the night.'

'Not that kind of business, no. But there are dangers to all this, Shand. Threats. And they need to be met. Anyway, what are you doing out at night without your bodyguard?'

'Ublala? That oaf? In Rissarh's bed. Or Hejun's. Not mine, not tonight, anyway. We take it in turns.'

Bugg stared at her through the gloom. He drank the last of the tea and set the cup down.

'Is all that true?' Shand asked after a moment. 'Those investments?'

'Yes.'

'Why isn't he telling us these things?'

'Because your investments have to remain separate, disconnected. There can be no comparable pattern. Thus, follow his instructions with precision. It will all come clear eventually.'

'I hate geniuses.'

'Understandable. All he does seems to confound, it's true. One gets used to it.'

'And how is Bugg's Construction doing?'

'Well enough.'
'What's the purpose of it, anyway? Just to make money?'

'No. The intention is to acquire the contract for the Eternal Domicile.'

Shand stared. 'Why?'

Bugg smiled.

Disinfecting, bleaching, scraping, combing. Fragrant oils rubbed into clothing and skin. Preserving oils rubbed in everywhere else. Scouring flushes of eyes, nose, ears and mouth. Then it was time for the pump.

At which point Tehol staggered outside for some air.

The sky was paling to the east, the city's less sane denizens already risen and venturing out onto the streets. Clattering carts on the cobbles. Somewhere a rooster crowed, only to have its exuberant cry cut off into strangled silence. A dog barked happily.

Footsteps, halting to Tehol's right. 'You still here?'

'Ah, Selush's assistant. And how are you this grisly morning, Padderunt?'

The old man's expression was eternally sour, but at Tehol's courteous enquiry it seemed to implode into a wrinkled mess. 'How am I? Sleepless! That's how I am, y'dammed snake! They still in there? It's a lost cause, I say. A lost cause. Just like you, Tehol Beddict. I knew your mother – what would she say seeing you now?'

'You knew her corpse, you old fool. Before that we'd never met you.'

'Think she didn't tell me all about herself anyway? Think I can't see what's there to be seen? The soul inside shapes the flesh. Oh, she talked to me all right.'

Tehol's brows rose. 'The soul inside shapes the flesh?' He stared down at the wrinkled prune face glaring up at him. 'Oh my.'

'Oh, that's a cutting remark, is it? True enough, here's what happens when a decent man gets no sleep!'

A small clay pot exploded on the cobbles between them, followed by a furious shout from a window in the building opposite.

'There!' Padderunt cried, hand to his head as he staggered in circles. 'Make of our neighbours vicious enemies! You don't live here, do you?'

'Calm down,' Tehol said. 'I simply asked how you were this morning, in case you've forgotten. Your reply was supposed to be equally inane and nondescript. If I'd wanted a list of your ailments – well, I wouldn't. Who would? Innocuous civility is what was expected, Padderunt. Not foul invective.'

'Oh really? Well, how am I supposed to know that? Come on, there's a place nearby makes great grain cakes. And rustleaf tea, which can wake the dead.'

The two made their way down the street.

'Have you tried it?' Tehol asked.

'Tried what?'

'Waking the dead with rustleaf tea.'

'Should've worked.'

'But, alas, it didn't.'

'Still should've. The stuff doubles your heart rate and makes you heave everything in your stomach.'
'I can't wait.'

'Until you get used to it. Makes a fine insect killer, too. Just splash it on the floor and in cracks and such. I can't recommend it highly enough.'

'Most people smoke rustleaf, not drink it.'

'Barbarians. Here we are. You're buying, right?'

'With what?'

'Then it goes on Selush's account, meaning you just have to pay later.'

'Fine.'

Shurq Elalle stood in front of the long silver mirror. Instinct had her gauging the worth of all that silver for a moment before she finally focused on the reflected image. A healthy pallor to her skin, her cheeks glowing with vigour. Her hair was clean and had been cut for the first time in years, scented with a hint of patchouli oil. The whites of her eyes were clear, a wet gleam reflecting from her pupils.

The rotted leathers and linen of her clothing had been replaced with black silks beneath a short black calf-hide jacket. A new weapons belt, tanned leggings and high boots. Tight leather gloves. 'I look like a whore.'

'Not any old whore, though, right?' Selush said.

'True, I'll take your coin then kill you. That's how I look.'

'There are plenty of men out there who'll go for that, you know.'

'Getting killed?'

'Absolutely. In any case, I was led to believe that wasn't your profession. Although I suppose you might feel inclined to try something new – how does the ootooloo feel, by the way?'

'Hungry. Can't I feed it, uh, something else?'

Selush's eyes sparkled. 'Experimentation, that's the spirit!'

Some comments, the undead woman reflected, deserved no response.

Shurq Elalle flexed the muscles that would permit her to draw breath – they were long out of practice, and it was strange to feel the still vague and remote sense of air sliding down her throat and filling her chest. After the pump, there had been infusions. The breath she released smelled of cinnamon and myrrh. Better than river mud any day.

'Your work is acceptable,' she said.

'Well, that's a relief! It's nearly dawn, and I'm starving. Shall we test you out, dear? I imagine my assistant and Tehol are at the local establishment, breaking their fast. Let us join them.'

'I thought I wasn't supposed to eat or drink.'

'No, but you can preen and flirt, can't you?'

Shurq stared at the woman.

Selush smiled. Then her eyelids fluttered and she turned away. 'Where's my shawl?'

Kuru Qan had left and returned with two assistants who carried Brys back to the Ceda's chambers, where he was laid down on a bench and plied with various liquids and food. Even so, strength was slow to return and he was still lying supine, head propped up on a cushion, when the doors opened and First Eunuch Nifadas entered.
His small eyes glittered as he looked down on Brys. 'King's Champion, are you well enough to meet your
king? He will be here in a moment.'

Brys struggled to sit straighter. 'This is unfortunate. I am, for the moment, unequal to my responsibilities—'

'Never mind that, Finadd. Your king seeks only to ensure you will recover from your ordeal. Genuine
concern motivates Ezgara Diskanar in this instance. Please, remain where you are. I have never seen you so
pale.'

'Something has fed on his blood,' Kuru Qan said, 'but he will not tell me what it was.'

Nifadas pursed his lips as he regarded Brys. 'I cannot imagine that a god would do such a thing.'

'Mael was not there, First Eunuch,' Brys said. 'The Tiste Edur found something else, and have bound it to
their service.'

'Can you tell us what this thing is?'

'A forgotten god, but that is the extent of my knowledge. I do not know its nature, nor the full breadth of its
power. It is old, older than the ocean itself. Whatever worshipped it was not human.'

A voice spoke from the doorway. 'I am ever careless with my assets, although the Errant has spared me the
cruellest consequence thus far, for which I am thankful.'

Kuru Qan and Nifadas both bowed low as Ezgara Diskanar entered the chamber. In his sixth decade, the
king's features remained surprisingly youthful. He was of average height, slightly on the lean side, his gestures
revealing a nervous energy that seemed tireless. The bones beneath his features were prominent and somewhat
asymmetrical, the result of a childhood incident with a bad-tempered horse. Right cheekbone and orbital arch
sat flatter and higher than their counterparts on the left side of the king's face, making the eye on that side seem
larger and rounder. It was a poorly functioning eye and had a tendency to wander independently when Ezgara
was irritated or weary. Healers could have corrected the damage, but the king forbade it – even as a child, he
had been obstinate and wilful, and not in the least concerned with outward appearance.

Further proof of that observation was evinced in his modest attire, more befitting a citizen in the markets
than a king.

Brys managed a slight bow from his reclined position. 'My apologies, your highness—'

'None needed, Finadd,' Ezgara Diskanar cut in, waving a hand. 'Indeed, it is I who must apologize to you.
Unpleasant tasks that take you from your official functions. I have sorely abused your loyalty, my young
Champion. And you have suffered for it.'

'I shall recover, sire,' Brys said.

Ezgara smiled, then surveyed the others in the room. 'Well, this is a fell gathering, isn't it? We should be
relieved that my dearest wife is at the moment senseless beneath an exhausted consort, so that even her most
trusted spies dare not intrude to report on this meeting. Hopefully, when that finally occurs, it will be far too
late.'

Nifadas spoke. 'My king, I shall be the first to take my leave, if you will permit. The hour of my departure
from the city fast approaches, and my preparations are far from complete.'

Ezgara's lopsided smile broadened. 'First Eunuch, your diligence in such matters is legendary, leaving me
sceptical of your claims. None the less, you have my leave, if only that you might ensure your spies are made
aware of precisely when her spies make their report, so that they in turn may report to you and you may then
report to me. Although what I am to do with such knowledge will no doubt escape me, given that the event
initiating these flurries of reporting is none other than the one occurring right now in this room.'

Nifadas bowed. 'None can rest in this dance, sire, as you well know.'
The king’s smile tightened. ‘Well I do, indeed, First Eunuch. Be off with you, then.’

Brys watched Nifadas depart. As soon as the door was closed the king faced Kuru Qan. ‘Ceda, the Chancellor continues to petition against Finadd Gerun Eberict’s attachment to the delegation. His arguments are persuasive.’

‘He fears for the life of your son, your highness.’

Ezgara nodded. ‘And has the Finadd’s restraint so weakened that he might murder my heir?’

‘One would hope not, sire.’

‘Do you imagine that my son understands the risk and will therefore act with constraint and decorum?’

‘Prince Quillas has been advised of the dangers, sire,’ Kuru Qan carefully replied. ‘He has gathered about him his most trusted bodyguards, under the command of Moroch Nevath.’

‘Presumably, Moroch feels equal to the task of defending his prince’s life.’ At this Ezgara turned and fixed Brys with an inquisitive gaze.

‘Moroch is supremely skilled, sire,’ Brys Beddict said after a moment. ‘I would hazard he will have tasters in line before the prince, and mages replete with a host of wards.’

‘To the latter, your highness,’ Kuru Qan said, ‘I can attest. I have lost a number of skilled students to the queen’s command.’

‘Thus,’ Ezgara Diskanar said, ‘we seek balance in the threat, and rely upon the wisdom of the players. Should one party decide on pre-emptive action, however, the scenario fast unravels.’

‘True, sire.’

‘Finadd Brys Beddict, is Moroch Nevath capable of advising restraint?’

‘I believe so, sire.’

‘The question remaining, however,’ Ezgara said, ‘is whether my son is capable of receiving it.’

Neither the Ceda nor Brys made response to that.

Their king eyed them both for a long moment, then settled his attention on Brys. ‘I look forward to your return to duties, Champion, and am relieved that you are recovering from your adventures.’

Ezgara Diskanar strode from the chamber. At the doorway’s threshold he said – without turning or pausing – ‘Gerun Eberict will need to reduce his own entourage, I think...’

The door was closed by one of Kuru Qan’s servants, leaving the two men alone. The Ceda glanced over at Brys, then shrugged.

‘If wherewithal was an immortal virtue ...’ Brys ventured.

‘Our king would be a god,’ Kuru Qan finished, nodding. ‘And upon that we now stake our lives.’ The lenses covering his eyes flashed with reflected light. ‘Curious observation to make at this time. Profoundly prescient, I think. Brys Beddict, will you tell me more of your journey?’

‘Only that I sought to right a wrong, and that, as a consequence, the Tiste Edur will be unable to bind any more forgotten gods.’

‘A worthwhile deed, then.’

‘Such is my hope.’

‘What do the old witches in the market always say? "The end of the world is announced with a kind word."'
Brys winced.

'Of course,' the Ceda continued distractedly, 'they just use that as an excuse to be rude to inquisitive old men.'

'They have another saying, Ceda,' Brys said after a moment. 'Truth hides in colourless clothes.'

'Surely not the same witches? If so, then they're all the greatest liars known to the mortal world!'

Brys smiled at the jest. But a taste of ashes had come to his mouth, and he inwardly quailed at the first whispers of dread.
CHAPTER SEVEN

You see naught but flesh
in the wrought schemes
that stitch every dance
in patterns of rising –
the ritual of our days
our lives bedecked
with precious import
as if we stand unbolstered
before tables feast-heavy
and tapestries burdened
with simple deeds
are all that call us
and all that we call upon
as would flesh blood-swollen
by something other than need.
But my vision is not so
privileged and what I see
are the bones in ghostly motion,
the bones who are the
slaves and they weave
the solid world underfoot
with every stride you take.

Slaves Beneath
Fisher kel Tath

Acquitor Seren Pedac watched Edur children playing among the sacred trees. The shadows writhing in the black bark of the boles were a chaotic swirl of motion surrounding the children, to which they seemed entirely indifferent. For some ineffable reason, she found the juxtaposition horrifying.

She had, years ago, seen young Nerek playing amidst the scattered bones of their ancestors, and it had left her more shaken than any battlefield she had walked. The scene before her now resonated in the same manner. She was here, in the Warlock King's village, and in the midst of people, of figures in motion and voices ringing through the misty air, she felt lost and alone.

Encircling the holy grove was a broad walkway, the mud covered with shaggy strips of shredded bark, along which sat logs roughly carved into benches. Ten paces to Seren's left was Hull Beddict, seated with his forearms on his knees, hands anchoring his head as he stared at the ground. He had neither moved nor spoken in some time, and the mundane inconsequentiality of their exchanged greetings no longer echoed between them, barring a faint flavour of sadness in the mutual silence.

The Tiste Edur ignored the two Letherii strangers in their midst. Lodgings had been provided for them and for Buruk the Pale. The first meeting with Hannan Mosag was to be this night, but the company had already been here for five days. Normally, a wait of a day or two was to be expected. It was clear that the Warlock King was sending them a message with this unprecedented delay.

A more dire warning still was to be found in the many Edur from other tribes now resident in the village. She had seen Arapay, Merude, Beneda and Sollanta among the native Hiroth. Den-Ratha, who dwelt in the northernmost regions of Edur territory, were notoriously reluctant to venture from their own lands. Even so, the fact of the unified tribes could be made no more apparent and deliberate than it had been, and a truth she had known only in the abstract was given chilling confirmation in its actuality. The divisive weaknesses of old were no more. Everything had changed.
The Nerek had pulled the wagons close to the guest lodge and were now huddled among them, fearful of venturing into the village. The Tiste Edur had a manner of looking right through those they deemed to be lesser folk. This frightened the Nerek in some way, as if the fact of their own existence could be damaged by the Edur's indifference. Since arriving they had seemed to wither, immune to Buruk's exhortations, barely inclined to so much as feed themselves. Seren had gone in search of Hull, in the hope of convincing him to speak to the Nerek.

Upon finding him, she had begun to wonder whether he'd been inflicted with something similar to the enervating pall that had settled on the Nerek. Hull Beddict looked old, as if the journey's end had carried with it a fierce cost, and before him waited still heavier burdens.

Seren Pedac pulled her gaze from the playing children and walked back to where Hull sat on the log bench. Men were quick and stubborn with their barriers, but she'd had enough. 'Those Nerek will starve if you don't do something.'

There was no indication that he'd heard her.

'Fine,' she snapped. 'What's a few more Nerek deaths to your toll?'

She'd wanted anger. Outrage. She'd wanted to wound him with that, if only to confirm that there was still blood to flow. But at her vicious words, he slowly looked up and met her eyes with a soft smile. 'Seren Pedac. The Nerek await acceptance by the Tiste Edur, just as we do — although we Letherii are far less sensitive to the spiritual damage the Edur want us to suffer. Our skin is thick, after all——'

'Born of our fixation on our so-called infallible destiny,' she replied. 'What of it?'

'I used to think,' he said, smile fading, 'that the thickness of our ... armour was naught but an illusion. Bluster and self-righteous arrogance disguising deep-seated insecurities. That we lived in perpetual crisis, since self-avowed destinies wear a thousand masks and not one of them truly fits——'

'How can they, Hull Beddict, when they're modelled on perfection?'

He shrugged, looked down and seemed to study his hands. 'But in most ways our armour is indeed thick. Impervious to nuances, blind to subtlety. Which is why we're always so suspicious of subtle things, especially when exhibited by strangers, by outsiders.'

'We Letherii know our own games of deceit,' Seren said. 'You paint us as blundering fools——'

'Which we are, in so many ways,' he replied. 'Oh, we visualize our goals clearly enough. But we ignore the fact that every step we take towards them crushes someone, somewhere.'

'Even our own.'

'Yes, there is that.' He rose, and Seren Pedac was struck once more by his bulk. A huge, broken man. 'I will endeavour to ease the plight of the Nerek. But the answer rests with the Tiste Edur.'

'Very well.' She stepped back and turned round. The children played on, amidst the lost shadows. She listened to Hull walk away, the soft crackle of his moccasined feet on the wood chips fading.

'Very well.'

She made her way into the village, onto the main avenue, across the bridge that led through open gates into the inner ward, where the noble-born Hiroth had their residences. Just beyond them was Hannan Mosag's long-house. Seren Pedac paused in the broad clearing just within the palisade wall. No children in sight, only slaves busy with their menial chores and a half-dozen Edur warriors sparring with a wide assortment of weapons. None spared the Acquitor any notice, at least not outwardly, though she was certain that her arrival had been surreptitiously observed and that her movements would be tracked.

Two Letherii slaves were walking nearby, carrying between them a net-sling bulging with mussels. Seren approached.
'I would speak with an Edur matron.'

'She comes,' one of them replied, not glancing over.

Seren turned.

The Edur woman who strode towards her was flanked by attendants. She looked young, but there was in truth no way of knowing. Attractive, but that in itself was not unusual. She wore a long robe, the wool dyed midnight blue, with gold-threaded patterns adorning cuffs and brocade. Her long, straight brown hair was unbound.

'Acquitor,' she said in Edur, 'are you lost?'

'No, milady. I would speak with you on behalf of the Nerek.'

Thin brows arched above the heart-shaped face. 'With me?'

'With an Edur,' Seren replied.

'Ah. And what is it you wish to say?'

'Until such time that the Tiste Edur offer an official welcome to the Nerek, they starve and suffer spiritual torment. I would ask that you show them mercy.'

'I am sure that this is but an oversight, Acquitor. Is it not true that your audience with the Warlock King occurs this very night?'

'Yes. But that is no guarantee that we will be proclaimed guests at that time, is it?'

'You would demand special treatment?'

'Not for ourselves. For the Nerek.'

The woman studied her for a time, then, 'Tell me, if you will, who or what are these Nerek?'

A half-dozen heartbeats passed, as Seren struggled to adjust to this unexpected ignorance. Unexpected, she told herself, but not altogether surprising—she had but fallen to her own assumptions. It seemed the Letherii were not unique in their self-obsessions. Or, for that matter, their arrogance. 'Your pardon, milady—'

'I am named Mayen.'

'Your pardon, Mayen. The Nerek are the servants of Buruk the Pale. Similar in status to your slaves. They are of a tribe that was assimilated by Lether some time back, and now work to pay against their debt.'

'Joining the Letherii entails debt?'

Seren's gaze narrowed. 'Not direc— not as such, Mayen. There were ... unique circumstances.'

'Yes, of course. Those do arise, don't they? The Edur woman pressed a fingertip to her lips, then seemed to reach a decision. 'Take me, then, to these Nerek, Acquitor.'

'I'm sorry? Now?'

'Yes, the sooner their spirits are eased the better. Or have I misunderstood you?'

'No.'

'Presumably, the blessing of any Edur will suffice for these pitiful tribespeople of yours. Nor can I see how it will affect the Warlock King's dealings with you. Indeed, I am sure it won't.' She turned to one of her Letherii slaves. 'Feather Witch, please inform Uruth Sengar that I will be somewhat delayed, but assure her it will not be for long.'
The young woman named Feather Witch bowed and rushed off towards a longhouse. Seren stared after her for a moment. 'Mayen, if I may ask, who gave her that name?'

'Feather Witch? It is Letherii, is it not? Those Letherii born as slaves among us are named by their mothers. Or grandmothers, whatever the practice among your kind may be. I have not given it much thought. Why?'

Seren shrugged. 'It is an old name, that is all. I've not heard it used in a long time, and then only in the histories.'

'Shall we walk, Acquitor?'

Udinaas sat on a low stool near the entrance, stripping scales from a basketful of dried fish. His hands were wet, red and cracked by the salt paste the fish had been packed in. He had watched the Acquitor's arrival, followed Mayen's detour, and now Feather Witch was approaching, a troubled expression on her face.

'Indebted,' she snapped, 'is Uruth within?'

'She is, but you must wait.'

'Why?'

'She speaks with the highborn widows. They have been in there some time, and no, I do not know what concerns them.'

'And you imagine I would have asked you?'

'How are your dreams, Feather Witch?'

She paled, and looked round as if seeking somewhere else to wait. But a light rain had begun to fall, and beneath the projecting roof of the longhouse they were dry. 'You know nothing of my dreams, Indebted.'

'How can I not? You come to me in them every night. We talk, you and I. We argue. You demand answers from me. You curse the look in my eyes. And, eventually, you flee.'

She would not meet his gaze. 'You cannot be there. In my mind,' she said. 'You are nothing to me.'

'We are just the fallen, Feather Witch. You, me, the ghosts. All of us. We're the dust swirling around the ankles of the conquerors as they stride on into glory. In time, we may rise in their ceaseless scuffling, and so choke them, but it is a paltry vengeance, don't you think?'

'You do not speak as you used to, Udinaas. I no longer know who speaks through you.'

He looked down at his scale-smeared hands. 'And how do I answer that? Am I unchanged? Hardly. But does that mean the changes are not mine? I fought the White Crow for you, Feather Witch. I wrested you from its grasp, and now all you do is curse me.'

'Do you think I appreciate owing you my life?'

He winced, then managed a smile as he lifted his gaze once more, catching her studying him – though once more she glanced away. 'Ah, I see now. You have found yourself ... indebted. To me.'

'Wrong,' she hissed. 'Uruth would have saved me. You did nothing, except make a fool of yourself.'

'She was too late, Feather Witch. And you insist on calling me Indebted, as if saying it often enough will take away——'

'Be quiet! I want nothing to do with you!'

'You have no choice, although if you speak any louder both our heads will top a pike outside the walls. What did the Acquitor want with Mayen?'

She shifted nervously, hesitated, then said, 'A welcome for the Nerek. They're dying.'
Udinaas shook his head. 'That gift is for the Warlock King to make.'

'So you would think, yet Mayen offered herself in his stead.'

His eyes widened. 'She did? Has she lost her mind?'

'Quiet, you fool!' Feather Witch crouched down across from him. 'The impending marriage has filled her head. She fashions herself as a queen and so has become insufferable. And now she would bless the Nerek—'

'Bless?'

'Her word, yes. I think even the Acquitor was taken aback.'

'That was Seren Pedac, wasn't it?'

Feather Witch nodded.

Both were silent for a few moments, then Udinaas said, 'What would such a blessing do, do you think?'

'Probably nothing. The Nerek are a broken people. Their gods are dead, the spirits of their ancestors scattered. Oh, a ghost or two might be drawn to the newly sanctified ground—'

'An Edur's blessing could do that? Sanctify the ground?'

'Maybe. I don't know. But there could be a binding. Of destinies, depending on the purity of Mayen's bloodline, on all that awaits her in her life, on whether she's—' Feather Witch gestured angrily and clamped her mouth shut.

On whether she's a virgin. But how could that be in question? She's not yet married, and Edur do not break those rules. 'We did not speak of this, you and I,' Udinaas said. 'I told you that you had to wait, because that is expected of me. You had no reason to think your message from Mayen was urgent. We are slaves, Feather Witch. We do not think for ourselves, and of the Edur and their ways we know next to nothing.'

Her eyes finally locked with his. 'Yes.' A moment, then, 'Hannan Mosag meets with the Letherii tonight.'

'I know.'

'Buruk the Pale. Seren Pedac. Hull Beddict.'

Udinaas smiled, but the smile held no humour. 'If you will, at whose feet shall the tiles be cast, Feather Witch?'

'Among those three? Errant knows, Udinaas.' As if sensing her own softening towards him, she scowled and straightened. 'I will stand over there. Waiting.'

'You do intend to cast the tiles tonight, don't you?'

She admitted it with a terse nod, then walked to the corner of the longhouse front, to the very edge of the thickening rain.

Udinaas resumed stripping scales. He thought back to his own words earlier. Fallen. Who tracks our footsteps, I wonder? We who are the forgotten, the discounted and the ignored. When the path is failure, it is never willingly taken. The fallen. Why does my heart weep for them? Not them but us, for most assuredly I am counted among them. Slaves, serfs, nameless peasants and labour' ers, the blurred faces in the crowd – just a smear on memory, a scuffing of feet down the side passages of history.

Can one stop, can one turn and force one's eyes to pierce the gloom? And see the fallen? Can one ever see the fallen? And if so, what emotion is born in that moment?

There were tears on his cheeks, dripping down onto his chafed hands. He knew the answer to that question, knife-sharp and driven deep, and the answer was ... recognition.
Hull Beddict moved to stand beside Seren Pedac as Mayen walked away. Behind them, the Nerek were speaking in their native tongue, harsh and fast words, taut with disbelief. Rain hissed in the cookfires.

‘She should not have done that,’ Hull said.

‘No,’ Seren agreed, ‘she should not have. Still, I am not quite certain what has just happened. They were just words, after all. Weren't they?’

‘She didn't proclaim them guests, Seren. She blessed their arrival.’

The Acquitor glanced back at the Nerek, frowned at their flushed, nervous expressions. ‘What are they talking about?’

‘It's the old dialect – there are trader words in it that I understand, but many others that I don't.’

‘I didn't know the Nerek had two languages.’

‘Their name is mentioned in the annals of the First Landings,’ Hull said. ‘They are the indigenous people whose territory spanned the entire south. There were Nerek watching the first ships approach. Nerek who came to greet the first Letherii to set foot on this continent. Nerek who traded, taught the colonizers how to live in this land, gave them the medicines against the heat fevers. They have been here a long, long time. Two languages? I'm surprised there aren't a thousand.’

‘Well,’ Seren Pedac said after a moment, 'at least they're animated once more. They'll eat, do as Buruk commands—’

‘Yes. But I sense a new fear among them – not one to incapacitate, but the source of troubled thoughts. It seems that even they do not comprehend the full significance of that blessing.’

‘This was never their land, was it?’

‘I don't know. The Edur certainly claim to have always been here, from the time when the ice first retreated from the world.’

‘Oh yes, I'd forgotten. Their strange creation myths. Lizards and dragons and ice, a god-king betrayed.’

After a moment she glanced over, and saw him staring at her.

‘What is it, Hull?’

‘How do you know such things? It was years before Binadas Sengar relinquished such information to me, and that as a solemn gift following our binding.’

Seren blinked. ‘I heard it... somewhere. I suppose.’ She shrugged, wiping rainwater from her face. ‘Everyone has some sort of creation myth. Nonsense, typically. Or actual memories all jumbled up and infused with magic and miracles.’

‘You are being surprisingly dismissive, Acquitor.’

‘And what do the Nerek believe?’

‘That they were all born of a single mother, countless generations past, who was the thief of fire and walked through time, seeking which might answer a need that consumed her – although she could never discover the nature of that need. One time, in her journey, she took within her a sacred seed, and so gave birth to a girl-child. To all outward appearances,’ he continued, ‘that child was little different from her mother, for the sacredness was hidden, and so it remains hidden to this day. Within the Nerek, who are the offspring of that child.’

‘And by this, the Nerek justify their strange patriarchy.’

‘Perhaps,’ Hull conceded, ‘although it is the female line that is taken as purest.’
'And does this first mother's mother have a name?'

'Ah, you noted the confused blending of the two, as if they were roles rather than distinct individuals. Maiden, mother and grandmother, a progression through time—'

'Discounting the drudgery spent as wife. Wisdom unfurls like a flower in a pile of dung.'

His gaze sharpened on her. 'In any case, she is known by a number of related names, also suggesting variations of a single person. Eres, N'eres, Eres'al.'

'And this is what lies at the heart of the Nerek ancestor worship?'

'Was, Seren Pedac. You forget, their culture is destroyed.'

'Cultures can die, Hull, but the people live on, and what they carry within them are the seeds of rebirth—'

'A delusion, Seren Pedac,' he replied. 'Whatever might be born of that is twisted, weak, a self-mockery.'

'Even stone changes. Nothing can stand still—'

'Yet we would. Wouldn't we? Oh, we talk of progress, but what we really desire is the perpetuation of the present. With its seemingly endless excesses, its ravenous appetites. Ever the same rules, ever the same game.'

Seren Pedac shrugged. 'We were discussing the Nerek. A noble-born woman of the Hiroth Tiste Edur has blessed them—'

'Before even our own formal welcome has been voiced.'

Her brows rose. 'You think this is yet another veiled insult to the Letherii? Instigated by Hannan Mosag himself? Hull, I think your imagination has the better of you this time.'

'Think what you like.'

She turned away. 'I'm going for a walk.'

Uruth had intercepted Mayen at the bridge. Whatever was exchanged between them was brief and without drama, at least none that Udinaas could determine from where he sat in front of the longhouse. Feather Witch had trailed Uruth after delivering the message from her mistress, and waited a half-dozen paces distant from the two Edur women, though not so far as to be out of earshot. Uruth and Mayen then approached side by side, the slaves trailing.

Hearing low laughter, Udinaas stiffened and hunched lower on the stool. 'Be quiet, Wither!' he hissed.

'\textit{There are realms, dead slave,}' the wraith whispered, '\textit{where memories shape oblivion, and so make of ages long past a world as real as this one. In this way, time is defeated. Death is defied. And sometimes, Udinaas the Indebted, such a realm drifts close. Very close.}'

'No more, I beg you. I'm not interested in your stupid riddles—'

'\textit{Would you see what I see? Right now? Shall I send Shadow's veil to slip over your eyes and so reveal to you unseen pasts?}'

'Not now—'

'Too late.'

Layers unfolded before the slave's eyes, cobweb-thin, and the surrounding village seemed to shrink back, blurred and colourless, beneath the onslaught. Udinaas struggled to focus. The clearing had vanished, replaced by towering trees and a forest floor of rumpled moss, where the rain fell in sheets. The sea to his left was much closer, fiercely toppling grey, foaming waves against the shoreline's jagged black rock, spume exploding skyward.
Udinaas flinched away from the violence of those waves – and all at once they faded into darkness, and another scene rose before the slave's eyes. The sea had retreated, beyond the western horizon, leaving behind trench-scarred bedrock ringed in sheer ice cliffs. The chill air carried the stench of decay.

Figures scurried past Udinaas, wearing furs or perhaps bearing their own thick coat, mottled brown, tan and black. They were surprisingly tall, their bodies disproportionately large below small-skulled, heavy-jawed heads. One sported a reed-woven belt from which dead otters hung, and all carried coils of rope made from twisted grasses.

They were silent, yet Udinaas sensed their terror as they stared at something in the northern sky.

The slave squinted, then saw what had captured their attention.

A mountain of black stone, hanging suspended in the air above low slopes crowded with shattered ice. It was drifting closer, and Udinaas sensed a malevolence emanating from the enormous, impossible conjuration – an emotion the tall, pelted creatures clearly sensed as well.

They stared for a moment longer, then broke. Fled past Udinaas—

—and the scene changed.

Battered bedrock, pulverized stone, roiling mists. Two tall figures appeared, dragging between them a third one – a woman, unconscious or dead, long dark brown hair unbound and trailing on the ground. Udinaas flinched upon recognizing one of the walking figures – that blinding armour, the iron-clad boots and silver cloak, the helmed face. *Menandore, Sister Dawn.* He sought to flee – she could not avoid seeing him – but found himself frozen in place.

He recognized the other woman as well, from fearfully carved statues left half buried in loam in the forest surrounding the Hiroth village. Piebald skin, grey and black, making her hard face resemble a war-mask. A cuirass of dulled, patchy iron. Chain and leather vambraces and greaves, a full-length cape of sealskin billowing out behind her. *Dapple, the fickle sister. Sukul Ankhadu.*

And he knew, then, the woman they dragged between them. Dusk, Sheltatha Lore. Scabandari's most cherished daughter, the Protectress of the Tiste Edur.

The two women halted, releasing the limp arms of the one between them, who dropped to the gritty bedrock as if dead. Two sets of wide, epicanthic Tiste eyes seemed to fix on Udinaas.

Menandore was the first to speak. 'I didn't expect to find you here.'

As Udinaas struggled to find a response to that, a man's voice at his side said, 'What have you done to her?'

The slave turned to see another Tiste, standing within an arm's reach from where Udinaas sat on the stool. Taller than the women facing him, he was wearing white enamelled armour, blood-spattered, smudged and scarred by sword-cuts. A broken helm was strapped to his right hip. His skin was white as ivory. Dried blood marked the left side of his face with a pattern like branched lightning. Fire had burned most of his hair away, and the skin of his pate was cracked, red and oozing.

Twin scabbarded longswords were slung on his back, the grips and pommels jutting up behind his broad shoulders.

'Nothing she didn't deserve,' Menandore replied in answer to the Tiste man's question.

The other woman bared her teeth. 'Our dear uncle had ambitions for this precious cousin of ours. Yet did he come when she screamed her need?'

The battle-scarred man stepped past the slave's position, his attention on the body of Sheltatha Lore. 'This is a dread mess. I would wash my hands of it – all of it.'

'But you can't,' Menandore said with strange glee. 'We're all poisoned by the mother's blood, after all—'
Sukul Ankhadu swung to her sister with the words, 'Her daughters have fared worse than poison! There is nothing balanced to this shattering of selves. Look at us! Spiteful bitches – Tiam's squalling heads rearing up again and again, generation after generation!' She stabbed a finger at the Tiste man. 'And what of you, Father? That she-nightmare sails out on feathered wings from the dark of another realm, legs spread oh so wide and inviting, and were you not first in line? Pure Osserc, First Son of Dark and Light, so precious! Yet there you were, weaving your blood with that whore – tell us, did you proclaim her your sister before or after you fucked her?'

If the venom of her words had any effect, there was no outward sign. The one named Osserc simply smiled and looked away. 'You shouldn't speak of your mother that way, Sukul. She died giving birth to you, after all—'

'She died giving birth to us all!' Sukul Ankhadu's raised hand closed into a fist that seemed to twist the air. 'Dies, and is reborn. Tiam and her children. Tiam and her lovers. Her thousand deaths, and yet nothing changes!'

Menandore spoke in a calm tone. 'And who have you been arguing with, Osserc?'

Osserc scowled. 'Anomander. He got the better of me this time. Upon consideration,' he continued after a moment, 'not surprising. The weapon of anger often proves stronger than cold reason's armour.' Then he shrugged. 'Even so, I delayed him long enough—'

'To permit Scabandari's escape?' Menandore asked. 'Why? Your kin or not, he's shown himself for what he truly is – a treacherous murderer.'

Osserc's brows rose mockingly and he regarded the unconscious woman lying on the ground between his daughters. 'Presumably, your cousin who's clearly suffered at your hands is not dead, then. Accordingly, I might point out that Scabandari did not murder Silchas Ruin—'

'True,' Sukul snapped, 'something far worse. Unless you think eating mud for eternity is a preferable fate.'

'Spare me the outrage,' Osserc sighed. 'As you so often note, dear child, treachery and betrayal is our extended family's most precious trait, or, if not precious, certainly its most popular one. In any case, I am done here. What do you intend doing with her?'

'We think Silchas might enjoy the company.'

Osserc stiffened. 'Two draconean Ascendants in the same grounds? You sorely test that Azath House, daughters.'

'Will Scabandari seek to free her?' Menandore asked.

'Scabandari is in no condition to free anyone,' Osserc replied, 'including himself.'

The two women were clearly startled by this. After a moment, Menandore asked, 'Who managed that?'

The man shrugged. 'Does it matter? It was Scabandari's conceit to think this world's gods had not the power to oppose him.' He paused then to eye his daughters speculatively, and said, 'Heed that as a warning, my dears. Mother Dark's first children were spawned without need of any sire. And, despite what Anomander might claim, they were not Tiste Andii.'

'We did not know this,' Menandore said.

'Well, now you do. Tread softly, children.'

Udinaas watched the tall figure walk away, then the slave gasped as Osserc's form blurred, shifted, unfolded to find a new shape. Huge, glittering gold and silver scales rippling as wings spread wide. A surge of power, and the enormous dragon was in the air.

Sukul Ankhadu and Menandore stared after him, until the dragon dwindled to a gleaming ember in the heavy sky, winked out and was gone.
Sukul grunted, then said, 'I'm surprised Anomander didn't kill him.'

'Something binds them, sister, of which not we nor anyone else knows a thing about. I am certain of it.'

'Perhaps. Or it might be something far simpler.'

'Such as?'

'They would the game continue,' Sukul said with a tight smile. 'And the pleasure would pale indeed were one to kill the other outright.'

Menandore's eyes fell to the motionless form of Sheltatha Lore. 'This one. She took a lover from among this world's gods, did she not?'

'For a time. Begetting two horrid little children.'

'Horrid? Daughters, then.'

Sukul nodded. 'And their father saw that clearly enough from the very start, for he named them appropriately.'

'Oh? And what were those names, sister?'

'Envy and Spite.'

Menandore smiled. 'This god – I think I would enjoy meeting him one day.'

'It is possible he would object to what we plan to do with Sheltatha Lore. Indeed, it is possible that even now he seeks our trail, so that he might prevent our revenge. Accordingly, as Osserc is wont to say, we should make haste.'

Udinaas watched as the two women moved apart, leaving their unconscious cousin where she lay.

Menandore faced her sister across the distance. 'Sheltatha's lover. That god – what is his name?'

Sukul's reply seemed to come from a vast distance, 'Draconus.'

Then the two women veered into dragons, of a size almost to match that of Osserc. One dappled, one blindingly bright.

The dappled creature lifted into the air, slid in a banking motion until she hovered over Sheltatha Lore's body. A taloned claw reached down and gathered her in its grasp.

Then the dragon rose higher to join her sister. And away they wheeled. Southward.

The scene quickly faded before the slave's eyes.

And, once more, Udinaas was sitting outside the Sengar longhouse, a half-scaled fish in his red, cracked hands, its facing eye staring up at him with that ever-disturbing look of witless surprise – an eye that he had seen, with the barest of variations, all morning and all afternoon, and now, as dusk closed round him, it stared yet again, mute and emptied of life. As if what he held was not a fish at all.

Just eyes. Dead, senseless eyes ... Yet even the dead accuse.

'You have done enough, slave.'

Udinaas looked up.

Uruth and Mayen stood before him. Two Tiste women, neither dappled, neither blindingly bright. Just shades in faint, desultory variation.

Between them and a step behind, Feather Witch stood foremost among the attending slaves. Large eyes filled
with feverish warnings, fixed on his own.

Udinaas bowed his head to Uruth. ‘Yes, mistress.’

‘Find a salve for those hands,’ Uruth said.

‘Thank you, mistress.’

The procession filed past, into the longhouse.

Udinaas stared down at the fish. Studied that eye a moment longer, then dug it out with his thumb.

Seren Pedac stood on the beach in the rain, watching the water in its ceaseless motion, the way the pelting rain transformed the surface into a muricated skin, grey and spider-haired as it swelled shoreward to break hissing, thin and sullen on the smooth stones.

Night had arrived, crawling out from the precious shadows. The dark hours were upon them all, a shawl of silence settling on the village behind her. She was thinking of the Letherii slaves.

Her people seemed particularly well suited to surrender. Freedom was an altar supplicants struggled to reach all their lives, clawing the smooth floor until blood spattered the gleaming, flawless stone, yet the truth was it remained for ever beyond the grasp of mortals. Even as any sacrifice was justified in its gloried name. For all that, she knew that blasphemy was a hollow crime. Freedom was no god, and if it was, and if it had a face turned upon its worshippers, its expression was mocking. A slave's chains stole something he or she had never owned.

The Letherii slaves in this village owed no debt. They served recognizable needs, and were paid in food and shelter. They could marry. Produce children who would not inherit the debts of their parents. The portions of their day allotted their tasks did not progress, did not devour ever more time from their lives. In all, the loss of freedom was shown to be almost meaningless to these kin of hers.

A child named Feather Witch. As if a witch from the distant past, awkwardly dressed, stiff and mannered as all outdated things appear to be, had stepped out from the histories. Womb-chosen caster of the tiles, who practise her arts of divination for the service of her community, rather than for the coins in a leather pouch. Perhaps the name had lost its meaning among these slaves. Perhaps there were no old tiles to be found, no solemn nights when fates gathered into a smudged, crack-laced path, the dread mosaic of destiny set out before one and all – with a hood-eyed woman-child overseeing the frightful ritual.

She heard the crunch of stones from near the river mouth and turned to see a male slave crouching down at the waterline. He thrust his hands into the cold, fresh water as if seeking absolution, or ice-numbing escape.

Curious, Seren Pedac walked over.

The glance he cast at her was guarded, diffident. Acquitor,’ he said, ‘these are fraught hours among the Edur. Words are best left unspoken.’

‘We are not Edur, however,’ she replied, ‘are we?’

He withdrew his hands, and she saw that they were red and swollen. ‘Emurlahn bleeds from the ground in these lands, Acquitor.’

‘None the less, we are Letherii.’

His grin was wry. ‘Acquitor, I am a slave.’

‘I have been thinking on that. Slavery. And freedom from debt. How do you weigh the exchange?’

He settled back on his haunches, water dripping from his hands, and seemed to study the clear water swirling past. The rain had fallen off and mist was edging out from the forest. ‘The debt remains, Acquitor. It governs every Letherii slave among the Edur, yet it is a debt that can never be repaid.’
She stared down at him, shocked. 'But that is madness!'

He smiled once more. 'By such things we are all measured. Why did you imagine that mere slavery would change it?'

Seren was silent for a time, studying the man crouched at the edge of the flowing water. Not at all unhandsome, yet, now that she knew, she could see his indebtedness, the sure burden upon him, and the truth that, for him, for every child he might sire, there would be no absolving the stigma. It was brutal. It was ... Letherii. 'There is a slave,' she said, 'who is named Feather Witch.'

He seemed to wince. 'Yes, our resident caster of the tiles.'

'Ah. I had wondered. How many generations has that woman's family dwelt as a slave among the Edur?'

'A score, perhaps.'

'Yet the talent persisted? Within this world of Kurald Emurlahn? That is extraordinary.'

'Is it?' He shrugged and rose. 'When you and your companions are guest to Hannan Mosag this night, Feather Witch will cast.'

Sudden chill rippled through Seren Pedac. She drew a deep breath and released it slow and heavy. 'There is ... risk, doing such a thing.'

'That is known, Acquitor.'

'Yes, I see now that it would be.'

'I must return to my tasks,' he said, not meeting her eyes.

'Of course. I hope my delaying you does not yield grief.'

He smiled yet again, but said nothing.

She watched him walk up the strand.

Buruk the Pale stood wrapped in his rain cape before the Nerek fire. Hull Beddict was nearby, positioned slightly behind the merchant, hooded and withdrawn.

Seren walked to Buruk's side, studied the struggling flames from which smoke rose to hang smeared, stretched and motionless above them. The night's chill had seeped into the Acquitor's bones and the muscles of her neck had tightened in response. A headache was building behind her eyes.

'Seren Pedac,' Buruk sighed. 'I am unwell.'

She heard as much in his weak, shaky voice. 'You ran long and far,' she said.

'Only to find myself standing still, here before a sickly fire. I am not so foolish as to be unaware of my crimes.'

Hull grunted behind them. 'Would those be crimes already committed, or those to come, Buruk the Pale?'

'The distinction is without meaning,' the merchant replied. 'Tonight,' he said, straightening himself, 'we shall be made guests of Hannan Mosag. Are you both ready?'

'The formality,' Seren said, 'is the least of what this meeting portends, Buruk. The Warlock King intends to make his position unambiguous. We will hear a warning, which we are expected to deliver to the delegation when it arrives.'

'Intentions are similarly without relevance, Acquitor. I am without expectations, whereas one of us three is consumed by nothing else. Rehearsed statements, dire pronouncements, all await this fell visit.' Buruk swung his head to regard Hull Beddict. 'You still think like a child, don't you? Clay figurines sunk to their ankles in
the sand, one here, one there, standing just so. One says this, the other says that, then you reach down and rearrange them accordingly. Scenes, vistas, stark with certainty. Poor Hull Beddict, who took a knife to his heart so long ago that he twists daily to confirm it's still there.'

'If you would see me as a child,' the huge man said in growl, 'that is your error, not mine, Buruk.'

'A gentle warning,' the merchant replied, 'that you are not among children.'

Buruk then gestured them to follow and made his way towards the citadel.

Falling in step beside Hull – with the merchant a half-dozen paces ahead, barely visible in the dark – Seren asked, 'Have you met this Hannan Mosag?'

'I have been guest here before, Seren.'

'Of the Warlock King's?'

'No, of the Sengar household. Close to the royal blood, the eldest son, Fear Sengar, is Hannan Mosag's Marshal of War – not his actual title, but it serves well as translation.'

Seren considered this for a moment, then frowned and said, 'You anticipate, then, that friends will be present tonight.'

'I had, but it is not to be. None of the Sengar barring the patriarch, Tomad, and his wife are in the village. The sons have left.'

'Left? Where?'

Hull shook his head. 'I don't know. It is ... odd. I have to assume Fear and his brothers will be back in time for the treaty meeting.'

'Is the Warlock King aware of the blood-ties you have bound with Binadas Sengar?'

'Of course.'

Buruk the Pale had reached the bridge leading to the inner ward. The mists had thickened into fog, obscuring the world surrounding the three Letherii. There was no-one else in sight, nor any sound beyond the crunch of their feet on the pebbled path. The massive bulk of the citadel rose before them.

The broad, arched entranceway was lurid with firelight.

'He has no guards,' Seren murmured.

'None that can be seen,' Hull Beddict replied.

Buruk climbed the two shallow steps to the landing, paused to release the clasps of his cape, then strode inside. A moment later Seren and Hull followed.

The long hall was virtually empty. The feast table was a much smaller version than what normally occupied the centre axis of the room, as evinced by the wear patterns on the vast rug covering the wood-slatted floor. And off to the right, Seren saw, stood that table, pushed flush against the tapestry-lined wall.

Near the far end of the chamber, the modest feast table had been positioned crossways, with three high-backed chairs awaiting the Letherii on this side. Opposite them sat the Warlock King, already well into his meal. Five Edur warriors stood in shadows behind Hannan Mosag, motionless.

They must be the K'risnan. Sorcerors ... they look young.

The Warlock King waited until they had divested themselves of their outer clothing, then gestured them forward, and said in passable Letherii, 'Join me, please. I dislike cold food, so here you see me, rudely filling my belly.'
Buruk the Pale bowed from the waist, then said, 'I did not think we were late, sire—'

'You're not, but I am not one for formality. Indeed, I am often tried by mere courtesy. Forgive, if you will, this king's impatience.'

'Appetites care little for demands of decorum, sire,' Buruk said, approaching.

'I was confident a Letherii would understand. Now,' he suddenly rose, the gesture halting the three in their tracks, 'I proclaim as my guests Buruk the Pale, Acquitor Seren Pedac and Sentinel Hull Beddict. Seat yourselves, please. I only devour what my cooks prepare for me.'

His was a voice one could listen to, hours passing without notice, discomforts forgotten. Hannan Mosag was, Seren realized, a very dangerous king.

Buruk the Pale took the central seat, Seren moving to the one on the merchant's left, Hull to the right. As they settled into the Blackwood chairs, the Warlock King sat down once more and reached for a goblet. 'Wine from Trate,' he said, 'to honour my guests.'

'Acquired through peaceful trade, one hopes,' Buruk said.

'Alas, I am afraid not,' Hannan Mosag replied, glancing up almost diffidently into the merchant's eyes, then away once more. 'But we are all hardy folk here at this table, I'm sure.'

Buruk collected his goblet and sipped. He seemed to consider, then sighed, 'Only slightly soured by provenance, sire.'

The Warlock King frowned. 'I had assumed it was supposed to taste that way.'

'Not surprising, sire, once one becomes used to it.'

'The comfort that is familiarity, Buruk the Pale, proves a powerful arbiter once again.'

'The Letherii often grow restless with familiarity, alas, and as a consequence often see it as a diminishment in quality.'

'That is too complicated a notion, Buruk,' Hannan Mosag said. 'We've not yet drunk enough to dance with words, unless of course you eased your thirst back in your lodging, in which case I find myself at a disadvantage.'

Buruk reached for a sliver of smoked fish. 'Horribly sober, I'm afraid. If disadvantage exists, then it belongs to us.'

'How so?'

'Well, sire, you honour us with blood-tainted wine, a most unbalancing gesture. More, we have received word of the slaughter of Letherii seal hunters. The blood has grown deep enough to drown us.'

It seemed Buruk the Pale was not interested in veiled exchanges. A curious tactic, Seren reflected, and one that, she suspected, King Ezgara Diskanar would not appreciate in the circumstances.

'I am sure the few remaining kin of the butchered tusked seals would concur, tugged as they are in that fell tide,' the Warlock King said in a musing sort of way.

'Word has also reached us,' Buruk continued, 'of the ships' return to Trate's harbour. The holds that should have held the costly harvest were inexplicably empty.'

'Empty? That was careless.'

Buruk leaned back in his chair, closing both hands about the goblet as he studied the dark contents.

Hull Beddict suddenly spoke. 'Warlock King, I for one feel no displeasure in the resolution of that
treacherous event. Those hunters defied long-established agreements, and so deserved their fate.'

'Sentinel,' Hannan Mosag said, a new seriousness to his tone, 'I doubt their grieving kin would agree. Your words are cold. I am given to understand that the notion of debt is a pervasive force among your people. These hapless harvesters were likely *indebted*, were they not? Their desperation preyed upon by masters as heartless in their sentiments as you have just been.' He scanned the three Letherii before him. 'Am I alone in my grief?'

'The potential consequences of that slaughter promise yet more grief, sire,' Buruk the Pale said.

'And is that inevitable, merchant?'

Buruk blinked.

'It is,' Hull Beddict answered, leaning forward in his chair. 'Warlock King, is there any doubt upon whom that grief should be visited? You spoke of cold masters, and yes, it is their blood that should have been spilled in this instance. Even so, they are masters only because the Indebted accept them as such. This is the poison of gold as the only measure of worth. Those harvesters are no less guilty for their desperation, sire. They are all participants in the same game.'

'Hull Beddict,' Buruk said, 'speaks only for himself.'

'Are we not all speaking only for ourselves?' Hannan Mosag asked.

'As desirable as that would be, sire, it would be a lie to make such claims – for myself, for you.'

The Warlock King pushed his plate away and leaned back. 'And what of the Acquitor, then? She does not speak at all.' Calm, soft eyes fixed on her. 'You have escorted these men, Acquitor Seren Pedac.'

'I have, sire,' she replied, 'and so my task is done.'

'And in your silence you seek to absolve yourself of all to come of this meeting.'

'Such is the role of Acquitor, sire.'

'Unlike that of, say, Sentinel.'

Hull Beddict flinched, then said, 'I ceased being Sentinel long ago, sire.'

'Indeed? Then why, may I ask, are you here?'

'He volunteered himself,' Buruk answered. 'It was not for me to turn him away.'

'True. That responsibility, as I understand the matter, belonged to the Acquitor.' Hannan Mosag studied her, waiting.

'I did not feel compelled to deny Hull Beddict's decision to accompany us, sire.'

'Yes,' the Warlock King replied. 'Isn't that curious?'

Sweat prickled beneath her damp clothes. 'Permit me to correct myself, sire. I did not believe I would succeed, had I attempted to deny Hull Beddict. And so I decided to maintain the illusion of my authority.'

Hannan Mosag's sudden smile was profoundly disarming. 'An honest reply. Well done, Acquitor. You may now go.'

She rose shakily, bowed. 'It was a pleasure meeting you, Warlock King.'

'I reciprocate the sentiment, Acquitor. I would we speak later, you and I.'

'I am at your call, sire.'

Not meeting the eyes of her fellow Letherii, Seren stepped round the chair, then made her way outside.
The Warlock King had denied her the burden of witnessing all that followed this night between himself, Hull and Buruk. On a personal level, it stung, but she knew that he might very well have just saved her life.

In any case, all that had needed to be said had been said. She wondered if Hull Beddict had understood that. There was no doubt that Buruk had.

_We are sorely unbalanced, indeed. Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King, wants peace._

The rain had returned. She drew her cloak tighter about her shoulders.

_Poor Hull._

Someone edged to his side. Udinaas glanced over to see Hulad, the familiar lined face drawn, troubled and wan. 'Are you all right?'

Hulad shrugged. 'I was remembering the last time she cast, Udinaas. My nerves are ruined this night.'

Udinaas said nothing. It was with some measure of surprise that he himself was not feeling something similar. Changes had come to him, that much was clear. Feather Witch, he'd heard, had felt the brunt of Mayen's displeasure. It seemed Uruth's fury with the Nerek blessing, while delivered with quiet brevity, had been harsh in its content. Subsequently, Mayen had taken a switch to her slave's back.

Of course, when it came to dealing with slaves, justice was without meaning.

He watched her move to stand in the centre of the cleared area. There were more slaves crowding the vast barn than there had been the last time. Enticed by the fraught tales of the past casting, no doubt. Almost as good as the Drownings.

Feather Witch sat down on the hard-packed floor and everyone else quickly followed suit, moving with an alacrity that she herself was not able to match, bruised and battered as she was. Udinaas saw the strain in her movements, and wondered to what extent she blamed him for her suffering. Mayen was no harder a mistress than any other Edur. Beatings were mercifully uncommon – most egregious crimes committed by slaves were punished with swift death. If one was not going to kill a slave, what value incapacitating them?

The last casting had not proceeded so far as to the actual scattering of the tiles. The Wyval's sudden arrival had torn Feather Witch from the realm of the manifest Holds. Udinaas felt the first tremors of anticipation in his chest.

Sudden silence as Feather Witch closed her eyes and lowered her head, her yellow hair closing over her face like twin curtains. She shuddered, then drew a deep, ragged breath, and looked up with empty eyes, in which the black smear of a starless night sky slowly grew, as from behind thinning fog, followed by spirals of luminous light.

The Beginnings swept upon her with its mask of terror, twisting her features into something primal and chilling. She was, Udinaas knew, gazing upon the Abyss, suspended in the vast oblivion of all that lay between the stars. There were no Makers yet, nor the worlds they would fashion.

_And now the Fulcra. Fire, Dolmen and the Errant. The Errant, who gives shape to the Holds—_

'Walk with me to the Holds.'

The Letherii slaves loosed long-held breaths.

'We stand upon Dolmen, and all is as it should be.' Yet there was a strain to her voice. '_To live is to wage war against the Abyss. In our growth we find conquest, in our stagnation we find ourselves under siege, and in our dying our last defences are assailed. These are the truths of the Beast Hold. Blade and Knuckles, the war we cannot escape. Age has clawed the face and gouged the eyes of the Elder. He is scarred and battle-ravaged. Crone cackles with bitter spit, and twitches with dreams of flight. Seer's mouth moves yet there are none to hear. Shaman wails the weft of the dead in fields of bones, yet believes none of the patterns he fashions from those scattered remains. Tracker walks his steps assured and purposeful, to belie that he wanders lost._'
She fell silent.
Muttered voices from the crowd. This was a cold invitation into the Holds.

Errant guard us, we are in trouble. Dread trouble.

Hulad plucked at his arm, gestured to the far wall where shadows lay thick as muddy water. A figure stood there, back to the dirt-spattered plaster wall. The Acquitor. Seren Pedac.

Feather Witch remained silent, and unease grew.

Udinaas climbed to his feet and threaded his way through the crowd, ignoring the glares from the slaves he edged past. He reached the back wall and made his way along it until he reached the Acquitor's side.

'What has gone wrong?' she asked.

'I don't know—'

Feather Witch began speaking once more. 'Bone Perch now stands as a throne that none shall occupy, for its shape has become inimical to taming. The throne's back is now hunched, the ribs drawn downward, the shoulder blades steep and narrow. The arms, upon which a ruler's arms would rest, are risen now, each in the visage of a wolf, and in their eyes burns savage life.' She paused, then intoned, 'The Hold of the Beast has found Twin Rulers.'

'That is impossible,' Seren Pedac murmured.

'And before us now ...the Hold of the Azath. Its stones bleed. The earth heaves and steams. A silent, unceasing scream shakes the branches of the ancient trees. The Azath stands besieged.'

Voices rose in denial, the slaves shifting about.

'Ice Hold!' Feather Witch shouted, head tilted back, teeth bared.

Silence once more, all eyes fixing on her.

'Riven tomb! Corpses lie scattered before the sundered thresh' old. Urquall Jaghuthan taezmalas. They are not here to mend the damage. They are forgotten, and the ice itself cannot recall the weight of their passage.'

'What language was that?' Seren Pedac asked.

'Jaghut,' Udinaas replied, then snapped his mouth shut.

'What is Jaghut?'

He shrugged. 'Forgers of the Ice, Acquitor. It is of no matter. They are gone.'

She gripped his arm and swung him round. 'How do you know this?'

'The Hold of the Dragon,' Feather Witch said, her skin glistening with sweat. 'Eleint Tiam purake setoram n'brael buras—'

'Draconean words,' Udinaas said, suddenly revelling in his secret knowledge. 'Children of the Mother Tiam lost in all that they surrendered.' More or less. The poetry suffers in translation—'

'The Eleint would destroy all in their paths to achieve vengeance,' Feather Witch said in a grating voice. 'As we all shall see in the long night to come. The Queen lies dead and may never again rise. The Consort writhes upon a tree and whispers with madness of the time of his release. The Liege is lost, dragging chains in a world where to walk is to endure, and where to halt is to be devoured. The Knight strides his own doomed path, soon to cross blades with his own vengeance. Gate rages with wild fire. Wyval——'

Her head snapped back as if struck by an invisible hand, and blood sprayed from her mouth and nose. She gasped, then smiled a red smile. 'Locqui Wyval waits. The Lady and the Sister dance round each other, each on
her own side of the world. Blood-Drinker waits as well, waits to be found. Path-Shaper knows fever in his fell
blood and staggers on the edge of the precipice.

‘Thus! The Holds, save one.’

‘Someone stop her,’ Seren Pedac hissed, releasing Udinaas's arm.

And now it was his turn to grasp her, hold her back. She snapped a glare at him and twisted to escape his
grip.

He pulled her close. ‘This is not your world, Acquitor. No-one invited you. Now, stand here and say nothing...
or leave!’

‘The Empty Hold has become …’ Feather Witch's smile broadened, ‘very crowded indeed. ‘Ware the brothers!
Listen! Blood weaves a web that will trap the entire world! None shall escape, none shall find refuge!’ Her right
hand snapped out, spraying the ancient tiles onto the floor. From the rafters far above pigeons burst out of the
gloom, a wild, chaotic beat of wings. They circled in a frenzy, feathers skirling down.

‘The Watchers stand in place as if made of stone! Their faces are masks of horror. The Mistresses dance with
thwarted desire.’ Her eyes were closed, yet she pointed to one tile after another, proclaiming their identity in a
harsh, rasping voice. ‘The Wanderers have broken through the ice and cold darkness comes with its deathly
embrace. The Walkers cannot halt in the growing torrent that pulls them ever onward. The Saviours——’

‘What is she saying?’ Seren Pedac demanded. ‘She has made them all plural – the players within the Hold of
the Empty Throne – this makes no sense——’

‘—face one another, and both are doomed, and in broken reflection so stand the Betrayers, and this is what
lies before us, before us all.’ Her voice trailed away with her last words, and once more her chin settled, head
tilting forward, long hair sweeping down to cover her face.

The pigeons overhead whipped round and round, the only sound in the massive barn.

‘Contestants to the Empty Throne,’ Feather Witch whispered in a tone heavy with sorrow. ‘Blood and
madness...’

Udinaas slowly released his grip on Seren Pedac.

She made no move, as frozen in place as everyone else present.

Udinaas grunted, amused, and said to the Acquitor, ‘She's not slept well lately, you see.’

* * *

Seren Pedac staggered outside, into a solid sheet of cold rain. A hissing deluge on the path's pebbles, tiny rivers
cutting through the sands, the forest beyond seeming pulled down by streaming threads and ropes. An angry
susurration from the direction of the river and the sea. As if the world was collapsing in melt water.

She blinked against the cold tears.

And recalled the play of Edur children, the oblivious chatter of a thousand moments ago, so far back in her
mind now as to echo like someone else's reminiscence. Of times weathered slick and shapeless.

Memories rushing, rushing down to the sea.

Like children in flight.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Where are the days we once held
So loose in our sure hands?
When did these racing streams
Carve depthless caves beneath our feet?
And how did this scene stagger
And shift to make fraught our deft lies
In the places where youth will meet,
In the lands of our proud dreams?
Where, among all you before me,
Are the faces I once knew?

Words etched into the wall,
K'rul Belfry, Darujhistan

In the battle that saw Theradas Buhn blooded, a Merude cutlass had laid open his right cheek, snapping the bone beneath the eye and cutting through maxilla and the upper half of his mandible. The savage wound had been slow to heal, and the thread that had been used to seal the gaping hole into his mouth had festered the flesh before his comrades could return the warrior to a nearby Hiroth encampment, where a healer had done what she could – driving out the infection, knitting the bones. The result was a long, crooked scar within a seamed concave depression on that side of his face, and a certain flat look to his eyes that hinted of unseen wounds that would never heal.

Trull Sengar sat with the others five paces from the edge of the ice-field, watching Theradas as he paced back and forth along the crusted line of ice and snow, the red-tipped fox fur of his cloak flashing in the gusting wind. The Arapay lands were behind them now, and with them the grudging hospitality of that subjugated Edur tribe. The Hiroth warriors were alone, and before them stretched a white, shattered landscape.

It looked lifeless, but the Arapay had spoken of night hunters, strange, fur-shrouded killers who came out of the darkness wielding jagged blades of black iron. They took body parts as trophies, to the point of leaving limbless, headless torsos in their wake. None had ever been captured, and the bodies of those who fell were never left where they lay.

Even so, they tended to prey only upon paired Edur hunters. More formidable groups were generally left alone. The Arapay called them Jheck, which meant, roughly, standing wolves.

'There are eyes upon us,' Theradas pronounced in his thick, blunted voice.

Fear Sengar shrugged. 'The ice wastes are not as lifeless as they appear. Hares, foxes, ground owls, white wolves, bears, aranag—'

'The Arapay spoke of huge beasts,' Rhulad cut in. 'Brown-furred and tusked – we saw the ivory—'

'Old ivory, Rhulad,' Fear said. 'Found in the ice. It is likely such beasts are no more.'

'The Arapay say otherwise.'

Theradas grunted. 'And they live in fear of the ice wastes, Rhulad, and so have filled them with nightmare beasts and demons. It is this: we will see what we see. Are you done your repasts? We are losing daylight.'

'Yes,' Fear said, rising, 'we should go on.'

Rhulad and Midik Buhn moved out to the flanks. Both wore bear furs, black and silver-collared. Their hands, within fur-lined gauntlets – Arapay gifts – were wrapped round the long spears they used as walking sticks, testing the packed snow before them with each step. Theradas moved to point, fifteen paces ahead, leaving
Trull, Fear and Binadas travelling as the core group, pulling the two sleds packed with leather satchels filled with supplies.

It was said that, further out in the wastes, there was water beneath the ice, salt-laden remnants from an inland sea, and cavernous pockets hidden beneath thin-skin mantles of snow. Treachery waited underfoot, forcing them to travel slowly.

The wind swept down upon them, biting at exposed skin, and they were forced to lean forward against its gusting, frigid blasts.

Despite the furs enshrouding him, Trull felt the shock of that sudden cold, a force mindless and indifferent, yet eager to steal. Flooding his air passages in a numbing assault. And within that current, a faint smell of death.

The Edur wrapped swaths of wool about their faces, leaving the barest of slits for their eyes. Conversations were quickly abandoned, and they walked in silence, the crunch of their fur-lined moccasins muffled and distant.

The sun's warmth and turn of season could not win the war in this place. The snow and ice rose on the wind to glitter overhead, mocking the sun itself with twin mirror images, leading Trull to suspect that the wind held close to the ground, whilst high overhead the suspended ice crystals hovered unmoving, inured to the passing of seasons, of years.

He tilted his head to stare upward for a moment, wondering if that glistening, near-opaque canopy above them held the frozen memories of the past, minute images locked in each crystal, bearing witness to all that had occurred below. A multitude of fates, perhaps reaching back to when there was sea, in place of the ice. Did unknown creatures ply the waters in arcane, dugout canoes all those thousands of years ago? Would they one day become these Jheck?

The Letherii spoke of Holds, that strange pantheon of elements, and among them there was the Hold of Ice. As if winter was born of sorcery, as if ice and snow were instruments of wilful destruction. Something of that notion was present in Edur legends as well. Ice plunging down to steal the land that was soaked in Tiste blood, the brutal theft of hard-won territories committed as an act of vengeance, perhaps the gelid flowering of some curse uttered in a last breath, a final defiance.

The sentiment, then – if one such existed – was of old enmity. Ice was a thief, of life, land and righteous reward. Bound in death and blood, an eternal prison. From all this, it could earn hatred.

They continued through the day, moving slowly but steadily, through jumbled fields of broken, upthrust shards of ice that in the distance seemed simply white, but when neared was revealed to possess countless shades of greens, blues and browns. They crossed flats of wind-sculpted, hard-packed snow that formed rippled patterns as smooth as sand. Strange fault lines where unseen forces had sheered the ice, pushing one side up against the other, grinding opposing paths as if the solid world beneath them jostled in wayward migration.

Towards late afternoon, a muted shout from Theradas halted them. Trull, who had been walking with his eyes on the ground before him, looked up at the muffled sound and saw that Theradas was standing before something, gesturing them forward with a fur-wrapped hand. A few moments later they reached his side.

A broad crevasse cut across their path, the span at least fifteen paces. The sheer walls of ice swept down into darkness, and from its depths rose a strange smell.

'Salt,' Binadas said after pulling away his face-covering. 'Tidal pools.'

Rhulad and Midik joined them from the flanks. 'It seems to stretch to the very horizon,' Rhulad said.

'The break looks recent,' Binadas observed, crouching at the edge. 'As if the surface is shrinking.'

'Perhaps summer has managed a modest alteration to these wastes,' Fear mused. 'We have passed sealed faults that might be the remnant scars from similar wounds in the past.'
‘How will we cross?’ Midik asked.

‘I could draw shadows from below,’ Binadas said, then shook his head, ‘but the notion makes me uneasy. If there are spirits within, they might well prove unruly. There are layers of sorcery here, woven in the snow and ice, and they do not welcome Emurlahn.’

‘Get out the ropes,’ Fear said.

‘Dusk approaches.’

‘If necessary we will camp below.’

Trull shot Fear a look. ‘What if it closes whilst we are down there?’

‘I do not think that likely,’ Fear said. ‘Besides, we will remain unseen this night, hidden as we will be in the depths. If there are indeed beasts in this land – though we’ve seen no true sign as yet – then I would rather we took every opportunity to avoid them.’

Wet pebbles skidded under his moccasins as Trull alighted, stepping clear of the ropes. He looked around, surprised at the faint green glow suffusing the scene. They were indeed on a seabed. Salt had rotted the ice at the edges, creating vast caverns crowded with glittering pillars. The air was cold, turgid and rank.

Off to one side Midik and Rhulad had drawn bundles of wood out from a pack and were preparing a cookfire. Binadas and Fear were reloading the sleds to keep the food satchels off the wet ground, and Theradas had set off to scout the caverns.

Trull strode to a shallow pool and crouched down at its edge. The saline water swarmed with tiny grey shrimps. Barnacles crowded the waterline.

‘The ice is dying.’

At Fear’s words behind him, Trull rose and faced his brother. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘The salt gnaws its flesh. We are at the lowest region of the ancient seabed, I believe. Where the last of the water gathered, then slowly evaporated. Those columns of salt are all that remains. If the entire basin was like this place, then the canopy of ice would have collapsed—’

‘Perhaps it does just that,’ Binadas suggested, joining them. ‘In cycles over thousands of years. Collapse, then the salt begins its work once again.’

Trull stared into the gloomy reaches. ‘I cannot believe those pillars can hold up all this ice. There must be a cycle of collapse, as Binadas has said.’ His eyes caught movement, then Theradas emerged, and Trull saw that the warrior had his sword out.

‘There is a path,’ Theradas said. ‘And a place of gathering. We are not the first to have come down here.’

Rhulad and Midik joined them. No-one spoke for a time.

Then Fear nodded and asked, ‘How recent are the signs, Theradas?’

‘Days.’

‘Binadas and Trull, go with Theradas to this place of gathering. I will remain here with the Unblooded.’

The path began twenty paces in from the crevasse, a trail cleared of cobbles and detritus that wound between the rough, crystalline columns of salt. Melt water dripped from the rotting ceiling in a steady downpour. Theradas led them onward another thirty paces, where the path ended at the edge of a vast roughly domed expanse devoid of pillars.

Near the centre squatted a low, misshapen altar stone. Votive offerings surrounded it – shells, mostly, among which the odd piece of carved ivory was visible. Yet Trull spared it but a momentary glance, for his gaze had
been drawn to the far wall.

A sheer plane of ice a hundred paces or more across, rising in a tilted overhang – a wall in which countless beasts had been caught in mid-stampede, frozen in full flight. Antlers projected from the ice, heads and shoulders – still solid and immobile – and forelegs lifted or stretched forward. Frost-rimed eyes dully reflected the muted blue-green light. Deeper within, the blurred shapes of hundreds more.

Stunned by the vista, Trull slowly walked closer, round the altar, half expecting at any moment to see the charging beasts burst into sudden motion, onrushing, to crush them all beneath countless hoofs.

As he neared, he saw heaped bodies near the base, beasts that had fallen out from the retreating ice, had thawed, eventually collapsing into viscid pools.

Tiny black flies rose in clouds from the decaying flesh and hide, swarmed towards Trull as if determined to defend their feast. He halted, waved his hands until they dispersed and began winging back to the rotting carcasses. The beasts – caribou – had been running on snow, a packed layer kneedeep above the seabed. He could still see the panic in their eyes – and there, smeared behind an arm's length of ice, the head and shoulders of an enormous wolf, silver-haired and amber-eyed, running alongside a caribou, shoulder to shoulder. The wolf's head was raised, jaws open, close to the victim's neck. Canines as long as Trull's thumb gleamed beneath peeled-back lips.

Nature's drama, life unheeding of the cataclysm that rushed upon it from behind – or above. The brutal hand of a god as indifferent as the beasts themselves.

Binadas came to his side. 'This was born of a warren,' he said.

Trull nodded. Sorcery. Nothing else made sense. 'A god.'

'Perhaps, but not necessarily so, brother. Some forces need only be unleashed. A natural momentum then burgeons.'

'The Hold of Ice,' Trull said. 'Such as the Letherii describe in their faith.'

'The Hand of the Watcher,' Binadas said, 'who waited until the war was done before striding forward to unleash his power.'

Trull had thought himself more knowledgeable than most Edur warriors regarding the old legends of their people. With Binadas's words echoing in his head, however, he felt woefully ignorant. 'Where have they gone?' he asked. 'Those powers of old? Why do we dwell as if... as if ahne?'

His brother shrugged, ever reluctant to surrender his reserve, his mindful silence. 'We remain alone,' he finally said, 'to preserve the sanctity of our past.'

Trull considered this, his gaze travelling over the tableau before him, those dark, murky lives that could not outrun their doom, then said, 'Our cherished truths are vulnerable.'

'To challenge, yes.'

'And the salt gnaws at the ice beneath us, until our world grows perilously thin beneath our feet.'

'Until what was frozen ... thaws.'

Trull took a step closer to the one of the charging caribou. 'What thaws in turn collapses and falls to the ground. And rots, Binadas. The past is covered in flies.'

His brother walked towards the altar, and said, 'The ones who kneel before this shrine were here only a few days ago.'

'They did not come the way we did.'

'No doubt there are other paths into this underworld.'
Trull glanced over at Theradas, only now recalling his presence. The warrior stood at the threshold, his breath pluming in the air.

'We should return to the others,' Binadas said. 'We have far to walk tomorrow.'

The night passed, damp, cold, the melt water ceaselessly whispering. Each Edur stood watch in turn, wrapped in furs and weapons at the ready. But there was nothing to see in the dull, faintly luminescent light. Ice, water and stone, death, hungry motion and impermeable bones, a blind triumvirate ruling a gelid realm.

Just before dawn the company rose, ate a quick meal, then Rhulad clambered up the ropes, trusting to the spikes driven into the ice far overhead, about two-thirds of the way, where the fissure narrowed in one place sufficient to permit a cross-over to the north wall. Beyond that point, Rhulad began hammering new spikes into the ice. Splinters and shards rained down on the waiters below for a time, then there came a distant shout from Rhulad. Midik went to the ropes and began climbing, while Trull and Fear bound the food packs to braided leather lines. The sleds would be pulled up last.

'Today,' Binadas said, 'we will have to be careful. They will know we were here, that we found their shrine.'

Trull glanced over. 'But we did not desecrate it.'

'Perhaps our presence alone was sufficient outrage, brother.'

The sun was above the horizon by the time the Edur warriors were assembled on the other side of the crevasse, the sleds loaded and ready. The sky was clear and there was no wind, yet the air was bitter cold. The sun's fiery ball was flanked on either side by smaller versions – sharper and brighter than last time, as if in the course of the night just past the world above them had completed its transformation from the one they knew to something strange and forbidding, inimical to life.

Theradas in the lead once more, they set out.

Ice crunching underfoot, the hiss and clatter of the antler-rimmed sled runners, and a hissing sound both close and distant, as if silence had itself grown audible, a sound that Trull finally understood was the rush of his own blood, woven in and around the rhythm of his breath, the drum of his heart. The glare burned his eyes. His lungs stung with every rush of air.

The Edur did not belong in this landscape. The Hold of Ice. Feared by the Letherii. Stealer of life – why has Harmon Mosag sent us here?

Theradas halted and turned about. 'Wolf tracks,' he said, 'heavy enough to break through the crust of snow.'

They reached him, stopped the sleds. Trull drew the harness from his aching shoulders.

The tracks cut across their route, heading west. They were huge.

'These belong to a creature such as the one we saw in the ice last night,' Binadas said. 'What do they hunt? We've seen nothing.'

Fear grunted, then said, 'That does not mean much, brother. We are not quiet travellers, with these sleds.'

'Even so,' Binadas replied, 'herds leave sign. We should have come upon something, by now.'

They resumed the journey.

Shortly past midday Fear called a halt for another meal. The plain of ice stretched out flat and featureless on all sides.

'There's nothing to worry about out here,' Rhulad said, sitting on one of the sleds. 'We can see anyone coming ... or anything, for that matter. Tell us, Fear, how much farther will we go? Where is this gift that Hannan Mosag wants us to find?'

'Another day to the north,' Fear replied.
'If it is indeed a gift,' Trull asked, 'who is offering it?'
'I do not know.'
No-one spoke for a time.
Trull studied the hard-packed snow at his feet, his unease deepening. Something ominous hung in the still, frigid air. Their solitude suddenly seemed threatening, absence a promise of unknown danger. Yet he was among blood kin, among Hiroth warriors. Thus.

Still, why does this gift stink of death?

Another night. The tents were raised, a meal cooked, then the watches were set. Trull's was first. He walked the perimeter of their camp, spear in hand, in a continuous circuit in order to keep awake. The food in his stomach made him drowsy, and the sheer emptiness of the ice wastes seemed to project a force that dulled concentration. Overhead the sky was alive with strange, shifting hues that rose and fell in disconnected patterns. He had seen such things before, in the deepest winter in Hiroth lands, but never as sharp, never as flush, voicing a strange hissing song as of broken glass crunching underfoot.

When it was time, he awoke Theradas. The warrior emerged from his tent and rose, adjusting his fur cloak until it wrapped him tightly, then drawing his sword. He glared at the lively night sky, but said nothing.

Trull crawled into the tent. The air within was damp. Ice had formed on the tent walls, etching maps of unknown worlds on the stretched, waxy fabric. From outside came the steady footsteps of Theradas as he walked his rounds. The sound followed Trull into sleep.

Disjointed dreams followed. He saw Mayen, naked in the forest, settling down atop a man, then writhing with hungry lust. He stumbled closer, ever seeking to see that man's face, to discover who it was – and instead he found himself lost, the forest unreadable, unrecognizable, a sensation he had never experienced before, and it left him terrified. Trembling on his knees in the wet loam, while from somewhere beyond he could hear her cries of pleasure, bestial and rhythmic.

And desire rose within him. Not for Mayen, but for what she had found, in her wild release, closing down into the moment, into the present, future and past without meaning. A moment unmindful of consequences. His hunger became a pain within him, lodged like a broken knife-tip in his chest, cutting with each ragged breath, and in his dream he cried out, as if answering Mayen's own voice, and he heard her laugh with recognition. A laugh inviting him to join her world.

Mayen, his brother's betrothed. A detached part of his mind remained cool and objective, almost sardonic in its self-regard. Understanding the nature of this web, this sideways envy and his own burgeoning appetites.

Edur males were slow to such things. It was the reason betrothal and marriage followed at least a decade – often two – of full adulthood. Edur women arrived at their womanly hungers far earlier in their lives. It was whispered, among the men, that they often made use of the Letherii slaves, but Trull doubted the truth of that. It seemed ... inconceivable.

The detached self was amused by that, as if derisive of Trull's own naivety.

He awoke chilled, weak with doubts and confusion, and lay for a time in the pale half-light that preceded dawn, watching his breath plume in the close air of the tent.

Something gnawed at him, but it was a long time before he realized what it was. No footsteps.

Trull scrambled from the tent, stumbling on the snow and ice, and straightened.

It was Rhulad's watch. Near the dead fire, the hunched, bundled form of his brother, seated with hooded head bowed.

Trull strode up to stand behind Rhulad. Sudden rage took him with the realization that his brother slept. He lifted his spear into both hands, then swung the butt end in a snapping motion that connected with the side of
Rhulad's head.

A muffled crack that sent his brother pitching to one side. Rhulad loosed a piercing shriek as he sprawled on the hard-packed snow, then rolled onto his back, scrabbling for his sword.

Trull's spear-point was at his brother's neck. 'You slept on your watch!' he hissed.

'I did not!'

'I saw you sleeping! I walked right up to you!'

'I did not!' Rhulad scrambled to his feet, one hand held against the side of his head.

The others were emerging now from their tents. Fear stared at Trull and Rhulad for a moment, then turned to the packs.

Trull was trembling, drawing deep, frigid breaths. For a moment, it struck him how disproportionate his anger was, then the magnitude of the risk flooded through him yet again.

'We have had visitors,' Fear announced, rising and scanning the frozen ground. 'They left no tracks—'

'How do you know, then?' Rhulad demanded.

'Because all our food is gone, Rhulad. It seems we shall grow hungry for a time.'

Theradas swore and began a wider circuit, seeking a trail.

_They were among us. The Jheck. They could have killed us all where we slept. All because Rhulad will not grasp what it is to be a warrior._ There was nothing more to be said, and all knew it.

Except for Rhulad. 'I wasn't sleeping! I swear it! Fear, you have to believe me! I simply sat down for a moment to rest my legs. I saw no'one!'

'Behind closed lids,' Theradas growled, 'that's not surprising.'

'You think I'm lying, but I'm not! I'm telling the truth, I swear it!'

'Never mind,' Fear said. 'It is done. From now on, we will double the watch.'

Rhulad walked towards Midik. 'You believe me, don't you?'

Midik Buhn turned away. 'It was a battle just waking you for your watch, Rhulad,' he said, his tone both sad and weary.

Rhulad stood as if in shock, the pain of what he saw as betrayal clear and deep-struck on his face. His lips thinned, jaw muscles bunching, and he slowly turned away.

_The bastards were in our camp. Hannan Mosag's faith in us..._

'Let us strike the tents,' Fear said, 'and be on our way.'

Trull found himself scanning the horizon in an endless sweep, his sense of vulnerability at times near overwhelming. They were being watched, tracked. The emptiness of the landscape was a lie, somehow. Possibly there was sorcery at work, although this did not – could not – excuse Rhulad's failing.

Trust was gone, and Trull well knew that Rhulad's future would now be dominated by the effort to regain it. A lapse, and the young man's future path awaited him, deep-rutted and inevitable. A private journey beset by battle, each step resisted by a host of doubts, real and imagined – the distinction made no difference any more. Rhulad would see in his brothers and friends an unbroken succession of recriminations. Every gesture, every word, every glance. And, the tragedy was, he would not be far from the truth.

This would not be kept from the village. Sengar shame or not, the tale would come out, sung with quiet glee
among rivals and the spiteful – and, given the opportunity, there were plenty of those to be found. A stain that claimed them all, the entire Sengar line.

They moved on. Northward, through the empty day.

Late in the afternoon, Theradas caught sight of something ahead, and moments later the others saw it as well. A glimmer of reflected sunlight, tall and narrow and angular, rising from the flat waste. Difficult to judge its size, but Trull sensed that the projection was substantial, and unnatural.

'That is the place,' Fear said. 'Hannan Mosag's dreams were true. We shall find the gift there.'

'Then let us be about it,' Theradas said, setting off.

The spar grew steadily before them. Cracks appeared in the snow and ice underfoot, the surface sloping upward the closer they approached. The shard had risen up from the deep, cataclysmically, a sudden upthrust that had sent wagon-sized chunks of ice into the air, to crash and tumble down the sides. Angular boulders of mud, now frozen and rimed, had rolled across the snow and ringed the area in a rough circle.

Prismatic planes caught and split the sunlight within the spar. The ice in that towering shard was pure and clear.

At the base of the fissured up-welling – still thirty or more paces from the spar – the group halted. Trull slipped out from the sled harness, Binadas following suit.

Theradas, Midik, stay here and guard the sleds,' Fear said. 'Trull, draw your spear from its sling. Binadas, Rhulad, to our flanks. Let's go.'

They climbed the slope, winding their way between masses of ice and mud.

A foul smell filled the air, of old rot and brine.

Binadas hissed warningly, then said, 'The spirit Hannan Mosag called up from the ocean deep has been here, beneath the ice. This is its handiwork, and the sorcery lingers.'

'Emurlahn?' Trull asked.

'No.'

They came to the base of the spar. Its girth surpassed that of thousand-year-old Blackwood trees. Countless planes rose in twisted confusion, a mass of sharp, sheered surfaces in which the setting sun's red light flowed thick as blood.

Fear pointed. 'There. The gift.'

And now Trull saw it. Faint and murky, the smudged form of a two-handed sword, bell-hilted, its blade strangely fractured and mottled – although perhaps that effect was created by the intervening thickness of ice.

'Binadas, weave Emurlahn into Trull's spear. As much as you can – this will take many, many shadows.'

Their brother frowned. 'Take? In what way?'

'Shattering the ice will destroy them. Annihilation is demanded, to free the gift. And remember, do not close your unguarded hand about the grip, once the weapon comes free. And keep the wraiths from attempting the same, for attempt it they will. With desperate resolve.'

'What manner of sword is this?' Trull whispered.

Fear did not answer.

'If we are to shatter this spar,' Binadas said after a moment, 'all of you should stand well clear of myself and Trull.'
'We shall not be harmed,' Fear said. 'Hannan Mosag's vision was clear on this.'

'And how far did that vision go, brother?' Trull asked. 'Did he see our return journey?'

Fear shook his head. 'To the shattering, to the fall of the last fragment of ice. No further.'

'I wonder why?'

'This is not a time for doubt, Trull,' Fear said.

'Isn't it? It would seem that this is precisely the time for doubt.'

His brothers faced him.

Trull looked away. 'This feels wrong.'

'Have you lost your courage?' Rhulad snapped. 'We have walked all this way, and now you voice your doubts?'

'What sort of weapon is this gift? Who fashioned it? We know nothing of what we are about to release.'

'Our Warlock King has commanded us,' Fear said, his expression darkening. 'What would you have us do, Trull?'

'I don't know.' He turned to Binadas. 'Is there no means of prying the secrets loose?'

'I will know more, I think, when we have freed the sword.'

Fear grunted. 'Then begin, Binadas.'

They were interrupted by a shout from Theradas. 'A wolf!' he cried, pointing to the south.

The beast was barely visible, white-furred against the snow, standing motionless a thousand or more paces distant, watching them.

'Waste no more time,' Fear said to Binadas.

Shadows spun from where Binadas was standing, blue stains crawling out across the snow, coiling up the shaft of the Blackwood spear in Trull's hands, where they seemed to sink into the glossy wood. The weapon felt no different through the thick fur of his gauntlets, but Trull thought he could hear something new, a keening sound that seemed to reverberate in his bones. It felt like terror.

'No more,' Binadas gasped.

Trull glanced at his brother, saw the pallor of his face, the glistening sweat on his brow. 'They are resisting this?'

Binadas nodded. 'They know they are about to die.'

'How can wraiths die?' Rhulad demanded. 'Are they not already ghosts? The spirits of our ancestors?'

'Not ours,' Binadas replied, but did not elaborate, gesturing instead towards Trull. 'Strike at the ice, brother.'

Trull hesitated. He looked round over his left shoulder, searched until he found the distant wolf. It had lowered its head, legs gathering under it. 'Daughter Dusk,' he whispered, 'it's about to charge.' Below, Theradas and Midik were readying their spears.

'Now, Trull!'

Fear's bellow startled him, so that he almost dropped the spear. Jaw clenching, he faced the spar once more, then slashed the iron spear-head against the ice.
Even as the weapon whipped forward, Trull's peripheral vision caught motion on all sides, as figures seemed to rise from the very snow itself.

Then the spar exploded into blinding, white mist.

Sudden shouts.

Trull felt a savage wrench on the spear in his hands, the Blackwood ringing like iron as countless wraiths were torn free. Their death-cries filled his skull. Stumbling, he tightened his grip, striving to see through the cloud.

Weapons clashed.

An antler clawed for his face, each tine carved into a barbed point tipped with quartzite. Trull reeled back, flinging the spear shaft into the antler's path. Trapping it. He twisted the spear round, reversing grip, and succeeded in forcing the attacker into releasing the antler. It spun away to one side. An upward slash with the spear, and Trull felt the iron blade tear through hide and flesh, clattering along ribs before momentarily springing free, to connect hard against the underside of a jaw.

The scene around him was becoming more visible. They were beset by savages, small and bestial, wearing white-skinned hides, faces hidden behind flat white masks. Wielding claw-like antler weapons and short stabbing spears with glittering stone points, the Jheck swarmed on all sides.

Fear was holding three at bay, and behind him stood the sword, upright and freed from the ice, its point jammed into the frozen ground. It seemed the Jheck were desperate to claim it.

Trull struck at the closest of Fear's opponents, iron tip punching deep into the savage's neck. Blood sprayed, jetted down the spear-shaft. He tore the weapon loose, in time to see the last of the Jheck in front of Fear wheel away, mortally wounded by a sword-thrust.

Spinning round, Trull saw Binadas go down beneath a mass of Jheck. Shadows then enveloped the writhing figures.

Rhulad was nowhere to be seen.

Down below, Theradas and Midik had met the wolf's charge, and the huge beast was on its side, skewered by spears, legs kicking even as Theradas stepped in with his broad-bladed cutlass. Two more wolves were closing in, alongside them a half-dozen Jheck.

Another score of the savages were ascending the slope.

Trull readied his weapon.

Nearby, Binadas was climbing free of a mound of corpses. He was sheathed in blood, favouring his right side.

'Behind us, Binadas,' Fear commanded. 'Trull, get on my left. Quickly.'

'Where is Rhulad?'

Fear shook his head.

As Trull moved to his brother's left he scanned the bodies sprawled on the snow. But they were all Jheck. Even so, the belief struck him hard as a blow to his chest. They were going to die here. They were going to fail.

The savages on the slope charged.

Antlers flew from their hands, dagger-sharp tines flashing as the deadly weapons spun end over end.

Trull shouted, warding with his spear as he ducked beneath the whirling onslaught. One flew past his guard, a tine clipping his left knee. He gasped at the pain and felt the sudden spurt of blood beneath his leggings, but
his leg held his weight and he remained upright.

Behind the flung weapons, the Jheck arrived in a rush.

A dozen heartbeats on the defensive, then the Edur warriors found openings for counter-attacks almost simultaneously. Sword and spear bit flesh, and two of the Jheck were down.

A shriek from behind Trull and Fear, and the savages recoiled, then in unison darted to their right—
—as Rhulad leapt into their midst, the long, bell-hilted sword in his hands.

A wild slash, and a Jheck head pitched away from shoulders to bounce and roll down the slope.

Another chop, a gush of blood.

Both Fear and Trull rushed to close with the combatants—
—even as stabbing spears found their way into Rhulad from all sides. He shrieked, blood-slick blade wavering over his head. Then he sagged. A shove toppled him onto his back, the sword still in his hands.

The surrounding Jheck darted away, then ran down the slope, weapons dropping or flung aside in sudden panic.

Trull arrived, skidding on the blood-slick ice, the wound in his leg forgotten as he knelt at Rhulad's side.

'They're withdrawing,' Fear said between harshly drawn breaths, moving to stand guard before Trull and Rhulad.

Numb, Trull tore off a gauntlet and set his hand against Rhulad's neck, seeking a pulse.

Binadas staggered over, settling down opposite Trull. 'How does he fare, brother?'

Trull looked up, stared until Binadas glanced up and locked gazes.

'Rhulad is dead,' Trull said, dropping his eyes and seeing now, for the first time, the massive impaling wounds punched into his brother's torso, the smear of already freezing blood on the furs, smelling bitter urine and pungent faeces.

'Theradas and Midik are coming,' Fear said. 'The Jheck have fled.' He then set off, round towards the back of the rise.

But that makes no sense. They had us. There were too many of them. None of this makes sense. Rhulad. He's dead. Our brother is dead.

A short time later, Fear returned, crouched down beside him, and tenderly reached out... to take the sword. Trull watched Fear's hands close about Rhulad's where they still clutched the leather-wrapped grip. Watched, as Fear sought to pry those dead fingers loose.

And could not.

Trull studied that fell weapon. The blade was indeed mottled, seemingly forged of polished iron and black shards of some harder, glassier material, the surface of both cracked and uneven. Splashes of blood were freezing black here and there, like a fast-spreading rot.

Fear sought to wrench the sword free.

But Rhulad would not release it.

'Hannan Mosag warned us,' Binadas said, 'did he not? Do not allow your flesh to touch the gift.'

'But he's dead,' Trull whispered.
Dusk was swiftly closing round them, the chill in the air deepening.

Theradas and Midik arrived. Both were wounded, but neither seriously so. They were silent as they stared down on Rhulad.

Fear leaned back, having reached some sort of decision. He was silent a moment longer, slowly pulling on his gauntlets. Then he straightened. 'Carry him – sword and all – down to the sleds. We will wrap body and blade together. Releasing the gift from our brother's hands is for Hannan Mosag to manage, now.'

No-one else spoke.

Fear studied each of them in turn, then said, 'We travel through this night. I want us out of these wastes as soon as possible.' He looked down on Rhulad once more. 'Our brother is blooded. He died a warrior of the Hiroth. His shall be a hero's funeral, one that all the Hiroth shall remember.'

In the wake of numbness came ... other things. Questions. But what was the point of those? Any answers that could be found were no better than suppositions, born of uncertainties vulnerable to countless poisons – that host of doubts even now besieging Trull's thoughts. Where had Rhulad disappeared to? What had he sought to achieve by charging into that knot of Jheck savages? And he had well understood the prohibition against taking up the gift, yet he had done so none the less.

So much of what happened seemed ... senseless.

Even in his final act of extremity, Rhulad answers not the loss of trust under which he laboured. No clean gesture, this messy end. Fear called him a hero, but Trull suspected the motivation behind that claim. A son of Tomad Sengar had failed in his duties on night watch. And now was dead, the sacrifice itself marred with incomprehensible intentions.

The questions led Trull nowhere, and faded to a new wave, one that sickened him, clenching at his gut with spasms of anguish. There had been bravery in that last act. If nothing else. Surprising bravery, when Trull had, of his brother Rhulad, begun to suspect ... otherwise. I doubted him. In every way, I doubted him.

Into his heart whispered ... guilt, a ghost and a ghost's voice, growing monstrous with taloned hands tightening, ever tightening, until his soul began to scream. A piercing cry only Trull could hear, yet a sound that threatened to drive him mad.

And through it all, a more pervasive sense, a hollowness deep within him. The loss of a brother. The face that would never again smile, the voice that Trull would never again hear. There seemed no end to the layers of loss settling dire and heavy upon him.

He helped Fear wrap Rhulad and the sword in a waxed canvas groundsheet, hearing Midik's weeping as if from a great distance, listening to Binadas talk as he bound wounds and drew upon Emurlahn to quicken healing. As the stiff folds closed over Rhulad's face, Trull's breath caught in a ragged gasp, and he flinched back as Fear tightened the covering with leather straps.

'It is done,' Fear murmured. 'Death cannot be struggled against, brother. It ever arrives, defiant of every hiding place, of every frantic attempt to escape. Death is every mortal's shadow, his true shadow, and time is its servant, spinning that shadow slowly round, until what stretched behind one now stretches before him.'

'You called him a hero.'

'I did, and it was not an empty claim. He went to the other side of the rise, which is why we did not see him, and discovered Jheck seeking the sword by subterfuge.'

Trull looked up.

'I needed answers of my own, brother. He killed two on that side of the hill, yet lost his weapon doing so. Others were coming, I imagine, and so Rhulad must have concluded he had no choice. The Jheck wanted the sword. They would have to kill him to get it. Trull, it is done. He died, blooded and brave. I myself came upon the corpses beyond the rise, before I came back to you and Binadas.'
All my doubts ... the poisons of suspicion, in all their foul flavours – Daughter Dusk take me – but I have drunk deep.

'Trull, we need you and your skills with that spear in our wake,' Fear said. 'Both Binadas and Rhulad here will have to be pulled on the sleds, and for this Theradas and I will be needed. Midik takes point.'

Trull blinked confusedly. 'Binadas cannot walk?'

'His hip is broken, and he has not the strength left to heal it.'

Trull straightened. 'Do you think they will pursue?' 'Yes,' Fear said.

Their flight began. Darkness swept down upon them, and a wind began blowing, lifting high the fine-grained snow until the sky itself was grey-white and lowering. The temperature dropped still further, as if with vicious intent, until even the furs they wore began to fail them.

Favouring his wounded leg, Trull jogged twenty paces behind the sleds – they were barely visible through the wind-whipped snow. The blood-frosted spear was in his grip, a detail he confirmed every few moments since his fingers had gone numb, but this did little to encourage him. The enemy might well be all around him, just beyond the range of his vision, padding through the darkness, only moments from rushing in.

He would have no time to react, and whatever shout of warning he managed would be torn away by the wind, and his companions would hear nothing. Nor would they return for his body. The gift must be delivered.

Trull ran on, constantly scanning to either side, occasionally twisting round to look behind, seeing nothing but faint white. The rhythmic stab of pain in his knee cut through a growing, deadly lassitude, the seep of exhaustion slowing his shivering beneath the furs, dragging at his limbs.

Dawn's arrival was announced by a dull, reluctant surrender of the pervasive gloom – there was no break in the blizzard's onslaught, no rise in temperature. Trull had given up his vigil. He simply ran on, one foot in front of the other, his ice-clad moccasins the entire extent of his vision. His hands had grown strangely warm beneath the gauntlets, a remote warmth, pooled somewhere beyond his wrists. Something about that vaguely disturbed him.

Hunger had faded, as had the pain in his knee.

A tingling unease, and Trull looked up.

The sleds were nowhere in sight. He gasped bitter air, slowed his steps, blinking in an effort to see through the ice crystals on his lashes. The muted daylight was fading. He had run through the day, mindless as a millstone, and another night was fast approaching. And he was lost.

Trull dropped the spear. He cried out in pain as he wheeled his arms, seeking to pump more blood into his cold, stiff muscles. He drew his fingers into fists within the gauntlets, and was horrified by nearly failing at so simple a task. The warmth grew wanner, then hot, then searing as if his fingers were on fire. He fought through the agony, pounding his fists on his thighs, flexing against the waves of burning pain.

He was surrounded in white, as if the physical world had been scrubbed away, eroded into oblivion by the snow and wind. Terror whispered into his mind, for he sensed that he was not alone.

Trull retrieved the spear. He studied the blowing snow on all sides. One direction seemed slightly darker than any other – the east – and he determined that he had been running due west. Following the unseen sun. And now, he needed to turn southerly.

Until his pursuers tired of their game.

He set out.

A hundred paces, and he glanced behind him, to see two wolves emerge from the blowing snow. Trull halted and spun round. The beasts vanished once more.
Heart thundering, Trull drew out his longsword and jammed it point-first into the hard-packed snow. Then he strode six paces back along his trail and readied his spear.

They came again, this time at a charge.

He had time to plant his spear and drop to one knee before the first beast was upon him. The spear shaft bowed as the iron point slammed dead-centre into the wolf's sternum. Bone and Blackwood shattered simultaneously, then it was as if a boulder hammered into Trull, throwing him back in the air. He landed on his left shoulder, to skid and roll in a spray of snow. As he tumbled, he caught sight of his left forearm, blood whipping out from the black splinters jutting from it. Then he came to a stop, up against the longsword.

Trull tugged it loose and half rose as he turned about.

A mass of white fur, black-gummed jaws stretched wide.

Bellowing, Trull slashed horizontally with the sword, falling in the wake of the desperate swing.

Iron edge sheared through bones, one set, then another.

The wolf fell onto him, its forelimbs severed halfway down and spraying blood.

Teeth closed down on the blade of his sword in a snapping frenzy.

Trull kicked himself clear, tearing his sword free of the wolf's jaws. Tumbling blood, a mass of tongue slapping onto the crusty ice in front of his face, the muscle twitching like a thing still alive. He scrambled into a crouch, then lunged towards the thrashing beast. Thrusting the sword-point into its neck.

The wolf coughed, kicking as if seeking to escape, then slumped motionless on the red snow.

Trull reeled back. He saw the first beast, lying where the spear had stolen its life before breaking. Beyond it stood three Jheck hunters – who melted back into the whiteness.

Blood was streaming down Trull's left forearm, gathering in his gauntlet. He lifted the arm and tucked it close against his stomach. Pulling the splinters would have to wait. Gasping, he set his sword down and worked his left forearm through his spear harness. Then, retrieving the sword, he set out once more.

Oblivion on all sides. In which nightmares could flower, sudden and unimpeded, rushing upon him, as fast as his terror-filled mind could conjure them into being, one after another, the succession endless, until death took him – until the whiteness slipped behind his eyes.

He stumbled on, wondering if the fight had actually occurred, unwilling to look down to confirm the wounds on his arm – fearing that he would see nothing. He could not have killed two wolves. He could not have simply chosen to face in one direction and not another, to find himself meeting that charge head-on. He could not have thrust his sword into the ground the precise number of paces behind him, as if knowing how far he would be thrown by the impact. No, he had conjured the entire battle from his own imagination. No other explanation made sense.

And so he looked down.

A mass of splinters rising like crooked spines from his forearm. A blackening sword in his right hand, tufts of white fur caught in the clotted blood near the hilt. His spear was gone.

I am fevered. The will of my thoughts has seeped out from my eyes, twisting the truth of all that I see. Even the ache in my shoulder is but an illusion.

A rush of footsteps behind him.

With a roar, Trull whipped around, sword hissing.

Blade chopping into the side of a savage's head, just above the ear. Bone buckling, blood spurting from eye and ear on that side. Figure toppling.
Another, darting in low from his right. Trull leapt back, stop-thrusting. He watched, the motion seeming
appalling slow, as the Jheck turned his stabbing spear to parry. Watched as the sword dipped under the block,
then extended once more, to slide point-first beneath the man's left collarbone.

A third attacker on his left, slashing a spear-point at Trull's eyes. He leaned back, then spun full circle,
pivoting on his right foot, and brought his sword's edge smoothly across the savage's throat. A red flood down
the Jheck's chest.

Trull completed his spin and resumed his jog, the snow stinging his eyes.

Nothing but nightmares.

He was lying motionless, the snow slowly covering him, whilst his mind ran on and on, fleeing this lie, this
empty world that was not empty, this thick whiteness that exploded into motion and colour again and again.

Attackers, appearing out of the darkness and blowing snow. Moments of frenzied fighting, sparks and the
hiss of iron and the bite of wood and stone. A succession of ambushes that seemed without end, convincing
Trull that he was indeed within a nightmare, ever folding in on itself. Each time, the Jheck appeared in threes,
ever more, and the Hiroth warrior began to believe that they were the same three, dying only to rise once
again – and so it would continue, until they finally succeeded, until they killed him.

Yet he fought on, leaving blood and bodies in his wake.

Running, snow crunching underfoot.

And then the wind fell off, sudden like a spent breath.

Patches of dark ground ahead. An unseen barrier burst across, the lurid glare of a setting sun to his right, the
languid flow of cool, damp air, the smell of mud.

And shouts. Figures off to his left, half a thousand paces distant. Brothers of the hearth, the dead welcoming
his arrival.

Gladness welling in his heart, Trull staggered towards them. He was not to be a ghost wandering for ever
alone, then. There would be kin at his side. Fear, and Binadas. And Rhulad.

Midik Buhn, and Theradas, rushing towards him.

*Brothers, all of them. My brothers—*

The sun's light wavered, rippled like water, then darkness rose up in a devouring flood.

The sleds were off to one side, their runners buried in mud. On one was a wrapped figure, around which jagged
slabs of ice had been packed and strapped in place. Binadas was propped up on the other sled, his eyes closed,
his face deeply lined with pain.

Trull slowly sat up, feeling light-headed and strangely awkward. Furs tumbled from him as he clambered to
his feet and stood, wavering, and dazedly looked around. To the west shimmered a lake, flat grey beneath the
overcast sky. The faint wind was warm and humid.

A fire had been lit, and over it was spit a scrawny hare, tended to by Midik Buhn. Off to one side stood Fear
and Theradas, facing the distant ice-fields to the east as they spoke in quiet tones.

The smell of the roasting meat drew Trull to the fire. Midik Buhn glanced up at him, then looked quickly
away, as if shamed by something.

Trull's fingers were fiercely itching, and he lifted them into view. Red, the skin peeling, but at least he had
not lost them to the cold. Indeed, he seemed intact, although his leather armour was split and cut all across his
chest and shoulders, and he could see that the quilted under-padding bore slices, here and there stained dark
red, and beneath them was the sting of shallow wounds on his body.
Not a nightmare, then, those countless attacks. He checked for his sword and found he was not wearing the belted scabbard. A moment later he spied his weapon, leaning against a pack. It was barely recognizable. The blade was twisted, the edge so battered as to make the sword little more than a club.

Footsteps, and Trull turned.

Fear laid a hand upon his shoulder. 'Trull Sengar, we did not expect to see you again. Leading the Jheck away from our path was a bold tactic, and it saved our lives.' He nodded towards the sword. 'Your weapon tells the tale. Do you know how many you defeated?'

Trull shook his head. 'No. Fear, I did not intentionally lead them away from you. I became lost in the storm.'

His brother smiled and said nothing.

Trull glanced over at Theradas. 'I became lost, Theradas Buhn.'

'It matters not,' Theradas replied in a growl.

'I believed I was dead.' Trull looked away, rubbed at his face. 'I saw you, and thought I was joining you in death. I'd expected ...' He shook his head. 'Rhulad ...'

'He was a true warrior, Trull,' Fear said. 'It is done, and now we must move on. There are Arapay on the way – Binadas managed to awaken their shamans to our plight. They will hasten our journey home.'

Trull nodded distractedly. He stared at the distant field of ice. Remembering the feel and sound beneath his moccasins, the blast of the wind, the enervating cold. The horrifying Jheck, silent hunters who claimed a frozen world as their own. They had wanted the sword. Why?

How many Jheck could those ice-fields sustain? How many had they killed? How many wives and children were left to grieve? To starve?

_There should have been five hundred of us. Then they would have left us alone._

'Over there!'

At Midik's shout Trull swung round, then faced in the direction Midik was pointing. Northward, where a dozen huge beasts strode, coming down from the ice, four-legged and brown-furred, each bearing long, curved tusks to either side of a thick, sinuous snout.

_Ponderous, majestic, the enormous creatures walked towards the lake._

_This is not our world._

A sword waited in the unyielding grip of a corpse, sheathed in waxed cloth, bound with ice. A weapon familiar with cold's implacable embrace. It did not belong in Hannan Mosag's hands.

Unless the Warlock King had changed.

_And perhaps he has._

'Come and eat, Trull Sengar,' his brother called behind him.

_Sisters have mercy on us, in the way we simply go on, and on. Would that we had all died, back there on the ice. Would that we had failed._
CHAPTER NINE

You may be written this way
Spun in strands sewn in thread
Blood woven to the child you once were
Huddled in the fold of night
And the demons beyond the corner
Of your eye stream down
A flurry of arachnid limbs
Twisting and tumbling you tight
To feed upon later.
You may be written this way
Stung senseless at the side of the road
Waylaid on the dark trail
And the recollections beyond the corner
Of your eye suckle in the mud
Dreadful fluids seeping
From improbable pasts
And all that might have been.
You would be written this way
Could you crack the carcass
And unfurl once more
The child you once were

Waylaid
Wrathen Urut

Rolled onto the beach, naked and grey, the young man lay motionless in the sand. His long brown hair was tangled, snarled with twigs and strands of sea-weed. Scaled birds pranced around the body, serrated beaks gaping in the morning heat.

They scattered at Withal's arrival, flapping into the air. Then, as three black Nachts bounded down from the verge, the birds screamed and whirled out over the waves.

Withal crouched down at the figure's side, studied it for a moment, then reached out and rolled the body onto its back.

'Wake up, lad.'

Eyes snapped open, filled with sudden terror and pain. Mouth gaped, neck stretched, and piercing screams rose into the air. The young man convulsed, legs scissoring the sand, and clawed at his scalp.

Withal leaned back on his haunches and waited.

The screams grew hoarse, were replaced by weeping. The convulsions diminished to waves of shuddering as the young man slowly curled up in the sand.

'Vet gets easier, one hopes,' Withal murmured.

Head twisted round, large, wet eyes fixing on Withal's own. 'What... where...'

'The two questions I am least able to answer, lad. Let's try the easier ones. I'm named Withal, once of the Third Meckros city. You are here – wherever here is – because my master wills it.' He rose with a grunt. 'Can you stand? He awaits you inland – not far.'

The eyes shifted away, focused on the three Nachts at the edge of the verge. 'What are those things? What's
that one doing?'

'Bhoka'ral. Nachts. Name them as you will. As I have. The one making the nest is Pule, a young male. This particular nest has taken almost a week – see how he obsesses over it, adjusting twigs just so, weaving the seaweed, going round and round with a critical eye. The older male, over there and watching Pule, is Rind. He's moments from hilarity, as you'll see. The female preening on the rock is Mape. You've arrived at a propitious time, lad. Watch.'

The nest-builder, Pule, had begun backing away from the intricate construct on the verge, black tail flicking from side to side, head bobbing. Fifteen paces from the nest, it suddenly sat, arms folded, and seemed to study the colourless sky.

The female, Mape, ceased preening, paused a moment, then ambled casually towards the nest.

Pule tensed, even as it visibly struggled to keep its gaze on the sky.

Reaching the nest, Mape hesitated, then attacked. Driftwood, grasses and twigs flew in all directions. Within moments, the nest had been destroyed in a wild frenzy, and Mape was squatting in the wreckage, urinating. Nearby, Rind was rolling about in helpless mirth.

Pule slumped in obvious dejection.

'This has happened more times than I'd care to count,' Withal said, sighing.

'How is it you speak my language?'

'I'd a smattering, from traders. My master has, it seems, improved upon it. A gift, you might say, one of a number of gifts, none of which I asked for. I suspect,' he continued, 'you will come to similar sentiments, lad. We should get going.'

Withal watched the young man struggle to his feet. 'Tall,' he observed, 'but I've seen taller.'

Pain flooded the youth's features once more and he doubled over. Withal stepped close and supported him before he toppled.

'It's ghost pain, lad. Ghost pain and ghost fear. Fight through it.'

'No! It's real! It's real, you bastard!'

Withal strained as the youth's full weight settled in his arms. 'Enough of that. Stand up!'

'It's no good! I'm dying!'

'On your feet, dammit!' A rough shake, then Withal pushed him away.

He staggered, then slowly straightened, drawing in deep, ragged breaths. He began shivering. 'It's so cold ...'

'Hood's breath, lad, it's blistering hot. And getting hotter with every day.'

Arms wrapped about himself, the young man regarded Withal. 'How long have you lived ... lived here?'

'Longer than I'd like. Some choices aren't for you to make. Not for you, not for me. Now, our master's losing patience. Follow me.'

The youth stumbled along behind him. 'You said "our".'

'Did I?'

'Where are my clothes? Where are my – no, never mind – it hurts to remember. Never mind.'
They reached the verge, withered grasses pulling at their legs as they made their way inland. The Nachts joined them, clambering and hopping, hooting and snorting as they kept pace.

Two hundred paces ahead squatted a ragged tent, the canvas sun-bleached and stained. Wafts of grey-brown smoke drifted from the wide entrance, where most of one side had been drawn back to reveal the interior.

Where sat a hooded figure.

'That's him?' the youth asked. 'That's your master? Are you a slave, then?'

'I serve,' Withal replied, 'but I am not owned.'

'Who is he?'

Withal glanced back. 'He is a god.' He noted the disbelief writ on the lad's face, and smiled wryly. 'Who's seen better days.'

The Nachts halted and huddled together in a threesome.

A last few strides across withered ground, then Withal stepped to one side. 'I found him on the strand,' he said to the seated figure, 'moments before the lizard gulls did.'

Darkness hid the Crippled God's features, as was ever the case when Withal had been summoned to an attendance. The smoke from the brazier filled the tent, seeping out to stream along the mild breeze. A gnarled, thin hand emerged from the folds of a sleeve as the god gestured. 'Closer,' he rasped. 'Sit.'

'You are not my god,' the youth said.

'Sit. I am neither petty nor overly sensitive, young warrior.'

Withal watched the lad hesitate, then slowly settle onto the ground, cross-legged, arms wrapped about his shivering frame. 'It's cold.'

'Some furs for our guest, Withal.'

'Furs? We don't have any—' He stopped when he noticed the bundled bearskin heaped beside him. He gathered it up and pushed it into the lad's hands.

The Crippled God scattered some seeds onto the brazier's coals. Popping sounds, then more smoke. 'Peace. Warm yourself, warrior, while I tell you of peace. History is unerring, and even the least observant mortal can be made to understand, through innumerable repetition. Do you see peace as little more than the absence of war? Perhaps, on a surface level, it is just that. But let me describe the characteristics of peace, my young friend. A pervasive dulling of the senses, a decadence afflicting the culture, evinced by a growing obsession with low entertainment. The virtues of extremity – honour, loyalty, sacrifice – are lifted high as shoddy icons, currency for the cheapest of labours. The longer peace lasts, the more those words are used, and the weaker they become. Sentimentality pervades daily life. All becomes a mockery of itself, and the spirit grows ... restless.'

The Crippled God paused, breath rasping. 'Is this a singular pessimism? Allow me to continue with a description of what follows a period of peace. Old warriors sit in taverns, telling tales of vigorous youth, their pasts when all things were simpler, clearer cut. They are not blind to the decay all around them, are not immune to the loss of respect for themselves, for all that they gave for their king, their land, their fellow citizens.

'The young must not be abandoned to forgetfulness. There are always enemies beyond the borders, and if none exist in truth, then one must be fashioned. Old crimes dug out of the indifferent earth. Slights and open insults, or the rumours thereof. A suddenly perceived threat where none existed before. The reasons matter not – what matters is that war is fashioned from peace, and once the journey is begun, an irresistible momentum is born.

'The old warriors are satisfied. The young are on fire with zeal. The king fears yet is relieved of domestic
pressures. The army draws its oil and whetstone. Forges blast with molten iron, the anvils ring like temple bells. Grain-sellers and armourers and clothiers and horse-sellers and countless other suppliers smile with the pleasure of impending wealth. A new energy has gripped the kingdom, and those few voices raised in objection are quickly silenced. Charges of treason and summary execution soon persuade the doubters.'

The Crippled God spread his hands. 'Peace, my young warrior, is born of relief, endured in exhaustion, and dies with false remembrance. False? Ah, perhaps I am too cynical. Too old, witness to far too much. Do honour, loyalty and sacrifice truly exist? Are such virtues born only from extremity? What transforms them into empty words, words devalued by their overuse? What are the rules of the economy of the spirit, that civilization repeatedly twists and mocks?'

He shifted slightly and Withal sensed the god's regard. 'Withal of the Third City. You have fought wars. You have forged weapons. You have seen loyalty, and honour. You have seen courage and sacrifice. What say you to all this?'

'Nothing,' Withal replied.

Hacking laughter. 'You fear angering me, yes? No need. I give you leave to speak your mind.'

'I have sat in my share of taverns,' Withal said, 'in the company of fellow veterans. A select company, perhaps, not grown so blind with sentimentality as to fashion nostalgia from times of horror and terror. Did we spin out those days of our youth? No. Did we speak of war? Not if we could avoid it, and we worked hard at avoiding it.'

'Why?'

'Why? Because the faces come back. So young, one after another. A flash of life, an eternity of death, there in our minds. Because loyalty is not to be spoken of, and honour is to be endured. Whilst courage is to be survived. Those virtues, Chained One, belong to silence.'

'Indeed,' the god rasped, leaning forward. 'Yet how they proliferate in peace! Crowed again and again, as if solemn pronouncement bestows those very qualities upon the speaker. Do they not make you wince, every time you hear them? Do they not twist in your gut, grip hard your throat? Do you not feel a building rage—'

'Aye,' Withal growled, 'when I hear them used to raise a people once more to war.'

The Crippled God was silent a moment, then he leaned back and dismissed Withal's words with a careless wave of one hand. He fixed his attention on the young warrior. 'I spoke of peace as anathema. A poison that weakens the spirit. Tell me, warrior, have you spilled blood?'

The youth flinched beneath his furs. Tremors of pain crossed his face. Then fear. 'Spilled blood? Spilled, down, so much of it – everywhere. I don’t – I can’t – oh, Daughters take me—'

'Oh no,' the Crippled God hissed, 'not the Daughters. I have taken you. Chosen you. Because your king betrayed me! Your king hungered for the power I offered, but not for conquest. No, he simply sought to make himself and his people unassailable.' Misshapen fingers curled into fists. 'Not good enough!'

The Crippled God seemed to spasm beneath his ragged blankets, then coughed wretchedly.

Some time later the hacking abated. More seeds on the coals, roiling smoke, then, 'I have chosen you, Rhulad Sengar, for my gift. Do you remember?'

Shivering, his lips strangely blue, the young warrior's face underwent a series of fraught expressions, ending on dread. He nodded. 'I died.'

'Spilled blood? Spilled, down, so much of it – everywhere. I don’t – I can’t – oh, Daughters take me—'

'Well,' the Crippled God murmured, 'every gift has a price. There are powers buried in that sword, Rhulad Sengar. Powers unimagined. But they are reluctant to yield. You must pay for them. In combat. With death. No, I should be precise in this. With your death, Rhulad Sengar.'

A gesture, and the mottled sword was in the Crippled God's hand. He tossed it down in front of the young
'Your first death is done, and as a consequence your skills – your powers – have burgeoned. But it is just the beginning. Take your weapon, Rhulad Sengar. Will your next death prove easier for you to bear? Probably not. In time, perhaps …'

Withal studied the horror on the young warrior's face, and saw beneath it the glimmer of... *ambition.*

*Hood, do not turn away.*

A long, frozen moment, during which Withal saw the ambition grow like flames behind the Tiste Edur's eyes.

*Ah. The Crippled God's chosen well. And deny it not, Withal, your hand is in this, plunged deep. So very deep.*

The smoke gusted, then spun, momentarily blinding Withal even as Rhulad Sengar reached for the sword.

A god's mercy? He was unconvinced.

In four days, the Letherii delegation would arrive. Two nights had passed since the Warlock King had called Seren, Hull and Buruk the Pale into his audience at the feast table. Buruk's spirits were high, a development that had not surprised Seren Pedac. Merchants whose interests were tempered by wisdom ever preferred the long term over speculative endeavours. There were always vultures of commerce who hungered for strife, and often profited by such discord, but Buruk the Pale was not one of them.

Contrary to the desires of those back in Letheras who had conscripted Buruk, the merchant did not want a war. And so, with Hannan Mosag's intimation that the Edur would seek peace, the tumult in Buruk's soul had eased. The issue had been taken from his hands.

If the Warlock King wanted peace, he was in for a fight. But Seren Pedac's confidence in Hannan Mosag had grown. The Edur leader possessed cunning and resilience. There would be no manipulation at the treaty, no treachery sewn into the fabric of generous pronouncements.

A weight had been lifted from her, mitigated only by Hull Beddict. He had come to understand that his desires would not be met. At least, not by Hannan Mosag. If he would have his war, it would of necessity have to come from the Letherii. And so, if he would follow that path, he would need to reverse his outward allegiances. No longer on the side of the Tiste Edur, but accreted to at least one element of the Letherii delegation – a faction characterized by betrayal and unrelenting greed.

Hull had left the village and was now somewhere out in the forest. She knew he would return for the treaty gathering, but probably not before. She did not envy him his dilemma.

With renewed energy, Buruk the Pale decided to set about selling his iron, and for this he was required to have an Acquiror accompanying him. Three Nerek trailed them as they walked up towards the forges, each carrying an ingot.

It had been raining steadily since the feast in the Warlock King's longhouse. Water flowed in turgid streams down the stony streets. Acrid clouds hung low in the vicinity of the forges, coating the wood and stone walls in oily soot. Slaves swathed in heavy rain cloaks moved to and fro along the narrow passages between compound walls.

Seren led Buruk and his servants towards a squat stone building with high, slitted windows, the entranceway three steps from ground level and flanked by Blackwood columns carved to mimic hammered bronze, complete with rivets and dents. The door was Blackwood inlaid with silver and black iron, the patterns an archaic, stylized script that Seren suspected contained shadow-wrought wards.

She turned to Buruk. 'I have to enter alone to begin with—'

The door was flung open, startling her, and three Edur rushed out, pushing past her. She stared after them, wondering at their tense expressions. A flutter of fear ran through her. 'Send the Nerek back,' she said to Buruk. 'Something's happened.'
The merchant did not argue. He gestured and the three Nerek hurried away.

Instead of entering the guild house, Seren and Buruk made their way to the centre street, seeing more Edur emerging from buildings and side alleys to line the approach to the noble quarter. No-one spoke.

'What is going on, Acquitor?'

She shook her head. 'Here is fine.' They had a clear enough view up the street, two hundred or more paces, and in the distance a procession had appeared. She counted five Edur warriors, one employing a staff as he limped along. Two others were pulling a pair of sleds across the slick stones of the street. A fourth walked slightly ahead of the others.

'Isn't that Binadas Sengar?' Buruk asked. 'The one with the stick, I mean.'

Seren nodded. He looked to be in pain, exhausted by successive layers of sorcerous healing. The warrior who walked ahead was clearly kin to Binadas. This, then, was the return of the group Hannan Mosag had sent away.

And now she saw, strapped to one of the sleds, a wrapped form – hides over pieces of ice that wept steadily down the sides. A shape more than ominous. Unmistakable.

'They carry a body,' Buruk whispered.

*Where did they go? Those bundled furs – north, then. But there's nothing up there, nothing but ice. What did the Warlock King ask of them?*

The memory of Feather Witch's divinations returned to her suddenly, inexplicably, and the chill in her bones deepened. 'Come on,' she said in a quiet tone. 'To the inner ward. I want to witness this.' She edged back from the crowd and set off.

'If they'll let us,' Buruk muttered, hurrying to catch up.

'We stay in the background and say nothing,' she instructed. 'It's likely they'll all be too preoccupied to pay us much attention.'

'I don't like this, Acquitor. Not any of it.'

She shared his dread, but said nothing.

They crossed the bridge well ahead of the procession, although it was evident that word had preceded them. The noble families were all out in the compound, motionless in the rain. Foremost among them were Tomad and Uruth, a respectful space around the two Edur and their slaves.

'It's one of the Sengar brothers,' Seren Pedac said under her breath.

Buruk heard her. 'Tomad Sengar was once a rival of Hannan Mosag's for the throne,' he muttered. 'How will he take this, I wonder?'

She glanced over at him. 'How do you know that?'

'I was briefed, Acquitor. That shouldn't surprise you, all things considered.'

The procession had reached the bridge.

'Ah.' Buruk sighed. 'The Warlock King and his K'risnan have emerged from the citadel.'

Udinaas stood a pace behind Uruth on her right, the rain running down his face.

Rhulad Sengar was dead.

He was indifferent to that fact. A young Edur eager for violence – there were plenty of those, and one fewer made little difference. That he was a Sengar virtually guaranteed that Udinaas would be tasked with dressing the corpse. He was not looking forward to that.
Three days for the ritual, including the vigil and the staining of the flesh. In his mind, he ran through possibilities in a detached sort of way, as the rain seeped down behind his collar and no doubt gathered in the hood he had not bothered to draw up over his head. If Rhulad had remained unblooded, the coins would be copper, with stone discs to cover the eyes. If blooded and killed in battle, it was probable that gold coins would be used. Letherii coins, mostly. Enough of them to ransom a prince. An extravagant waste that he found strangely delicious to contemplate.

Even so, he could already smell the stench of burning flesh.

He watched the group cross the bridge, Fear pulling the sled on which Rhulad's wrapped body had been laid. Binadas was limping badly – there must have been considerable damage, to resist the sorcerous healing that must already have been cast upon him. Theradas and Midik Buhn. And Trull Sengar, in the lead. Without the ever-present spear. So, a battle indeed.

'Udinaas, do you have your supplies?' Uruth asked in a dull voice.

'Yes, mistress, I have,' he replied, settling a hand on the leather pack slung from his left shoulder.

'Good. We will waste no time in this. You are to dress the body. No other.'

'Yes, mistress. The coals have been fired.'

'You are a diligent slave, Udinaas,' she said. 'I am pleased you are in my household.'

He barely resisted looking at her at that, confused and alarmed as he was by the admission. And had you found the Wyval blood within me, you would have snapped my neck with out a second thought. 'Thank you, mistress.'

'He died a blooded warrior,' Tomad said. 'I see it in Fear's pride.'

The Warlock King and his five apprentice sorcerors strode to intercept the party as they arrived on this side of the bridge, and Udinaas heard Uruth's gasp of outrage.

Tomad reached out to still her with one hand. 'There must be a reason for this,' he said. 'Come, we will join them.'

There was no command to remain behind, and so Udinaas and the other slaves followed Tomad and Uruth as they strode towards their sons.

Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan met the procession first. Quiet words were exchanged between the Warlock King and Fear Sengar. A question, an answer, and Hannan Mosag seemed to stagger. As one, the five sorcerors closed on him, but their eyes were on Rhulad's swathed form, and Udinaas saw a mixture of consternation, dread and alarm on their young faces.

Fear's gaze swung from the Warlock King to his father as Tomad's group arrived. 'I have failed you, Father,' he said. 'Your youngest son is dead.'

'He holds the gift,' Hannan Mosag snapped, shockingly accusatory in his tone. 'I need it, but he holds it. Was I not clear enough in my instructions, Fear Sengar?'

The warrior's face darkened. 'We were attacked, Warlock King, by the Jheck. I believe you know who and what they are—'

Tomad growled, 'I do not.'

Binadas spoke. 'They are Soletaken, Father. Able to assume the guise of wolves. It was their intention to claim the sword—'

'What sword?' Uruth asked. 'What—'

'Enough of this!' Hannan Mosag shouted.
'Warlock King,' Tomad Sengar said, stepping closer, 'Rhulad is dead. You can retrieve this gift of yours—'

'It is not so simple,' Fear cut in. 'Rhulad holds the sword still – I cannot pry his fingers from the grip.'

'It must be cut off,' Hannan Mosag said.

Uruth hissed, then shook her head. 'No, Warlock King. You are forbidden to mutilate our son. Fear, did Rhulad die as a blooded warrior?'

'He did.'

'Then the prohibitions are all the greater,' she said to Hannan Mosag, crossing her arms.

'I need that sword!'

In the fraught silence that followed that outburst, Trull Sengar spoke for the first time. 'Warlock King. Rhulad's body is still frozen. It may be, upon thawing, that his grip on the sword loosens. In any case, it seems clear the matter demands calm, reasoned discussion. It may in the end prove that our conflicting desires can be resolved by some form of compromise.' He faced his father and mother. 'It was our task, given us by the Warlock King, to retrieve a gift, and that gift is the sword Rhulad now holds. Mother, we must complete the task demanded of us. The sword must be placed in Hannan Mosag's hands.'

There was shock and horror in her voice as Uruth replied, 'You would cut off your dead brother's hands? Are you my son? I would—'

Her husband stopped her with a fierce gesture. 'Trull, I understand the difficulty of this situation, and I concur with your counsel that decisions be withheld for the time being. Warlock King, Rhulad's body must be prepared. This can be conducted without attention being accorded the hands. We have some time, then, do you agree?'

Hannan Mosag answered with a curt nod.

Trull approached Udinaas, and the slave could see the warrior's exhaustion, the old blood of countless wounds in his tattered armour. 'Take charge of the body,' he said in a quiet tone. 'To the House of the Dead, as you would any other. Do not, however, expect the widows to attend the ritual – we must needs postpone that until certain matters are resolved.'

'Yes, master,' Udinaas replied. He swung round and selected Hulad and one more of his fellow slaves. 'Help me with the sled's tethers. With solemn accord, as always.'

Both men he addressed were clearly frightened. This kind of open conflict among the Hiroth Edur was unprecedented. They seemed on the verge of panic, although Udinaas's words calmed them somewhat. There were values in ritual, and self-control was foremost among them.

Stepping past the Edur, Udinaas led his two fellow slaves to the sled.

The waxed canvas sheathing the ice had slowed the melt, although the slabs beneath it were much diminished, the edges softened and milky white.

Fear passed the harness over to Udinaas. The two other slaves helping, they began dragging it towards the large wooden structure where Edur corpses were prepared for burial. No-one stopped them.

Seren Pedac gripped Buruk's arm and began pulling him back towards the bridge. He swung her a wild look, but wisely said nothing.

They could not manage the passage unseen, and Seren felt sweat prickling on her neck and in the small of her back as she guided the merchant back towards the guest camp. They were not accosted, but their presence had without doubt been marked. The consequences of that would remain undetermined, until such time as the conflict they had witnessed was resolved.

The Nerek had extended a tarp from one of the wagons to shield the hearth they kept continually burning.
They scurried from the smoky flames as soon as Buruk and Seren arrived, quickly disappearing into their tents.

'That looks,' Buruk muttered as he edged closer to the hearth and held out his hands, 'to be serious trouble. The Warlock King was badly shaken, and I like not this talk of a gift. A sword? Some kind of sword, yes? A gift from whom? Surely not an alliance with the Jheck—'

'No,' agreed Seren, 'given that it was the Jheck with whom they fought. There's nothing else out there, Buruk. Nothing at all.'

She thought back to that scene on the other side of the bridge. Fear's brother, not Binadas, but the other one, who'd counselled reason, he ... interested her. Physically attractive, of course. Most Edur were. But there was more. There was... intelligence. And pain. Seren scowled. She was always drawn to the hurting ones.

'A sword,' Buruk mused, staring into the flames, 'of such value that Hannan Mosag contemplates mutilating a blooded warrior's corpse.'

'Doesn't that strike you as odd?' Seren asked. 'A corpse, holding on to a sword so tight even Fear Sengar cannot pull it loose?'

'Perhaps frozen?'

'From the moment of death?'

He grunted. 'I suppose not, unless it took his brothers a while to get to him.'

'A day or longer, at least. Granted, we don't know the circumstances, but that does seem unlikely, doesn't it?'

'It does.' Buruk shrugged. 'A damned Edur funeral. That won't put the Warlock King in a good mood. The delegation will arrive at precisely the wrong time.'

'I think not,' Seren said. 'The Edur have been unbalanced by this. Hannan Mosag especially. Unless there's quick resolution, we will be among a divided people.'

A quick, bitter smile. 'We?'

'Letherii, Buruk. I am not part of the delegation. Nor, strictly speaking, are you.'

'Nor Hull Beddict,' he added. 'Yet something tells me we are irredeemably bound in that net, whether it sees the light of day or sinks to the deep.'

She said nothing, because he was right.

The sled glided easily along the wet straw and Udinaas raised a boot to halt its progress alongside the stone platform. Unspeaking, the three slaves began unclasping the straps, pulling them free from beneath the body. The tarp was then lifted clear. The slabs of ice were resting on a cloth-wrapped shape clearly formed by the body it contained, and all three saw at the same time that Rhulad's jaw had opened in death, as if voicing a silent, endless scream.

Hulad stepped back. 'Errant preserve us,' he hissed.

'It's common enough, Hulad,' Udinaas said. 'You two can go, but first drag that chest over here, the one resting on the rollers.'

'Gold coins, then?'

'I am assuming so,' Udinaas replied. 'Rhulad died a blooded warrior. He was noble-born. Thus, it must be gold.'

'What a waste,' said Hulad.

The other slave, Irim, grinned and said, 'When the Edur are conquered, we should form a company, the three
of us, to loot the barrows.' He and Hulad pulled the chest along the runners.

The coals were red, the sheet of iron black with heat.

Udinaas smiled. 'There are wards in those barrows, Irim. And shadow wraiths guarding them.'

'Then we hire a mage who can dispel them. The wraiths will be gone, along with every damned Edur. Nothing but rotting bones. I dream of that day.'

Udinaas glanced over at the old man. 'And how badly Indebted are you, Irim?'

The grin faded. 'That's just it. I'd be able to pay it off. For my grandchildren, who are still in Trate. Pay it off, Udinaas. Don't you dream the same for yourself?'

'Some debts can't be paid off with gold, Irim. My dreams are not of wealth.'

'No.' Irim's grin returned. 'You just want the heart of a lass so far above you, you've not the Errant's hope of owning it. Poor Udinaas, we all shake our heads at the sadness of it.'

'Less sadness than pity, I suspect,' Udinaas said, shrugging. 'Close enough. You can go.'

'The stench lingers even now,' Hulad said. 'How can you stand it, Udinaas?'

'Inform Uruth that I have begun.'

* * *

It was not the time to be alone, yet Trull Sengar found himself just that. The realization was sudden, and he blinked, slowly making sense of his surroundings. He was in the longhouse, the place of his birth, standing before the centre post with its jutting sword-blade. The heat from the hearth seemed incapable of reaching through to his bones. His clothes were sodden.

He'd left the others outside, locked in their quiet clash of wills. The Warlock King and his need against Tomad and Uruth and their insistence on proper observance of a dead blooded warrior, a warrior who was their son. With this conflict, Hannan Mosag could lose his authority among the Tiste Edur.

_The Warlock King should have shown constraint. This could have been dealt with quietly, unknown to anyone else. How hard can it be to wrest a sword loose from a dead man's hands? And if sorcery was involved – and it certainly seemed to be – then Hannan Mosag was in his element. He had his K'risnan as well. They could have done something. And if not... then cut his fingers off. A corpse no longer housed the spirit. Death had severed the binding. Trull could feel nothing for the cold flesh beneath the ice. It was not Rhulad any more, not any longer._

But now there could be no chance of secrecy. The quarrel had been witnessed, and, in accordance with tradition, so too must be the resolution.

_We are doomed, now, to give answer to his death, again and again. Countless answers, to crowd the solitary question of his life. Is it our fate, then, to suffer beneath the siege of all that can never be known?_

There had been strangers witnessing the scene. The realization was sudden, shocking. A merchant and his Acquitor. Letherii visitors. Advance spies of the treaty delegation.

_Hannan Mosag's confrontation was a dreadful error in so many ways. Trull's high regard for the Warlock_
King had been damaged, sullied, and he longed for the world of a month past. Before the revelation of flaws and frailties.

*Padding through the forest, mind filled with the urgency of dire news.* A spear left in his wake, iron point buried deep in the chest of a Letherii. Leaden legs taking him through shadows, moccasins thudding on the dappled trail. The sense of having just missed something, an omen unwitnessed. Like entering a chamber someone else has just walked from, although in his case the chamber had been a forest cathedral, Hiroth sanctified land, and he had seen no signs of passage to give substance to his suspicion.

And it was this sense that had returned to him. They had passed through fraught events, all unmindful of significance, of hidden truths. The exigencies of survival had forced upon them a kind of carelessness.

A gelid wave of conviction rose within Trull Sengar, and he knew, solid as a knife in his heart, that something terrible was about to happen.

He stood, alone in the longhouse.

Facing the centre post and its crooked sword.

And he could not move.

Rhulad Sengar's body was frozen. A pallid grey, stiff-limbed figure lying on the stone platform. Head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, mouth stretched long as if striving for a breath never found. The warrior's hands were closed about the grip of a strange, mottled, straight-bladed sword, frost-rimed and black-flecked with dried blood.

Udinaas had filled the nose and ear holes with wax.

He held the pincers, waiting for the first gold coin to reach optimum heat on the iron plate suspended above the coals. He had placed one on the sheet, then, twenty heartbeats later, another. The order of placement for noble-born blooded warriors was precise, as was the allotted time for the entire ritual. Awaiting Udinaas was a period of mind-numbing repetition and exhaustion.

But a slave could be bent to any task. There were hard truths found only in the denigration of one's own spirit, if one was inclined to look for them. *Should, for example, a man require self-justification. Prior to, say, murder, or some other atrocity.*

*Take this body. A young man whose flesh is now a proclamation of death. The Edur use coins. Letherii use linen, lead and stone. In both, the need to cover, to disguise, to hide away the horrible absence writ there in that motionless face.*

Open, or closed, it began with the eyes.

Udinaas gripped the edge of the Letherii coin with the pincers. These first two had to be slightly cooler than the others, lest the eyes behind the lids burst. He had witnessed that once, when he was apprenticed to an elder slave who had begun losing his sense of time. Sizzling, then an explosive spurt of lifeless fluid, foul-smelling and murky with decay, the coin settling far too deep in the socket, the hissing evaporation and crinkling, blackening skin.

He swung round on the stool, careful not to drop the coin, then leaned over Rhulad Sengar's face. Lowered the hot gold disc.

A soft sizzle, as the skin of the lid melted, all moisture drawn from it so that it tightened round the coin. Holding it fast.

He repeated the task with the second coin.

The heat in the chamber was thawing the corpse, and, as Udinaas worked setting coins on the torso, he was continually startled by movement. Arched back settling, an elbow voicing a soft thud, rivulets of melt water crawling across the stone to drip from the sides, as if the body now wept.
The stench of burnt skin was thick in the hot, humid air. Rhulad Sengar's corpse was undergoing a transformation, acquiring gleaming armour, becoming something other than Tiste Edur. In the mind of Udinaas he ceased to exist as a thing once living, the work before the slave little different from mending nets.

Chest, to abdomen. Each spear-wound packed with clay and oil, encircled with coins then sealed. Pelvis, thighs, knees, shins, ankles, the tops of the feet. Shoulders, upper arms, elbows, forearms.

One hundred and sixty-three coins.

Udinaas wiped sweat from his eyes then rose and walked, limbs aching, over to the cauldron containing the melted wax. He had no idea how much time had passed. The stench kept his appetite at bay, but he had filled the hollow in his stomach a half-dozen times with cool water. Outside, the rain had continued, battering on the roof, swirling over the ground beyond the walls. A village in mourning – none would disturb him until he emerged.

He would have preferred a half-dozen Edur widows conducting the laying of coins, with him at his usual station tending to the fire. The last time he had done this in solitude had been with Uruth's father, killed in battle by the Arapay. He had been younger then, awed by the spectacle and his role in its making.

Attaching the handle to the cauldron, Udinaas lifted it from the hearth and carefully carried it back to the corpse. A thick coating over the front and sides of the corpse. A short time for the wax to cool – not too much, so that it cracked when he turned over the body – then he would return to the gold coins.

Udinaas paused for a moment, standing over the dead Tiste Edur. 'Ah, Rhulad,' he sighed. 'You could surely strut before the women now, couldn't you?'

* * *

'The mourning has begun.'

Trull started, then turned to find Fear standing at his shoulder. 'What? Oh. Then what has been decided?'

'Nothing.' His brother swung away and walked to the hearth. His face twisted as he regarded the low flames. 'The Warlock King proclaims our efforts a failure. Worse, he believes we betrayed him. He would hide that suspicion, but I see it none the less.'

Trull was silent a moment, then he murmured, 'I wonder when the betrayal began. And with whom.'

'You doubted this "gift", from the very first.'

'I doubt it even more now. A sword that will not relinquish its grip on a dead warrior. What sort of weapon is this, Fear? What sorcery rages on within it?' He faced his brother. 'Did you look closely at that blade? Oh, skilfully done, but there are ... shards, trapped in the iron. Of some other metal, which resisted the forging. Any apprentice swordsmith could tell you that such a blade will shatter at first blow.'

'No doubt the sorcery invested would have prevented that,' Fear replied.

'So,' Trull sighed, 'Rhulad's body is being prepared.'

'Yes, it has begun. The Warlock King has drawn our parents into the privacy of his longhouse. All others are forbidden to enter. There will be ... negotiations.'

'The severing of their youngest son's hands, in exchange for what?'

'I don't know. The decision will be publicly announced, of course. In the meantime, we are left to our own.'

'Where is Binadas?'

Fear shrugged. 'The healers have taken him. It will be days before we see him again. Mages are difficult to heal, especially when it's broken bone. The Arapay who tended to him said there were over twenty pieces loose in the flesh of his hip. All need to be drawn back into place and mended. Muscle and tendons to knit, vessels to
be sealed and dead blood expunged.’

Trull walked over to a bench alongside a wall and sat down, settling his head in his hands. The whole journey seemed unreal now, barring the battle-scars on flesh and armour, and the brutal evidence of a wrapped corpse now being dressed for burial.

The Jheck had been Soletaken. He had not realized. Those wolves...

To be Soletaken was a gift belonging to Father Shadow and his kin. It belonged to the skies, to creatures of immense power. That primitive, ignorant barbarians should possess a gift of such prodigious, holy power made no sense.

Soletaken. It now seemed ... sordid. A weapon as savage and as mundane as a raw-edged axe. He did not understand how such a thing could be.

'A grave test awaits us, brother.'

Trull blinked up at Fear. 'You sense it as well. Something's coming, isn't it?'

'I am unused to this ... to this feeling. Of helplessness. Of... not knowing.' He rubbed at his face, as if seeking to awaken the right words from muscle, blood and bone. As if all that waited within him ever struggled, futile and frustrated, to find a voice that others could hear.

A pang of sympathy struck Trull, and he dropped his gaze, no longer wanting to witness his brother's discomfort. 'It is the same with me,' he said, although the admission was not entirely true. He was not unused to helplessness; some feelings one learned to live with. He had none of Fear's natural, physical talents, none of his brother's ease. It seemed his only true skill was that of relentless observation, fettered to a dark imagination. 'We should get some sleep,' he added. 'Exhaustion ill fits these moments. Nothing will be announced without us.'

'True enough, brother.' Fear hesitated, then reached out and settled a hand on Trull's shoulder. 'I would you stand at my side always, if only to keep me from stumbling.' The hand withdrew and Fear walked towards the sleeping chambers at the back of the longhouse.

Trull stared after him, stunned by the admission, half disbelieving. As I gave words to comfort him, has he just done the same for me?

Theradas had told him they could hear the sounds of battle, again and again, cutting through the wind and the blowing snow. They'd heard bestial screams of pain, wolf-howls crying in mortal despair. They'd heard him leading the Jheck from their path. Heard, until distance stole from them all knowledge of his fate. And then, they had awaited the arrival of the enemy – who never came.

Trull had already forgotten most of those clashes, the numbers melding into one, a chaotic nightmare unstepped from time, swathed in the gauze of snow stretched and torn by the circling wind, wrapping ever tighter. Bound and carried as if made disparate, disconnected from the world. Is this how the direst moments of the past are preserved? Does this pain-ridden separation occur to each and every one of us – us ... survivors?

The mind's own barrow field, the trail winding between the mounded earth hiding the heavy stones and the caverns of darkness with their blood-painted walls and fire-scorched capstones – a life's wake, forlorn beneath a grey sky. Once walked, that trail could never be walked again. One could only look back, and know horror at the vastness and the riotous accumulation of yet more barrows. More, and more.

He rose and made his way to his sleeping mat. Wearied by the thought of those whom the Edur worshipped, who had lived tens upon tens of thousands of years, and the interminable horror of all that lay behind them, the endless road of deed and regret, the bones and lives now dust bedding corroded remnants of metal – nothing more, because the burden life could carry was so very limited, because life could only walk onward, ever onward, the passage achieving little more than a stirring of dust in its wake.

Sorrow grown bitter with despair, Trull sank down onto the thinly padded mattress, lay back and closed his eyes.
The gesture served only to unleash his imagination, image after image sobbing to life with silent but inconsolable cries that filled his head.

He reeled before the onslaught, and, like a warrior staggering senseless before relentless battering, he fell backward in his mind, into oblivion.

Like a bed of gold in a mountain stream, a blurred gleam swimming before his eyes. Udinaas leaned back, only now fully feeling the leaden weight of his exhausted muscles, slung like chains from his bones. The stench of burnt flesh had painted his lungs, coating the inside of his chest and seeping its insipid poison into his veins. His flesh felt mired in dross.

He stared down at the gold-studded back of Rhulad Sengar. The wax coating the form had cooled, growing more opaque with every passing moment.

*Wealth belongs to the dead, or so it must be for one such as me. Beyond my reach.* He considered those notions, the way they drifted through the fog in his mind. Indebtedness and poverty. The defining limits of most lives. Only a small proportion of the Letherii population knew riches, could indulge in excesses. Theirs was a distinct world, an invisible paradise framed by interests and concerns unknown to everyone else.

Udinaas frowned, curious at his own feelings. There was no envy. Only sorrow, a sense of all that lay beyond his grasp, and would ever remain so. In a strange way, the wealthy Letherii had become as remote and alien to him as the Edur. He was disconnected, the division as sharp and absolute as the one before him now – his own worn self and the gold-sheathed corpse before him. The living and the dead, the dark motion of his body and the perfect immobility of Rhulad Sengar.

He prepared for his final task before leaving the chamber. The wax had solidified sufficiently to permit the turning over of the body. Upon entering this house, Rhulad's parents would expect to find their dead son lying on his back, made virtually unrecognizable by the coins and the wax. Made, in fact, into a sarcophagus, already remote, with the journey to the shadow world begun.

*Errant take me, have I the strength for this?*

The corpse had been rolled onto wooden paddles with curved handles that were both attached to a single lever. A four-legged ridge pole was set crossways beneath the lever, providing the fulcrum. Udinaas straightened and positioned himself at the lever, taking the Blackwood in both hands and settling on it the weight of his upper body. He hesitated, lowering his head until his brow rested on his forearms.

The shadow wraith was silent, not a single whisper in his ear for days now. The blood of the Wyval slept. He was alone.

He had been expecting an interruption through the entire procedure. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan, thundering into the chamber. To cut off Rhulad's fingers, or the entire hands. Having no instructions to the contrary, Udinaas had sheathed the sword in wax, angled slightly as it reached down along the body's thighs.

He drew a deep breath, then pushed down on the lever. Lifting the body a fraction. Cracks in the wax, a crazed web of lines, but that was to be expected. Easily repaired. Udinaas pushed harder, watching as the body began turning, edging onto its side. The sword's weight defeated the wax sheathing the blade, and the point clunked down on the stone platform, drawing the arms with it. Udinaas swore under his breath, blinking the sweat from his eyes. Plate-sized sheets of wax had fallen away. The coins, at least – he saw with relief – remained firmly affixed.

He slipped a restraining strap over the lever to hold it in place, then moved to the corpse. Repositioning the sword, he nudged the massive weight further over in increments, until the balance shifted and the body thumped onto its back.

Udinaas waited until he regained his breath. Another coating of wax was needed, to repair the damage. Then he could stumble out of this nightmare.

A slave needn't think. There were tasks to be done. Too many thoughts were crawling through him,
interfering with his concentration.

He stumbled back to the hearth to retrieve the cauldron of wax.

A strange snapping sound behind him. Udinaas turned. He studied the corpse, seeking the place where the wax had broken loose. There, along the jaw, splitting wide over the mouth. He recalled the facial contortion that had been revealed when the bindings had been removed. It was possible he would have to sew the lips together.

He picked up the cauldron and made his way back to the corpse.

He saw the head jerk back.

A shuddering breath.

And then the corpse screamed.

From nothingness a scene slowly came into resolution, and Trull Sengar found himself standing, once more amidst gusting wind and swirling snow. He was surrounded, a ring of dark, vague shapes. The smeared gleam of amber eyes was fixed on him, and Trull reached for his sword, only to find the scabbard empty.

The Jheck had found him at last, and this time there would be no escape. Trull spun round, and again, as the huge wolves edged closer. The wind's howl filled his ears.

He searched for a dagger – anything – but could find nothing. His hands were numb with cold, the blowing snow stinging his eyes.

Closer, now, on all sides. Trull's heart pounded. He was filled with terror, filled as a drowning man is filled by the inrush of deadly water, the shock of denial, the sudden loss of all strength, and with it, all will.

The wolves charged.

Jaws closed on his limbs, fangs punching through skin. He was dragged down beneath the weight of onslaught. A wolf closed its mouth round the back of his neck. Dreadful grinding motions chewed through muscle. Bones snapped. His mouth gushed full and hot with blood and bile. He sagged, unable even to curl tight as the beasts tore at his arms and legs, ripped into his belly.

He could hear nothing but the wind's shriek, ever climbing.

Trull opened his eyes. He was sprawled on his sleeping mat, pain throbbing in his muscles with the ghost memory of those savage teeth.

And heard screaming.

Fear appeared in the entranceway, his eyes strangely red-rimmed, blinking in bewilderment. 'Trull?'

'It's coming from outside,' he replied, climbing stiffly to his feet.

They emerged to see figures running, converging on the House of the Dead.

'What is happening?'

Trull shook his head at his brother's question. 'Perhaps Udinaas...'

They set off.

Two slaves stumbled from the building's entrance, then fled in panic, one of them shouting incoherently.

The brothers picked up their pace.

Trull saw the Letherii Acquitor and her merchant on the bridge, figures rushing past them as they made a slow, hesitant approach.
The screams had not abated. There was pain in those cries, and horror. The sound, renewed breath after breath, made the blood gelid in Trull’s veins. He could almost...

Mayen was in the doorway, which was ajar. Behind her stood the slave Feather Witch.

Neither moved.

Fear and Trull reached them.

Feather Witch’s head snapped round, the eyes half mad as they stared up at first Trull, then Fear.

Fear came to the side of his betrothed in the doorway. He stared inward, face flinching with every scream. ‘Mayen,’ he said, ‘keep everyone else out. Except for Tomad and Uruth and the Warlock King, when they arrive. Trull—’ The name was spoken like a plea.

Mayen stepped back and Trull edged forward.

Side by side, they entered the House of the Dead.

A mass, a hunched shape, covered in wax like peeling skin, revealing the glitter of gold coins, slouched down at the foot of the stone platform, face lowered, forehead on knees, arms wrapped tight about shins but still holding the sword. A mass, a hunched shape, voicing endless shrieks.

The slave Udinaas stood nearby. He had been carrying a cauldron of wax. It lay on its side two paces to the Letherii’s left, the wax spilled out amidst twigs and straw.

Udinaas was murmuring. Soothing words cutting beneath the screams. He was moving closer to the shape, step by careful step.

Fear made to start forward but Trull gripped his upper arm and held him back. He’d heard something in those shrieks. They had come to answer the slave’s low soothings, defiant at first, but now thinning, the voice filling with pleading. Strangled again and again into shudders of raw despair. And through it all Udinaas continued to speak.

_Sister bless us, that is Rhulad. My brother._

_Who was dead._

The slave slowly crouched before the horrid figure, and Trull could make out his words as he said, ‘There are coins before your eyes, Rhulad Sengar. That is why you can see nothing. I would remove them. Your brothers are here. Fear and Trull. They are here.’

The shrieks broke then, replaced by helpless weeping.

Trull stared as Udinaas then did something he did not think possible. The slave reached out and took Rhulad’s head in his hands, as a mother might an inconsolable child. Tender, yet firm, the hands slowly lifted it clear of the knees.

A sobbing sound came from Fear, quickly silenced, but Trull felt his brother tremble.

_The face – oh, Father Shadow, the face._

A crazed mask of wax, cracked and scarred. And beneath it, gold coins, melded onto the flesh – not one had dislodged – angled like the scales of armour around the stretched jaw, the gasping mouth.

Udinaas leaned closer still, spoke low beside Rhulad’s left ear.

Words, answered with a shudder, a spasm that made coins click – the sound audible but muted beneath wax. A foot scraped across the stone flagstones surrounding the platform, drew in tighter.

Fear jolted in Trull’s grip, but he held on, held his brother back as Udinaas reached down to his belt and drew
out a work knife.

Whispering; rhythmic, almost musical. The slave brought the knife up. Carefully set the edge near the tip alongside the coin covering Rhulad's left eye.

The face flinched, but Udinaas drew his right arm round into a kind of embrace, leaned closer, not pausing in his murmuring. Pressure with the edge, minute motion, then the coin flashed as it came loose along the bottom. A moment later it fell away.

The eye was closed, a mangled, red welt. Rhulad must have sought to open it because Udinaas laid two fingers against the lid and Trull saw him shake his head as he said something, then repeated it.

A strange tic from Rhulad's head, and Trull realized it had been a nod.

Udinaas then reversed the position of his arms, and set the knife edge to Rhulad's right eye.

Outside was the sound of a mass of people, but Trull did not turn about. He could not pull his gaze from the Letherii, from his brother.

He was dead. There was no doubt. None.

The slave, who had worked on Rhulad for a day and a night, filling mortal wounds with wax, burning coins into the cold flesh, who had then seen his charge return to life, now knelt before the Edur, his voice holding insanity at bay, his voice – and his hands – guiding Rhulad back to the living.

A Letherii slave.

Father Shadow, who are we to have done this?

The coin was prised loose.

Trull pulled Fear along as he stepped closer. He did not speak. Not yet.

Udinaas returned the knife to its sheath. He leaned back, one hand withdrawing to settle on Rhulad's left shoulder. Then the slave pivoted and looked up at Trull. 'He's not ready to speak. The screaming has exhausted him, given the weight of the coins encasing his chest.' Udinaas half rose, intending to move away, but Rhulad's left arm rustled, hand sobbing away from the sword's grip, coins clicking as the fingers groped, then found the slave's arm. And held on.

Udinaas almost smiled – and Trull saw for the first time the exhaustion of the man, the extremity of all that he had gone through – and settled down once more. 'Your brothers, Rhulad,' he said. 'Trull, and Fear. They are here to take care of you now. I am but a slave—'

Two coins fell away as Rhulad's grip tightened.

'You will stay, Udinaas,' Trull said. 'Our brother needs you. We need you.'

The Letherii nodded. 'As you wish, master. Only ... I am tired. I – I keep blacking out, only to awaken at the sound of my own voice.' He shook his head helplessly. 'I don't even know what I have said to your brother—'

'It matters not,' Fear cut in. 'What you have done ...' His words trailed away, and for a moment it seemed his face would crumple. Trull saw the muscles of his brother's neck tauten, then Fear's eyes closed tight, he drew a deep breath and was himself once more. He shook his head, unable to speak.

Trull crouched beside Udinaas and Rhulad. 'Udinaas, I understand. You need rest. But stay for a few moments longer, if you can.'

The slave nodded.

Trull shifted his gaze, studied Rhulad's ravaged face, the eyes still shut – but there was movement behind them. 'Rhulad. It is Trull. Listen to me, my brother. Keep your eyes closed, for now. We must get this – this
armour – off you—'

At that Rhulad shook his head.

'They are funereal coins, Rhulad—'

'Y-yes. I ... know.'

Words raw and heavy, the breath pushed out from a constricted chest.

Trull hesitated, then said, 'Udinaas has been with you, alone, preparing you—'

'Yes.'

'He is used up, brother.'

'Yes. Tell Mother. I want. I want him.'

'Of course. But let him go now, please—'

The hand dropped away from the slave's arm, clunking hard and seemingly insensate on the floor. The other

hand, still holding the sword, suddenly twitched.

And a ghastly smile emerged on Rhulad's face. 'Yes. I hold it still. This. This is what he meant.'

Trull edged back slightly.

Udinaas crawled off a short distance, leaned up against the chest of coins. He drew himself up into a shape
echoing that of Rhulad, and, in the moment before he turned his face away, Trull saw the visage fill with
anguish.

Exhaustion or no, for Udinaas peace and rest was ten thousand paces away – Trull could see that, could
understand that brutal truth. Rhulad had had the slave, but whom did Udinaas have?

Not a typical Edur thought.

But nothing – nothing – was as it was. Trull rose and moved close to Fear. He thought for a moment, then
swung round to the entranceway. Mayen was still standing there, at her side the Letherii, Feather Witch. Trull
gestured at the slave, then pointed to where Udinaas crouched.

He saw her face stretch in horror. Saw her shake her head.

Then she ran from the building.

Trull grimaced.

A commotion at the entrance, and Mayen withdrew from sight.

Tomad and Uruth appeared.

And behind them, as they slowly edged forward, came Hannan Mosag.

Oh. Oh no. The sword. The damned sword—
CHAPTER TEN

White petals spin and curl on their way
down to the depthless sea.
The woman and her basket, her hand flashing red
in quick soft motion scattering these
pure wings, to ride a moment on the wind.
She stands, a forlorn goddess birthing flight
that fails and falls on the river's broad breast.
A basket of birds destined to drown.
See her weep in the city's drawn shadow
her hand a thing disembodied,
carrion-clawed and ceaseless in repetition,
she delivers death and in her eyes
is seen the horror of living.

Lady Elassara of Trate
Cormor Fural

The roll of thunder, the heavy trammelling of rain on the roof. The storm was following the course of the river,
drawn northward and dragging one edge of its heaving clouds across Letheras. Unseasonal, unwelcome,
making the single room of Tehol's abode close and steamy. There were two more stools than there had been,
retrieved by Bugg from a rubbish heap. On one of them, in the far corner, sat Ublala Pung, weeping.

As he had been without pause for over a bell, his huge frame racked with a shuddering that made the stool
creak alarmingly.

In the centre of the small room, Tehol paced.

A splashing of feet outside, then the curtain in the doorway was tugged to one side and Bugg stamped in,
water streaming from him. He coughed. 'What's burning in the hearth?'

Tehol shrugged. 'Whatever was piled up beside it, of course.'

'But that was your rain hat. I wove it myself, with my own two hands.'

'A rain hat? Those reeds had wrapped rotting fish—'

'That's the stink, all right.' Bugg nodded, wiping at his eyes. 'Anyway, rotting is a relative term, master.'

'It is?'

'The Faraed consider it a delicacy.'

'You just wanted me to smell like fish.'

'Better you than the whole house,' Bugg said, glancing over at Ublala. 'What's wrong with him?'

'I haven't a clue,' Tehol said. 'So, what's the news?'

'I found her.'

'Great.'

'But we'll have to go and get her.'

'Go outside?'
'Yes.'

'Into the rain?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' Tehol said, resuming his pacing, 'I don't like that at all. Too risky.'

'Risky?'

'Why, yes. Risky. I might get wet. Especially now that I don't have a rain hat.'

'And whose fault is that, I wonder?'

'It was already smouldering, sitting so close to the hearth. I barely nudged it with my toe and up it went.'

'I was drying it out.'

Tehol paused in mid-step, studied Bugg for a moment, then resumed pacing. 'It's a storm,' he said after a moment. 'Storms pass. I need a reason to procrastinate.'

'Yes, master.'

Tehol swung round and approached Ublala Pung. 'Most beloved bodyguard, whatever is wrong?'

Red-rimmed eyes stared up at him. 'You're not interested. Not really. Nobody is.'

'Of course I'm interested. Bugg, I'm interested, aren't I? It's my nature, isn't it?'

'Absolutely, master. Most of the time.'

'It's the women, isn't it, Ublala? I can tell.'

The huge man nodded miserably.

'Are they fighting over you?'

He shook his head.

'Have you fallen for one of them?'

'That's just it. I haven't had a chance to.'

Tehol glanced over at Bugg, then back to Ublala. 'You haven't had a chance to. What a strange statement. Can you elaborate?'

'It's not fair, that's what it is. Not fair. You won't understand. It's not a problem you have. I mean, what am I? Am I to be nothing but a toy? Just because I have a big—'

'Hold on a moment,' Tehol cut in. 'Let's see if I fully understand you, Ublala. You feel they're just using you. Interested only in your, uh, attributes. All they want from you is sex. No commitment, no loyalty even. They're happy taking turns with you, taking no account of your feelings, your sensitive nature. They probably don't even want to cuddle afterwards or make small talk, right?'

Ublala nodded.

'And all that is making you miserable?'

He nodded again, snuffling, his lower lip protruding, his broad mouth downturned at the corners, a muscle twitching in his right cheek.

Tehol stared for a moment longer, then he tossed up his hands. 'Ublala! Don't you understand? You're in a man's paradise! What all the rest of us can only dream about!'
'But I want something more!'  

'No! You don't! Trust me! Bugg, don't you agree? Tell him!'  

Bugg frowned, then said, 'It is as Tehol says, Ublala. Granted, a tragic truth, and granted, Master's nature is to revel in tragic truths, which to many might seem unusual, unhealthy even—'  

'Thanks for the affirmation, Bugg,' Tehol interrupted with a scowl. 'Go clean up, will you?' He faced Ublala again. 'You are at the pinnacle of male achievement, my friend – wait! Did you say it's not a problem I have? What did you mean by that?'  

Ublala blinked. 'What? Uh, are you at that pinnacle, or whatever you called it – are you at it too?'  

Bugg snorted. 'He hasn't been at it in months.'  

'Well, that's it!' Tehol stormed to the hearth and plucked out what was left of the matted reeds. He stamped out the flames, then picked the charred object up and set it on his head. 'All right, Bugg, let's go and get her. As for this brainless giant here, he can mope around all alone in here, for all I care. How many insults can a sensitive man like me endure, anyway?'  

Wisps of smoke drifted from the reeds on Tehol's head.  

'That's about to take flame again, master.'  

'Well, that's what's good about rain, then, isn't it? Let's go.'  

Outside in the narrow aisle, water streamed ankle-deep towards the clogged drain at the far end, where a small lake was forming. Bugg a half-step in the lead, they sloshed their way across its swirling, rain-pocked expanse.  

'You should be more sympathetic to Ublala, master,' Bugg said over a shoulder. 'He's a very unhappy man.'  

'Sympathy belongs to the small-membered, Bugg. Ublala has three women drooling all over him, or have you forgotten?'  

'That's a rather disgusting image.'  

'You've been too old too long, dear servant. There's nothing inherently disgusting about drool.' He paused, then said, 'All right, maybe there is. However, do we have to talk about sex? That subject makes me nostalgic.'  

'Errant forbid.'  

'So, where is she?'  

'In a brothel.'  

'Oh, now that's really pathetic.'  

'More like a newly acquired raging addiction, master. The more she feeds it, the hungrier it gets.'  

They crossed Turol Avenue and made their way into the Prostitutes' District. The downpour was diminishing, the tail ends of the storm front streaming overhead. 'Well,' Tehol commented, 'that is not a desirable condition for one of my most valued employees. Especially since her addiction doesn't include her handsome, elegant boss. Something tells me it should have been me weeping in a corner back there, not Ublala.'  

'It may simply be a case of Shurq not wanting to mix business with pleasure.'  

'Bugg, you told me she's in a brothel.'  

'Oh. Right. Sorry.'
'Now I'm truly miserable. I wasn't miserable this morning. If the trend continues, by dusk I'll be swimming the canal with bags of coins around my neck.'

'Here we are.'

They stood before a narrow, three-storey tenement, set slightly in from the adjoining buildings and looking a few centuries older than anything else on the street. The front facing held a carved façade around two square, inset columns of dusty blue marble. Decidedly female demons in bas-relief, contorted and writhing in a mass orgy, crowded the panels, and atop the columns crouched stone gargoyles with enormous breasts held high and inviting.

Tehol turned to Bugg. 'This is the Temple. She's in the Temple?'

'Does that surprise you?'

'I can't even afford to step across the threshold. Even Queen Janall frequents this place but a few times a year. Annual membership dues are ten thousand docks ... I've heard ... it rumoured. From someone, once.'

'Matron Delisp is probably very pleased with her newest property.'

'I'd wager she is at that. So, how do we extract Shurq Elalle, especially since it's obvious she is where she wants to be, and the Matron has at least thirty thugs in her employ who're likely to try and stop us? Should we simply consider this a lost cause and be on our way?'

Bugg shrugged. 'That is up to you to decide, master.'

'Well.' He considered. 'I'd like at least a word with her.'

'Probably all you can afford.'

'Don't be absurd, Bugg. She doesn't charge by the word ... does she?'

'She might well charge by the glance, master. Our dear dead thief has blossomed—'

'Thanks to me! Who arranged for her overhaul? Her dry-dock repairs, the new coat of paint? We had a deal—'

'Tell it to her, master, not me. I am well aware of the lengths you go to in appeasing your own peculiar appetites.'

'I'm not even going to ask what you mean by that, Bugg. It sounds sordid, and my sordid self is my own affair.'

'So it is, master, so it is. Good thing you're not the nostalgic type.'

Tehol glared at Bugg for a moment, then swung his attention once more to the Temple. The oldest brothel in all the land. Some said it was standing here long before the city rose up around it, and indeed the city rose up around it because of the brothel itself. That didn't make much sense, but then few things did when it came to love and its many false but alluring shades. He tilted his head back to study the gargoyles, and the scorched reed hat slid off to splash on the cobbles behind him. 'Well, that settles it. Either I stand here getting my hair wet, or I go inside.'

'As far as I can tell, master, my rain hat was a tragic failure in any case.'

'It's your over-critical nature, Bugg, what's done you in. Follow me!'

Tehol ascended the steps with proprietary determination. As he reached the landing the front door swung open and the frame was filled by a huge, hooded man wearing a black surcoat, a massive double-bladed axe in his gauntleted hands.

Appalled, Tehol halted, Bugg stumbling into him from behind on the lower step.
'Excuse me,' Tehol managed, stepping to one side and pulling Bugg along with him. 'Off to a beheading, then?' He gestured for the man to pass.

Small eyes glittered from the hood's shadows. 'Thank you, sir,' he said in a raspy voice. 'You are most courteous.' He strode forward onto the landing, then paused. 'It's raining.'

'Indeed, almost finished, I'd wager. See the blue overhead?'

The axe-carrying giant faced Tehol. 'If anyone asks, sir, you never saw me here.'

'You have my word.'

'Most kind.' He faced the street again, then cautiously descended the steps.

'Ooh,' he said as he set off, 'it's wet! Ooh!'

Tehol and Bugg watched him scurry away, hunched over and weaving to avoid the deeper puddles.

Bugg sighed. 'I admit to being greatly affrighted by his sudden appearance.'

Brows raised, Tehol regarded his servant. 'Really? Poor Bugg, you need to do something about those nerves of yours. Come on, then, and fear nothing whilst you are with me.'

They entered the Temple.

And Tehol halted once more, as suddenly as the first time, as the point of a knife settled on his cheek beneath his right eye, which blinked rapidly. Bugg managed to draw up in time to avoid bumping into his master, for which Tehol's gratitude was sufficient to weaken his knees.

A sweet feminine voice murmured close to his ear, 'You're not in disguise, sir. Which means, well, we both know what that means, don't we?'

'I've come for my daughter—'

'Now that's in very poor taste. We can't abide such twisted, sick desires in here—'

'You misunderstand – understandably, of course, that is. I meant to say, I've come to retrieve her, before it's too late.'

'Her name?'

'Shurq Elalle.'

'Well, it's too late.'

'You mean she being dead? I'm aware of that. It's her ancestors, you see, they want her to come home to the crypt. They miss her terribly, and a few of them are getting alarmingly angry. Ghosts can be a lot of trouble – not just for you and this establishment, but for me as well. You see my predicament?'

The knife point withdrew, and a short, lithe woman stepped round to stand before him. Close-fitting silks in rusty hues, a broad silk belt wrapped about her tiny waist, upturned slippers on her minuscule feet. A sweet, heart-shaped face, strangely overlarge eyes, now narrowing. 'Are you done?'

Tehol smiled sheepishly. 'You must get that a lot. Sorry. Are you, perchance, Matron Delisp?'

She spun about. 'Follow me. I hate this room.'

He glanced about for the first time. Two paces wide, four deep, a door at the far end, the walls hidden behind lush tapestries depicting countless couplings of all sorts. 'Seems inviting enough,' he said, following the woman to the door.

'It's the spent smell.'
'Spent? Oh, yes.'

'Smells of... regret. I hate that smell. I hate everything about it.' She opened the door and slipped through.

Tehol and Bugg hastened to follow.

The chamber beyond was dominated by a steep staircase, which began a single pace beyond the doorway. The woman led them round it to a plush waiting room, thick-padded sofas along the side walls, a single high-backed chair occupying the far wall. She walked directly to that chair and sat down. 'Sit. Now, what's all this about ghosts? Oh, never mind that. You were, what, ten years old when you fathered Shurq Elalle? No wonder she never mentioned you. Even when she was alive. Tell me, were you disappointed when she decided on a career of thievery?'

'From your tone,' Tehol said, 'I gather you are challenging the veracity of my claims.'

'Which question gave me away?'

'But, you see, I am not so ignorant as you think. Hence my disguise.'

She blinked. 'Your disguise is to appear as a man in his early thirties, wearing sodden, badly made wool—'

Bugg sat straighter. 'Badly made? Now, hold on—'

Tehol nudged his servant with an elbow, hard in the ribs. Bugg grunted, then subsided.

'That is correct,' Tehol said.

'A vast investment in sorcery, then. How old are you in truth?'

'Sixty-nine ... my dear.'

'I'm impressed. Now, you mentioned ghosts?'

'Affraid so, Matron. Terrible ones. Vengeful, disinclined to discourse. Thus far I have managed to keep them penned up in the family crypt, but they'll get out sooner or later. And proceed on a rampage through the streets – a night of terror for all Letheras's citizens, I fear – until they arrive here. And then, well, I shudder at the thought.'

'As I am shuddering right now, although for entirely different reasons. But yes, we certainly have a dilemma. My particular dilemma, however, is one I admit to having been struggling with for some time now.'

'Oh?'

'Fortunately, you appear to have provided me with a solution.'

'I am pleased.'

The woman leaned forward. 'Top floor – there's only one room. Talk that damned demoness out of here! Before my other lasses flay me alive!'

The stairs were steep but well padded, the wooden railing beneath their hands an unbroken undulation of lovingly carved breasts polished and oiled by countless sweaty palms. They met no-one on the way and reached the top floor breathless – due to the ascent, of course, Tehol told himself as he paused at the door and wiped his hands on his soaked leggings.

Head lowered and panting, Bugg was at his side. 'Errant take me, what have they rubbed into that wood?'

'I'm not sure,' Tehol admitted, 'but I can barely walk.'

'Perhaps we should take a moment,' Bugg suggested, wiping the sweat from his face.

'Good idea. Let's.'
A short time later Tehol straightened, with a wince, and nodded at Bugg, who grimaced in reply. Tehol raised a hand and thumped on the heavy wooden door.

'Enter,' came the muffled command.

Tehol opened the door and stepped into the room. Behind him, Bugg hissed, 'Errant take me, look at all the breasts!' The wall panels and ceiling continued the theme begun on the wooden railing, a riotous proliferation of mammary excess. Even the floor beneath the thick rugs was lumpy.

'A singular obsession—' Tehol began, and was interrupted.

'Oh,' said a voice from the huge bed before them, 'it's you.'

Tehol cleared his throat. 'Shurq Elalle.'

'If you've come for services,' she said, 'you might be relieved to know the executioner's big axe was pathetic compensation.'

'He got wet in the rain,' Bugg said.

Tehol glanced back at him. 'What is the relevance of that?'

'I don't know, but I thought you might.'

'I'm not leaving,' Shurq said, 'if that's why you're here.'

'You have to,' Tehol countered. 'The Matron insists.'

She sat straighter in the bed. 'It's those damned cows downstairs, isn't it? I've stolen all their clients and they want me out!'

'I imagine so.' Tehol shrugged. 'But that's hardly surprising, is it? Listen, Shurq, we had a deal, didn't we?'

Her expression darkened. 'So I should do the honourable thing? All right, but I have a problem regarding certain appetites...'

'I wish I could help.'

Her brows rose.

'Uh, I meant – I mean – oh, I don't know what I mean.' He paused, then brightened. 'But I'll introduce you to Ublala, an unhappy bodyguard longing for commitment.'

Her brows rose higher.

'Well, why not? You don't have to tell him you're dead! He'll never notice, of that I'm certain! And as for your appetites, I doubt there'll be a problem there, although there's a trio of women who might be very upset, but I'll handle that. Look, it's a brilliant solution, Shurq.'

'I'll give it a try, I suppose, but I'm not making any promises. Now, step outside, please, so I can get dressed.'

Tehol and Bugg exchanged glances and then complied, softly shutting the door behind them.

Bugg studied his master. 'I am very impressed,' he said after a moment. 'I'd thought this a situation without a solution. Master, my admiration for you grows like a—'

'Stop staring at that railing, Bugg.'

'Uh, yes. You're right.'
Matron Delisp was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Seeing Shurq Elalle following a step behind Bugg, her face twisted with distaste. 'Errant bless you, Tehol Beddict. I owe you one.'

Tehol sighed. 'I had a feeling you were sceptical of my story.'

'The woollen leggings,' she replied. 'I hear virtually everyone's put in orders for them.'

Tehol shot Bugg a look, but the servant's brows rose and he said, 'Not with me, master. That would be disloyal. Rest assured that everyone else's version will prove but pathetic imitations.'

'Perhaps, Matron Delisp,' Tehol said, 'I am merely disguised as Tehol Beddict. That would be clever, wouldn't it?'

'Too clever for you.'

'Well, you have a point there.'

'Anyway, do you want me in your debt or not?'

Shurq Elalle pushed past Bugg. 'I don't like being ignored. You're all ignoring me as if I was—'

'Dead?' Delisp asked.

'I just wanted to point out my reason for vacating this house, which is that I, too, owe Tehol Beddict. I may be dead, but I am not without honour. In any case, Delisp, I believe you owe me a rather substantial payment right now. Sixty per cent, I seem to recall—'

'What do you need all that money for?' the Matron demanded. 'How many variations of sex-assassin attire exist out there? How many bundles of raw spices do you need to keep fresh? No, wait, I don't want to know the answer. Sixty per cent. Fine, but it'll take me a day or two – I don't keep that kind of coin around here. Where should I have it delivered?'

'Tehol Beddict's residence will suffice.'

'Hold on,' Tehol objected. 'I can't secure—'

'I intend,' Shurq cut in, 'to spend it quickly.'

'Oh. All right, but I'm not happy. Too many comings and goings there. Suspicions will be insatiably aroused —'

'Stop staring at the railing, master.'

'Errant's dreams! Let's get out of here.'

* * *

The storm had passed. Rainwater still flowed down the streets, but people were venturing out once more. It was late afternoon. Shurq Elalle halted at the foot of the Temple's steps. 'I will rejoin you tonight, on your roof, Tehol Beddict. Midnight.'

'What about Ublala Pung?'

'I admit to having second thoughts.'

'Shurq Elalle. Ublala Pung survived a Drowning. He walked across the bottom of the canal. You two have a lot in common, if you think about it.'

'He's also massively endowed,' Bugg added.

Tehol made a face at him. 'You are being crude—'
'Bring him to the roof tonight,' Shurq said.

'This is a conspiracy to make me miserable, isn't it? Both of you, leave me. I'm going for a walk. Bugg, when you get back home, give it a tidy. No doubt Shand will be storming in before too long. Tell her I'll drop by tomorrow on some important business—'

'What important business?'

'I don't know. I'll invent something. You have other things to worry about – how's the foundation work coming along, anyway?'

'It's piling up.'

'Then sort it out.'

'You misunderstand, master. We're on schedule.'

'I didn't misunderstand. I was being obdurate. Now, I'm off to find a more reasonable conversation, somewhere.' He swung round for a final word with Shurq, but she was gone. 'Damned thief. Go on, Bugg. Wait, what's for supper?'

'Banana leaves.'

'Not fishy ones, I trust.'

'Of course not, master.'

'Then what?'

'The material they were wrapped around was unidentifiable, which, if you think about it, is probably a good thing.'

'How do we live on this stuff?'

'A good question, master. It is indeed baffling.'

Tehol studied his servant for a long moment, then he gestured the man away.

Bugg turned right, so Tehol went left. The air was warming, yet still fresh after the rain. Wet dogs nosed the rubbish in the settling puddles. Cats chased the cockroaches that had swarmed up from the drains. A beggar had found a sliver of soap and stood naked beneath a stream of water coming from a cracked eaves trough, working up a murky lather while he sang a lament that had been popular a hundred years ago. Residents had taken advantage of the unexpected downpour, emptying chamber pots from their windows rather than carrying them a few dozen paces to the nearest communal dump-hole. As a result, some of the pools held floating things and the streams in the gutters carried small flyblown islands that collected here and there in buzzing rafts that bled yellowy brown slime.

It was a fine evening in the city of Letheras, Tehol reflected, testing the air a moment before taking a deep breath and releasing it in a contented sigh. He went on down the street until he reached Quillas Canal, then walked along it towards the river. To his right rose a forest of masts from fisherboats moored to wait out the storm. Tarps were being pulled aside, water splashing as the crews bailed feverishly so they could make for open water before the day's light failed. Near one jetty a half-dozen city guardsmen were fishing a corpse from the murky water, a crowd of onlookers shouting advice as the squad struggled with hook-poles. Above them flapped seagulls.

Tehol came within sight of the old palace, then took a side street away from the canal, proceeding on a winding, confused route until he came to the grounds of the towers. Gathering dusk made the air grainy as Tehol reached the low crumbling wall and stared across the short expanse of broken, uneven yard to the one, battered tower that was clearly different in construction from all the others, being square instead of round.

The strange triangular windows were dark, crowded with dead vines. The inset, black-stained wooden door
was shrouded in shadow. Tehol wondered how such a door could have survived – normal wood would have rotted to dust centuries ago.

He could see no-one in the yard. 'Kettle! Child, are you in there?'

A small bedraggled figure stepped out from behind a tree.

Startled, Tehol said, 'That was a good trick, lass.'

She approached. 'There's an artist. A painter. He comes to paint the tower. He wants to paint me too, but I stay behind trees. It makes him very angry. You are the man who sleeps on the roof of your house. Lots of people try spying on you.'

'Yes, I know. Shurq tells me you, uh, take care of them.'

'She said maybe you could help find out who I was.'

He studied her. 'Have you seen Shurq lately?'

'Only once. She was all fixed. I barely recognized her.'

'Well, lass, we could see the same done for you, if you like.'

The grubby, mould-patched face wrinkled into a frown. 'Why?'

'Why? To make you less noticeable, I suppose. Wouldn't you enjoy looking the way Shurq does now?'

'Enjoy?'

'Think about it at least?'

'All right. You look friendly. You look like I could like you. I don't like many people, but I could like you. Can I call you Father? Shurq is my mother. She isn't, really, but that's what I call her. I'm looking for brothers and sisters, too.' She paused, then asked, 'Can you help me?'

'I'll try, Kettle. Shurq tells me the tower talks to you.'

'Not words. Just thoughts. Feelings. It's afraid. There's someone in the ground who is going to help. Once he gets free, he'll help us. He's my uncle. But the bad ones scare me.'

'The bad ones? Who are they? Are they in the ground, too?'

She nodded.

'Is there a chance they will get out of the ground before your uncle does?'

'If they do, they'll destroy us all. Me, Uncle and the tower. They've said so. And that will free all the others.'

'And are the others bad, too?'

She shrugged. 'They don't talk much. Except one. She says she'll make me an empress. I'd like to be an empress.'

'Well, I wouldn't trust that one. Just my opinion, Kettle, but promises like that are suspect.'

'That's what Shurq says, too. But she sounds very nice. She wants to give me lots of treats and stuff.'

'Be careful, lass.'

'Do you ever dream of dragons, Father?'

'Dragons?'
Shrugging again, she turned away. 'It's getting dark,' she said over her shoulder. 'I need to kill someone ... maybe that artist.'

Turudal Brizad, the consort to Queen Janall, stood leaning against the wall whilst Brys Beddict led his students through the last of the counter-attack exercises.

Audiences were not uncommon during his training regime with the king's own guard, although Brys had been mildly surprised that Turudal was among the various onlookers, most of whom were practitioners with the weapons he used in his instruction. The consort was well known for his indolent ways, a privilege that, in the days of Brys's grandfather, would not have been tolerated in a young, fit Letherii. Four years of military service beginning in the seventeenth year had been mandatory. In those days there had been external threats aplenty. Bluerose to the north, the independent, unruly city-states of the archipelago in Dracons Sea, and the various tribes on the eastern plain had been pressuring Lether, driven against the outposts by one of the cyclical expansionist regimes of far Kolanse.

Bluerose now paid tribute to King Ezgara Diskanar, the city-states had been crushed, leaving little more than a handful of goat-herders and fisherfolk on the islands, and Kolanse had subsided into isolation following some sort of civil war a few decades past.

It was difficult for Brys to imagine a life possessing virtually no ability to defend itself, at least upon the attainment of adulthood, but Turudal Brizad was such a creature. Indeed, the consort had expressed the opinion that he was but a forerunner, a pioneer of a state of human life wherein soldiering was left to the Indebted and the mentally inadequate. Although Brys had initially scoffed at hearing a recounting of Brizad's words, his disbelief had begun to waver. The Letherii military was still strong, yet increasingly it was bound to economics. Every campaign was an opportunity for wealth. And, among the civilian population of traders, merchants and all those who served the innumerable needs of civilization, few were bothering with martial training any more. An undercurrent of contempt now coloured their regard of soldiers.

*Until they need us, of course. Or they discover a means to profit by our actions.*

He completed the exercise, then lingered to see who left the chamber and who remained to practise on their own. Most remained, and Brys was pleased. The two who had left were, he knew, the queen's spies in the bodyguard. Ironically, everyone else knew that detail as well.

Brys sheathed his sword and strode over to Turudal Brizad. 'Consort?'

A casual tilt of the head. 'Finadd.'

'Have you found yourself at a loose end? I don't recall ever seeing you here before.'

'The palace seems strangely empty, don't you think?'

'Well,' Brys ventured, 'there's certainly less shouting.'

Turudal Brizad smiled. 'The prince is young, Finadd. Some exuberance is to be expected. The Chancellor would have a word with you, at your convenience. I understand you are fully recovered from your mysterious ordeal?'

'The King's healers were their usual proficient selves, Consort. Thank you for asking. Why does the Chancellor wish to speak with me?'

The man shrugged. 'I am not the one to ask. I am but a messenger in this, Finadd.'

Brys studied him for a moment, then simply nodded. 'I accept Triban Gnol's invitation. A bell from now?'

'That should suffice. Let us hope for all our sakes that this will not mark an expansion of the present feud between the Chancellor and the Ceda.'

Brys was surprised. 'There is a feud? I hadn't heard. I mean, apart from the, well, the usual clash of opinions.' He considered, then said, 'I share your concern, Consort.'
'Does it ever strike you, Finadd, that peace leads to an indulgence in strife?'

'No, since your statement is nonsensical. The opposite of peace is war, while war is an extreme expression of strife. By your argument, life is characterized as an oscillation between strife during peace and strife during war.'

'Not entirely nonsensical, then,' Turudal Brizad said. 'We exist in a state of perpetual stress. Both within ourselves and in the world beyond.' He shrugged. 'We may speak of a longing for balance, but in our soul burns a lust for discord.'

'If your soul is troubled, Consort,' Brys said, 'you hide it well.'

'None of us here lack that skill, Finadd.'

Brys cocked his head. 'I have no inclination to indulge in strife. I find I still disagree with your premise. In any case, I must take my leave of you now, Consort.'

On his way back to his chambers, Brys reflected on Turudal Brizad's words. There might well have been a warning hidden in there, but apart from the obvious suggestion that all was not as it seemed – and in the palace this was taken as given – he could not pierce the subtlety of the consort's intentions.

Stress lay in the cast of the mind, as far as Brys was concerned. Born of perspective and the hue through which one saw the world, and such things were shaped by both nature and nurture. Perhaps on some most basic level the struggle to live yielded a certain stress, but that was not the same as the strife conjured by an active mind, its myriad storms of desires, emotions, worries and terrors, its relentless dialogue with death.

Brys had realized long ago what had drawn him into the arts of fighting. The martial world, from duelling to warfare, was inherently reductionist, the dialogue made simple and straightforward. Threats, bargains and compromises were proscribed by the length of Letherii steel. Self-discipline imposed a measure of control over one's own fate, which in turn served to diminish the damaging effects of stress, more so when it became clear to the practitioner that death fought using blind chance when all else failed, and so one had no choice but to accept the consequences, however brutal they may be. Simple notions that one could reflect upon at leisure, should one choose – but never when face to face with an enemy with blades unsheathed and dancing.

Physical laws imposed specific limitations, and Brys was satisfied with that clear imposition of predictability – sufficient to provide the structure around which he built his life.

Turudal Brizad's life was far less certain. His physicality and its attractiveness to others was his singular quality, and no amount of diligence could hold back the years that threatened it. Granted, there were alchemies and sorceries that could be mustered to stand in the breach, but the dark tide was reluctant to bargain, for it abided by its own laws and those laws were immutable. Worse yet, Brizad's efficacy was defined by the whims of others. As professional as he might be, his every partner was, potentially, a fathomless well of raw emotions, yearning to grasp hold of Brizad and ensnare him. Outwardly, of course, there were rules in place. He was a consort, after all. The queen already had a husband. The Chancellor was bound to ancient laws denying him formal relationships with man or woman. Turudal Brizad possessed virtually no rights; the children he might sire would be without name or political power – indeed, the queen was required to ensure such pregnancies did not occur, and thus far she had held to that prohibition.

But it was rumoured that Janall had given her heart to Brizad. And that Triban Ghol might well have done the very same, with the potential consequence of tearing apart the old alliance between queen and Chancellor. If so, then Turudal Brizad had become the unhappy fulcrum. No wonder the man was plagued with stress.

Yet what were the consort's own ambitions? Had he too surrendered his heart, and if so, to which lover?

Brys entered his room. He divested himself of his belt and armour, then drew off his sweat-damp undergarments. He layered himself in scented oil which he then scraped off with a wooden comb. Dressing in clean clothes, he set to donning his formal armour. He replaced the heavier practice sword with his regular longsword in the scabbard at his waist. A final moment scanning the contents of his modest residence, noticing the misplaced brace of knives on the shelf above his bed, indicating that yet another spy had gone through his
room. Not one careless enough to leave the knives in the wrong position – that had been done by whoever had been spying on the spy, to let Brys know that yet another search for who knew what had taken place, a weekly occurrence of late.

He moved the knives back into their usual position, then left.

'Enter.'

Brys stepped inside, then paused to search through the crowded, cluttered chamber.

'Over here, King's Champion.'

He followed the sound of the voice and finally caught sight of the Ceda, who was suspended in a leather-strap harness depending from the ceiling. Face-down and close to a man's height above the floor, Kuru Qan was wearing a strange metal helmet with multiple lenses fixed in a slotted frame in front of his eyes. On the floor was an archaic, yellowed map.

'I have little time, Ceda,' Brys said. 'The Chancellor has requested that I attend him in a short while. What are you doing?'

'Is it important, lad?'

'That I know? I suppose not. I was just curious.'

'No, the Chancellor's summons.'

'I'm not sure. It seems I am to be increasingly viewed as some kind of pivotal player in a game of which I have no comprehension. After all, the king rarely asks for my advice on matters of state, for which I am eternally grateful, since I make it a point not to involve myself with such considerations. Thus, I have no opportunity to influence our Sire's opinion, nor would I wish to.'

'By this means,' Kuru Qan said, 'I am proving that the world is round.'

'Indeed? Did not the early colonizers from the First Empire make that evident? They circumnavigated the globe, after all.'

'Ah, but that was physical proof rather than theoretical. I wished to determine the same truth via hypothesis and theory.'

'In order to test the veracity of the methods?'

'Oh, no. Said veracity is already a given. No, lad, I seek to prove the veracity of physical evidence. Who can trust what the eyes witness, after all? Now, if mathematical evidence supports such practical observation, then we're getting somewhere.'

Brys looked round. 'Where are your helpers?'

'I sent them to the Royal Lens-maker for more lenses.'

'When was that?'

'Sometime this morning, I believe. Yes, just after breakfast.'

'You have therefore been hanging there all day.'

'And turning this way and that, without my own volition. There are forces, lad, unseen forces, that pull upon us every moment of our existence. Forces, I now believe, in conflict.'

'Conflict? In what way?'

'The ground beneath us exerts an imperative, evidenced by the blood settling in my face, the lightness in the back of my skull, the unseen hands seeking to drag me down – I have had the most exquisite hallucinations.
Yet there is a contrary, weaker force seeking to drag me – another world, one which travels the sky around this one—'

"The moon?"

'There are actually at least four moons, lad, but the others are not only distant, but perpetually occluded from reflecting the sun's light. Very difficult to see, although early texts suggest that this was not always so. Reasons for their fading as yet unknown, although I suspect our world's own bulk has something to do with it. Then again, it may be that they are not farther away at all, but indeed closer, only very small. Relatively speaking."

Brys studied the map on the floor. 'That's the original, isn't it? What new perspective have you achieved with all those lenses?'

'An important question? Probably, but in an indirect fashion. I had the map in my hands, lad, but then it fell. None the less, I have been rewarded with an insight. The continents were once all joined. What forces, one must therefore ask, have pulled them apart? Who forwarded the Chancellor's request?'

'What? Oh, Turudal Brizad.'

'Ah, yes. Such an errant, troubled lad. One sees such sorrow in his eyes, or at least in his demeanour.'

'One does?'

'And he said?'

'He spoke of a feud between you and the Chancellor; A, uh, new one.'

'There is? First I've heard of it.'

'Oh. So there isn't one.'

'No, no, lad, I'm sure there is. Be good enough to find out about it for me, will you?'

Brys nodded. 'Of course, Ceda. If I can. Is that the extent of your advice?'

'So it is.'

'Well, can I at least help you down?'

'Not at all, lad. Who knows how many more insights I will experience?'

'You may also lose your limbs, or pass out.'

'I still have my limbs?'

Brys moved directly beneath the Ceda, positioning his left shoulder below Kuru Qan's hips. 'I'm unstrapping you.'

'Be assured I will take your word for it, lad.'

'And I intend to have a word or two with your assistants once I'm done with the Chancellor.'

'Go easy on them, please. They're woefully forgetful.'

'Well, they won't forget me after today.'

Hands clasped behind his back, Triban Gnol paced. 'What is the readiness of the military, Finadd?'

Brys frowned. 'Preda Unnutal Hebaz would be better equipped to give you answer to that, Chancellor.'

'She is presently indisposed, and so I would ask you.'

They were alone in the Chancellor's office. Two guards waited outside. Votive candles exuded a scent of rare
Kolanse spices, giving the chamber an atmosphere vaguely religious. A temple of gold coins, and this man is the high priest... 'It is a mandate that the army and navy be maintained at a level of preparedness, Chancellor. Supplies and stores sufficient for a full season's campaign. As you know, contracts with suppliers stipulate that, in times of conflict, the needs of the military are to take precedence over all other clients. These contracts are of course maintained and will be rigorously enforced.'

'Yes yes, Finadd. But I am seeking a soldier's opinion. Are the king's soldiers ready and capable of war?'

'I believe so, Chancellor.'

Triban Gnol halted and fixed Brys with his glittering eyes. 'I will hold you to that, Finadd.'

'I would not have ventured an opinion were I not prepared to stand by it, Chancellor.'

A sudden smile. 'Excellent. Tell me, have you taken a wife yet? I thought not, although I doubt there's a maiden among the nobility who would hesitate in such a coup. There are many legacies one must live with, Finadd, and the means in which they are answered are the defining features of a man's or a woman's life.'

'I'm sorry, Chancellor. What are you getting at?'

'Your family history is well known, Finadd, and I hold deep sympathy for you and indeed, for your hapless brothers. In particular Hull, for whom I feel sincere worry, given his predilection for involving himself in crucial matters which are, strictly, not of his concern. I admit to fretting on his behalf, for I would not wish sorrow upon you and your kin.'

'It strikes me, Chancellor, that you are too generous in assembling your list of concerns. As for legacies, well, they are my own affair, as you no doubt appreciate. For what it is worth, I suggest that you are according Hull too much power in these matters—'

'Do you imagine I am here delivering a veiled warning?' Gnol waved a hand dismissively and resumed pacing. 'It insults me that you believe I am as crass as that. Does a seal-hunter warn the seal of the net closing round it? Hardly. No, Finadd, I am done with you. Rest assured I will waste no more sympathy upon you and your brothers.'

'I am relieved to hear that,' Brys said.

A venomous look. 'Please close the door on your way out, Finadd.'

'Of course, Chancellor.'

* * *

Outside, walking alone down the corridor, Brys sighed. He had failed to learn anything of the purported feud between Gnol and Kuru Qan. It seemed he had achieved little more than adding himself to the Chancellor's list of enemies.

A second, deeper sigh.

He had nothing of Hull's stolid determination. Nothing of Tehol's cunning. He had but some skill with a sword. And what value that, when his attackers employed insinuation and threat in some verbal knife-game? Seeking to deliver wounds that time did not heal?

Reluctantly, he realized he needed advice.

Which meant another duel, this time with his own brother.

At least Tehol had no desire to wound. Errant bless him, he seems to have no desires at all.

'What I desire,' Tehol said, scowling, 'is a meal that actually began with real food. Sort of a founding premise that what one is to eat is actually sustaining at its most basic level.' He lifted one of the dark, limp leaves, studied it for a moment, then forced it into his mouth. Chewing, he glowered at Bugg.
‘There are apes, master, for whom banana leaves constitute an essential source of nutrition.’
‘Indeed? And are they extinct yet?’
‘I don’t know. I am only recounting a sailor’s story I heard once at a bar.’
‘He was a drunkard and a liar.’
‘Oh, you know him, then.’

Tehol looked round. ‘Where’s Ublala? I need him here, so Shurq Elalle can gauge his …’
‘Length?’
‘Worth. Where is he?’
‘On the roof. Pining.’
‘Oh. The roof is good. Pining is not. Does he need yet another talking to, do you think?’
‘From you, master? No.’
‘Some more leaves, please. Don’t skimp on the sauce or whatever it is.’
‘Right the second time.’
‘Whatever it is? You don’t know?’
‘No, master. It just leaked out. Maybe from the leaves, maybe from something else. It reminds one of—’
‘Tanneries?’
‘Yes, that’s it exactly. Well done.’

Tehol paled and slowly set down his bowl. ‘I just had a thought.’
Bugg’s eyes widened and he too put his bowl down. ‘Please, master, do not pursue that thought.’
‘It keeps coming back.’

‘The thought?’
‘No, the supper.’ He rose suddenly. ‘Time for some air.’

‘Mind if I join you?’

‘Not at all, Bugg. Clearly, during the course of preparing this meal, you worked hard at ignoring whatever impressions you may have had. I understand that you might well be exhausted by that effort. And if not, you should be.’

They turned at a sound from the alley, then the curtain across the entrance was swept aside.

‘Ah, Shand, we were wondering when you would arrive!’

‘You’re a liar and a thief, Tehol Beddict.’

‘It’s the company I keep,’ Bugg muttered.

Rissarh and Hejun followed behind Shand as she stormed into the small room.

Tehol backed to the far wall, which wasn’t nearly far enough. ‘Needless to say,’ he said, ‘I’m impressed.’

Shand halted. ‘With what?’
He saw that her fists were clenched. 'Well, your vigour, of course. At the same time, I realize I have been remiss in directing your admirable energies, Shand. It's now clear to me that you – all three of you, in fact – require a more direct involvement in our nefarious undertaking.'

'He's doing it again,' Rissarh growled.

'We're supposed to be beating him up right now,' Hejun added. 'Look what he's done. Shand, less than a bell ago you were saying—'

'Be quiet about what I was saying,' Shand cut in. 'Direct involvement, you said, Tehol. Finally. It's about time, and no games, you slippery bastard. Talk to save your life.'

'Of course,' Tehol said, smiling. 'Please, make yourselves comfortable—'

'We're comfortable enough. Talk.'

'Well, you don't look comfortable—'

Tehol.

'As you like. Now, I'm going to give you a list of names, which you will have to memorize. Horul Esterrict, of Cargo Olives. Mirrik the Blunt, eldest of the Blunts, owner of Blunt's Letherii Steel and Blunt Weaponry. Stoople Rott, the grain magnate of Fort Shake. His brother, Puryst, the ale brewer. Erudinaas, queen of the rustleaf plantations at Dissent. The financiers, Bruck Stiffen, Horul Rinnesict, Grate Chizev of Letheras, Hepar the Pleaser, of Trate. Debt-holders Druz Themnict, Pralit Peff, Barrakta Ilk, Uster Taran, Lystry Maullict, all of Letheras. Tharav the Hidden, of room eleven, Chobor's Manse on Seal Street, Trate. Got those?'

Shand was glassy-eyed. 'There's more?'

'A dozen or so.'

'You want them killed?' Hejun asked.

'Errant no! I want you to begin purchasing shares in their enterprises. Under a variety of names, of course. Strive for forty-nine per cent. Once there, we'll be poised to force a coup. The goal, of course, is controlling interest, but to gain that will only be achieved with sudden ambush, and for that the timing has to be perfect. In any case, once you have done all that – the purchasing, that is – make no further move, just get back to me.'

'And how are we going to afford all that?' Shand demanded.

'Oh,' Tehol waved a hand, 'we're flush. The coin I invested for you is making a sizeable return. Time's come to make use of it.'

'How much of a return?'

'More than enough—'

'How much?'

'Well, I haven't actually counted it—'

Bugg spoke. 'About a peak.'

'Errant's blessing!' Shand stared at Tehol. 'But I haven't seen you do a thing!

'If you had, Shand, then I wouldn't have been careful enough. Now, best we start with just the names I've given you. The next list can come later. Now, I have meetings scheduled this night—'

'What kind of meetings?'

'Oh, this and that. Now, please, I beg you – no more charging in through my front door. It's bound to get noticed sooner or later, and that could be bad.'
'What have you two been eating?' Rissarh suddenly asked, her nose wrinkling.

'This and that,' Bugg replied.

'Come on,' Shand said to her companions, 'let's go home. Maybe Ublala will turn up.'

'I'm sure he will,' Tehol said, smiling as he escorted the three women to the doorway. 'Now, get some sleep. You've busy times ahead.'

Hejun half turned. 'Cargo Olives – Horul who?'

Shand reached out and dragged Hejun into the alley.

Still smiling, Tehol adjusted the curtain until it once more covered the entrance. Then he spun round. 'That went well.'

'Rissarh had a knife,' Bugg said, 'tucked up along her wrist.'

'She did? Tucked up?'

'Yes, master.'

Tehol walked to the ladder. 'I trust you had your own knives close to hand.'

'I don't have any knives.'

Tehol paused, one hand on the nearest rung. 'What? Well, where are all our weapons?'

'We don't have any weapons, master.'

'None? Did we ever?'

'No. Some wooden spoons...'

'And are you adept with them?'

'Very.'

'Well, that's all right, then. You coming?'

'In a moment, master.'

'Right, and be sure to clean up. This place is a dreadful mess.'

'If I find the time.'

Ublala Pung was lying face-down on the roof, near the bed.

'Ublala,' Tehol said, approaching, 'is something wrong?'

'No.' The word was muffled.

'What are you doing down there?'

'Nothing.'

'Well, we're about to have a guest who wants to meet you.'

'That's fine.'

'It might be worth your while to endeavour to make a good impression,' Tehol said.

'All right.'
'That might prove a little difficult, Ublala, with you lying there like that. When I first came up, I admit to thinking that you were dead.' He paused, then, considering, and brightened. 'Mind you, that might be a good thing—'

A scuff of boots to one side, then Shurq Elalle stepped from the shadows. 'Is this him?'

'You're early,' Tehol said.

'I am? Oh. Well, are you waiting for a necromancer to animate him or something?'

'I would be, were he dead. Ublala, if you will, stand up. I would like to introduce you to Shurq Elalle—'

'Is she the dead one?' he asked, not yet moving. 'The thief who drowned?'

'Already you're holding something against me,' Shurq replied, her tone despondent.

'We haven't got to that yet,' Tehol said. 'Ublala, get up. Shurq has needs. You can meet them, and in return you get Shand, Rissarh and Hejun to leave off—'

'Why would they?' Ublala demanded.

'Because Shurq will tell them to.'

'I will?'

'Look,' Tehol said, exasperated, 'neither of you are cooperating here. On your feet, Ublala.'

'That won't be necessary,' Shurq cut in. 'Just roll him over.'

'Oh, fine, that's very nice. Crass, but nice.' Tehol crouched down alongside Ublala, pushed his hands beneath the huge man, then lifted. Tehol's feet skidded. He grunted, gasped, heaved again and again, to little effect.

'Stop it,' Shurq said in a strange voice. 'You're going to make me laugh. And laughing right now would be expensive.'

Sprawled across Ublala, Tehol stared up at her. 'Expensive?'

'All those spices, of course. Tell me, Ublala, what did you see when you walked across the bottom of the canal?'

'Mud.'

'What else?'

'Junk.'

'What else? What were you walking on?'


'Furniture?' Tehol asked. 'Serviceable furniture?'

'Well, there was a chair. But I didn't sit in it.'

'Bodies,' Shurq said. 'Yes. Lots of bodies. How deep was the canal originally?'

Bugg had arrived, and with this question Tehol looked over at his manservant. 'Well? You must know, being an engineer and all that.'

'But I'm only pretending to be an engineer,' Bugg pointed out.

'So pretend to know the answer to Shurq's question!'
'It was said seven tall men could stand, foot to shoulder, and the last would be able to reach up with his hands and find the surface. Used to be big trader ships could make their way the entire length.'

'I wasn't far from the surface,' Ublala said, rolling over, unmindful of Tehol who yelped as he was tumbled to one side with a thump. 'I could almost reach,' he added as he stood, brushing himself off.

'That's a lot of rubbish,' Bugg commented.

'I'm not lying,' Ublala said.

'I didn't say you were,' Bugg said.

'So,' Shurq asked, 'who is killing all those people?'

'Never mind all that,' Tehol said as he clambered to his feet. 'Shurq Elalle, permit me to introduce Ublala Pung. The canal walk is very lovely at night, yes? Not in it, I mean. Alongside it, just for a change. Perfect for a promenade—'

'I intend to rob Gerun Eberict's estate,' Shurq said to Ublala. 'But there are outlying watchers that need taking care of. Can you create a diversion, Ublala Pung?'

The huge man scratched his jaw. 'I don't know. I got nothing against them—'

'They don't like you.'

'They don't? Why?'

'No reason. They just don't.'

'Then I don't like them either.'

'So you say, but I haven't seen any proof.'

'You want proof? Good. Let's go.'

Shurq hooked one arm in Ublala's and led him towards the far edge of the roof. 'We have to jump to that other roof,' she said. 'I don't think you can do it, Ublala. Not quietly, anyway.'

'Yes I can. I'll show you I can.'

'We'll see ...'

Tehol stared after them, then he swung to Bugg.

The manservant shrugged. 'It's the complexities of the male mind, master.'

The rain earlier that day had made the night air blessedly cool. Brys Beddict left the palace by a side postern and proceeded on a circuitous route towards his brother's residence. Although it was close to midnight, there were plenty of people on the streets.

He had never felt entirely comfortable in the crowded, sordid maze that was Letheras. The face of wealth stayed mostly hidden, leaving only the ravaged mien of poverty, and that was at times almost overwhelming. Beyond the Indebted were the lost, those who had given up entirely, and among them could be seen not just refugees from annexed tribes, but Letherii as well – more than he would have imagined. For all the explosive growth driving the kingdom, it seemed an ever greater proportion of the population was being left behind, and that was troubling.

At what point in the history of Letheras, he wondered, did rampant greed become a virtue? The level of self-justification required was staggering in its tautological complexity, and it seemed language itself was its greatest armour against common sense.

_You can't leave all these people behind. They're outside the endless excitement and lust, the frenzied_
accumulation. They're outside and can only look on with growing despair and envy. What happens when rage supplants helplessness?

Increasingly, the ranks of the military were filling with the lowest classes. Training, acceptable income and a full belly provided the incentives, yet these soldiers were not enamoured of the civilization they were sworn to defend. True, many of them joined with dreams of booty, of wealth stolen and glory gained. But such riches came only with aggression, and successful aggression at that. What would happen if the military found itself on the defensive? They'll fight to defend their homes, their loved ones. Of course they will. There's no cause for worry, is there?

He swung into the alley leading to Tehol's home, and heard, somewhere beyond the squalid tenement, the sounds of a fierce argument. Things came crashing down in a cacophony that ended with a shriek.

Brys hesitated. He could not reach the source of the sounds from this alley, but Tehol's rooftop might permit him a view down on the opposite street. He went on.

With the pommel of his knife Brys tapped on the doorframe. There was no reply. He pulled aside the curtain and peered in. A single wavering oil lamp, the faint glow from the hearth, and voices coming down from above.

Brys entered and climbed the rickety ladder.

He emerged onto the roof to see Tehol and his manservant standing at the far edge, looking down – presumably on the argument that was still under way.

'Tehol,' Brys called, approaching. 'Is this a matter for the city guard?'

His brother swung about, then shook his head. 'I don't think so, brother. A resolution is but moments away. Wouldn't you agree, Bugg?'

'I think so, since he's almost out and that old woman's run out of things to throw.'

Brys came alongside and looked down. A huge man was busy extricating himself from a pile of dusty rubble, ducking when objects were flung at him by a old woman in the tenement doorway.

'What happened?' Brys asked.

'An associate of mine,' Tehol said, 'jumped onto the roof over there from this one. He landed quietly enough, I suppose. Then the roof gave out, alas. As you can see, he's a big man.'

The hapless associate had climbed free at last. It appeared that he had taken most of the wall with him in his descent. It was a miracle that he seemed uninjured. 'Why was he jumping from your roof, Tehol?'

'It was a dare.'

'Yours?'

'Oh no, I'd never do that.'

'Then who? Surely not your manservant?'

Bugg sputtered, 'Me? Most assuredly not, Finadd!'

'Another guest,' Tehol explained. 'Who has since gone, although not far, I imagine. Somewhere in the shadows, waiting for dear Ublala.'

'Ublala? Ublala Pung? Oh, yes, I recognize him now. An associate? Tehol, the man's a criminal—'

'Who proved his innocence in the canal—'

'That's not innocence,' Brys retorted, 'that's stubborn will.'

'A will that the Errant would surely have weakened were Ublala truly guilty of the crimes of which he had
been accused.'

'Tehol, really—'

His brother faced him, brows raised. 'Are you, a soldier of the king, casting aspersions on our justice system?'

'Tehol, the king casts aspersions on the justice system!' 'None the less, Brys – oh, what are you doing here, by the way?'

'I have come seeking your advice.'

'Oh. Well, shall we retire to a more private section of my rooftop? Here, follow me – that far corner is ideal.'

'Wouldn't down below be better?'

'Well, it would, if Bugg had bothered cleaning up. As it is, my abode is an unacceptable mess. I can't concentrate down there, not for a moment. My stomach turns at the thought—'

'That would be supper,' Bugg said behind them.

The brothers turned to look back at him.

Bugg gave a sheepish wave. 'I'll be down below, then.'

They watched him leave.

Brys cleared his throat. 'There are factions in the palace. Intrigues. And it seems certain people would force me into involvement, when all I wish is to remain loyal to my king.'

'Ah, and some of those factions are less than loyal to the king?'

'Not in any manner that could be proved. Rather, it's simply a matter of reinterpretation of what would best serve the king and the kingdom's interests.'

'Ah, but those are two entirely different things. The king's interests versus the kingdom's interests. At least, I assume that's how they see it, and who knows, they might be right.'

'They might, Tehol, but I have doubts.'

Tehol folded his arms and stared out on the city. 'So,' he said, 'there's the queen's faction, which includes Prince Quillas, Chancellor Triban Gnol, and the First Consort, Turudal Brizad. Have I missed anyone?'

Brys was staring at his brother. He shook his head. 'Officers and guards, various spies.'

'And the king's own faction. Ceda Kuru Qan, First Eunuch Nifadas, Preda Unnutil Hebaz and perhaps First Concubine Nisall. And, of course, you.'

'But I have no desire to be in any faction—'

'You're the King's Champion, brother. As I see it, you have little choice.'

'Tehol, I am hopeless at such games of intrigue.'

'So say nothing. Ever.'

'What good will that do?'

'You'll convince them you're smarter than they are. Even scarier, that you know everything. You can see through all their facades—'

'But I can't see through all that, Tehol. Therefore, I'm not smarter.'
'Of course you are. You just need to treat it like a duel. In fact, treat everything like a duel. Feint, parry, disengage, all that complicated stuff.'

'Easy for you to say,' Brys muttered.

They fell silent, staring out over the dark city. Oil lamps lit the canal walks, but the water itself was black as ink, winding like ribbons of oblivion between the squat, hulking buildings. Other lights swung in motion down the streets, carried by people going about their tasks. For all that, darkness dominated the scene.

Brys stared up at the nearest tier, watched a few lanterns slide along the span like minuscule moons. 'I have been thinking about Hull,' he said after a time.

'I would hold out little hope,' Tehol said. 'Our brother's desires have nothing to do with self-preservation. It is in his mind, I believe, that he is going to die soon.'

Brys nodded.

'And,' Tehol continued, 'if he can, in so doing he will also take down as much of Lether as possible. For that reason alone, someone will stop him. With finality.'

'And vengeance against those murderers will be expected of me,' Brys said.

'Not necessarily,' Tehol said. 'After all, your foremost loyalty is to your king.'

'Superseding even that to my family?'

'Well, yes.'

'To do nothing would be seen as cowardice. Worse yet, I do not think I could face Hull's killers without reaching for my sword.'

'You may have to, Brys. Of course,' Tehol added, 'I am not so bound by such prohibitions.'

Brys studied his brother for a long moment. 'You would avenge Hull?'

'Count on it.'

Eventually, Brys smiled.

Tehol glanced over and nodded. 'That's perfect, brother. When you come face to face with them, show that smile. It will put terror in their hearts.'

Brys sighed and returned his gaze to the city. 'Outwardly, we seem so different, the three of us.'

'And so we are,' Tehol replied. 'It comes down to methods, and we each walk unique paths. At the same time, alas, we must all live with an identical legacy, a particularly unpleasant inheritance.' He shrugged, then pulled up his sagging trousers. 'Three stones in a stream. All subjected to the same rushing water, yet each shaped differently, depending upon its nature.'

'And which of us is sandstone?'

'Hull. He's been worn down the most, brother, by far. You, you're basalt.'

'And you, Tehol?'

'Maybe a mix of the two, yielding a sadly misshapen result. But I can live with it.'

'Perhaps you can,' Brys observed, 'but what about the rest of us?'

'There's a matter on which you can help me, brother.'

'Oh?'
'Presumably, there are recorders of obscure information in the palace. People who tally various events, trends
and such.'

'A veritable army of them, Tehol.'

'Indeed. Now, might you make some discreet inquiries for me?'

'Regarding what?'

'People going missing in Letheras. Annual numbers, that sort of thing.'

'If you like. Why?'

'At the moment, I'm just curious.'

'What are you up to, Tehol?'

'This and that.'

Brys grimaced. 'Be careful.'

'I shall. Do you smell that? Bugg is brewing tea.'

'That doesn't smell like tea.'

'Yes, he's full of surprises. Let's go down. I for one am very thirsty.'

Shurq Elalle watched Ublala Pung close in on the pair of guards who had just come round the corner of the
estate's outer wall. They had time to look up in alarm before he threw his punch. Crunching into one jaw, then
following through to crack against the other man's temple. Both collapsed. Ublala paused, looking down on
them, then headed off in search of more.

Shurq stepped from the shadows and approached the wall. Wards had been etched into the ochre stone, but
she knew they were linked to intrusions by someone living. The heat of a body, the moist breaths, the thump of
a heart. Those relating to motion were far more expensive to maintain, and would be reserved for the main
house.

She reached the wall, paused to take a final look round, then quickly scaled it.

The top was studded with shards of razor-sharp iron that cut deep into the reinforced padding on her gloves.
As she drew herself up, the shards cut through the layers of leather and sank into her palms, improving her grip.
She would get the lacerations sewn up later, to keep out lint and insects and other creatures that might seek to
take up residence in the punctures.

Her upper body perched above her arms, she studied the compound below. Seeing no-one, she lifted herself
over, pivoting on her hands, then edged down onto the other side. She pried her left hand loose of the spikes
and gripped the ledge with her fingers, then tugged her right hand loose as well. Freed of the shards, she
quickly descended to crouch in the shadows beneath the wall.

Dozens of guards somewhere ahead, between her and her goal. Men – but no, she couldn't think about that,
not right now. Later, with Ublala. Unfortunately, the mindless guest within her understood nothing of the value
of anticipation. It knew hunger, and hunger must be appeased. The nature of things alive, she mused, as
opposed to things dead. Urgency, dissatisfaction, the burden of appetites. She'd forgotten.

Four guards standing at the estate entrance, one to either side of the double doors, the remaining two flanking
the broad steps. They looked bored. There were windows on the main floor, but these were shuttered. Balconies
on the next level – the small doors there would be warded. The uppermost floor consisted of three A-frame
rooms facing front, their peaked roofs steep and tiled in slate. Inward of these projections, the estate roof was
flat and low-walled, a veritable forest of potted plants and stunted trees. And hidden watchers.

All in all, seemingly impregnable.
Just the kind she liked.

She set out towards the nearest outbuilding, a maintenance shed with a sloped roof that faced onto the compound. Careful, silent steps, then settling alongside the nearest wall of the shed. Where she waited.

A loud thumping on the front gates.

The four guards at the estate entrance straightened, exchanged glances. There were at least eight of their comrades patrolling the street and alley beyond the wall. It was too late for a guest, and besides, Master Gerun Eberict was not at home. Alternatively, perhaps he had sent a messenger. But then there would have been a signal from the patrol. No, she could see them conclude, this was unusual.

The two guards at the base of the steps set off towards the gate, hands on the grips of their swords.

The thumping stopped when the two men were halfway to the gate. They slowed, drawing weapons.

Two steps from the gate.

The twin massive portals exploded inward, taking both guards down beneath the battered wood and bronze. Ublala's forward momentum carried him over the flattened doors and the men trapped beneath them.

At the top of the stairs, shouts of alarm, and the last two guards were rushing towards the giant.

'I never done nothing to any of you!' Ublala bellowed, or at least that is what Shurq thought he said – the words were made indistinct by his bristling indignation as he charged the two guards.

A brief moment of concern for Shurq, since her man was unarmed.

Swords slashed out. Ublala seemed to slap at them along the flat, and one of the swords cartwheeled through the air. The other ploughed into the pavestones at the giant's feet. A backhand slap spun the nearest man round and off his feet. The remaining guard was screaming, stumbling back. Ublala reached out, caught him by the right arm, and tugged him close.

'I'm not meat I'm a new body!'

Or 'I'm not mean to nobody!'

The guard was dragged off his feet and shaken about in a clatter of armour to accompany the incoherent assertion. The hapless man went limp, his limbs flailing about. Ublala dropped him and looked up.

Guards were streaming towards him from either side of the estate.

He grunted in alarm, turned about and ran back through the gaping gateway.

Shurq glanced up at the roof. Four figures up there, looking down at the fleeing giant, two of them readying javelins.

But he was already through the archway.

Shurq slipped round the back of the shed and darted across the narrow gap to come alongside the estate wall. She padded towards the stairs, onto the platform and through the unwarded entrance. Outside, she heard someone shout orders for a rearguard to hold the compound, but clearly no-one had turned round to keep an eye on the front doors.

Shurq found herself in a reception hall, the walls covered in frescos illustrating Gerun's desperate defence of King Ezgara Diskanar. She paused, drew out a knife to scratch a moustache on Gerun's manly, grimacing, triumphant face, then continued on through an archway leading to a large chamber modelled in the fashion of a throne room, although the throne – an ornate, high-backed monstrosity – was simply positioned at the head of a long table instead of surmounting a raised dais.

Doors at every corner of the chamber, each one elaborately framed. A fifth one, narrow and inset at the back,
probably with a servants' passage beyond.

No doubt the inhabitants were awake by now. Yet, being servants – Indebted one and all – they'd be hiding under their cots during this terrifying tumult.

She set off towards that last door. The passageway beyond was narrow and poorly lit. Curtained cells lined it, the pathetic residences of the staff. No light showed from beneath any of the hangings, but Shurq caught the sound of scuffing from one room halfway down, and a stifled gasp from one closer, on her left.

She closed her gloved hand on the grip of the fighting knife strapped beneath her left arm, and ran the back of the blade hard against the scabbard edge as she drew it forth. More gasps. A terrified squeal.

Slow steps down the narrow passage, pausing every now and then, but never long enough to elicit a scream from anyone, until she came to a T-intersection. To the right the aisle opened out onto the kitchen. To the left, a staircase leading both up and to cellars below ground. Shurq swung round and faced the passageway she had just quitted. Pitching her voice low, she hissed, 'Go to sleep. Was jus' doin' a circuit. No-one here, sweeties. Relax.'

'Who's that?' a voice asked.

'Who cares?' another replied. 'Like he said, Prist, go back t'sleep.'

But Prist continued, 'It's jus' that I don' recognize 'im—'

'Yeah,' the other countered, 'an' you ain't a gardener but a real live hero, right, Prist?'

'All I'm sayin' is—'

Shurq walked back to halt in front of Prist's curtain.

She heard movement beyond, but the man was silent.

She drew the dirty linen to one side and slipped into the cramped room. It stank of mud and manure. In the darkness she could just make out a large, crouching figure at the back wall, a blanket drawn up under its chin.

'Ah, Prist,' Shurq murmured in a voice little more than a whisper and taking another step closer, 'are you any good at keeping quiet? I hope so, because I intend to spend some time with you. Don't worry,' she added as she unbuckled her belt, 'it'll be fun.'

Two bells later, Shurq lifted her head from the gardener's muscled arm, concentrating to listen beyond his loud snores. Poor bastard had been worn right out – she hoped Ublala could manage better – and all his subsequent whimpering and mewling was disgusting. As the bell's low echoes faded, a solid silence replaced it.

The guards had returned shortly after Shurq had slipped into Prist's cubicle. Loud with speculation and bitter argument, indicating that Ublala had made good his escape, although a call for the services of the house healer suggested there'd been a clash or two. Since that time, things had settled down. There had been a cursory search of the estate, but not the servants' quarters, suggesting that no suspicion of diversion and infiltration had occurred to the house guards. Careless. Indicative of a sad lack of imagination. All in all, as she had expected. An overbearing master had that effect. Initiative was dangerous, lest it clash with Gerun's formidable ego.

Shurq pulled herself loose from Prist's exhausted, childlike embrace, and rose silently to don her clothes and gear. Gerun would have an office, adjoining his private rooms. Men like Gerun always had offices. It served their need for legitimacy.

Its defences would be elaborate, the magic expensive and thorough. But not so complicated as to leave a Finadd confused. Accordingly, the mechanisms of deactivation would be straightforward. Another thing to consider, of course, was the fact that Gerun was absent. It was likely there were additional wards in place that could not be negated. She suspected they would be life-aspected, since other kinds could more easily be accidentally triggered.
She quietly stepped back into the passageway. Sounds of sleep and naught else. Satisfied, Shurq returned to the T-intersection and turned left. Ascending the staircase, she was careful to place each foot along alternating edges where the joins reduced the likelihood of a telltale creak.

Reaching the first landing, Shurq stepped close to the door, then paused. Motionless. A tripwire was set along the seam of the door, locked in place by the last servant to use the passage. Sometimes the simplest alarms succeeded where more elaborate ones failed, if only because the thief was over-anticipating the complication. She released the mechanism and turned the latch.

Into another servants’ passage, running parallel to the formal hallway, assuming a typical layout for Gerun's estate. She found the lone door where she expected, on the right at the far end. Another tripwire to release, then she stepped through. The hallway was unlit, which was clever. Three doors along the opposite wall, the rooms beyond showing no light.

She was fairly certain she had found Gerun Eberict's private quarters. Barely detectable in the gloom were a host of arcane sigils painted on the nearest door.

Shurq edged closer to study those symbols.

And froze as a dull voice spoke from down the corridor. 'It was incompetence. Or so he says. And now I'm supposed to make it up to him.'

She slowly turned. A seated figure, sprawled back with legs stretched out, head tilted to one side.

'You're dead,' the man said.

'Is that a promise or an observation?'

'Just something we have in common,' he answered. 'That doesn't happen to me much, any more.'

'I know just how you feel. So, Gerun has you here guarding his rooms.'

'It's my penance.'

'For incompetence.'

'Yes. Gerun doesn't fire people, you know. He kills them and then, depending on how angry he is, either buries them or keeps them on for a time. I suppose he'll bury me eventually.'

'Without releasing your soul?'

'He often forgets about that part.'

'I'm here to steal everything he has.'

'If you were living I would of course kill you in some monstrous, terrifying way. I would get up from this chair, feet dragging, arms out with my hands clawing the air. I'd make bestial sounds and moans and hisses as if I was hungry to sink my teeth into your throat.'

'That would certainly prove sufficient to deter a thief. A living one, that is.'

'It would, and I'd probably enjoy it, too.'

'But I'm not living, am I?'

'No. But I have one question for you and it's an important one.'

'All right. Ask it.'

'Why, since you're dead, do you look so good? Who cut your hair? Why aren't you rotting away like me? Are you stuffed with herbs or something? Are you wearing make-up? Why are the whites of your eyes so white? Your lips so glossy?'
Shurq was silent a moment, then asked, ‘Is that your one question?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you like, I can introduce you to the people responsible for the new me. I am sure they can do the same for you.’

‘Really? Including a manicure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘What about filing my teeth? You know, to make them sharp and scary.’

‘Well, I don’t know how scary you will be with styled hair, make-up, perfect nails and glossy lips.’

‘But sharp teeth? Don’t you think the sharp teeth will terrify people?’

‘Why not just settle for those? Most people are frightened of rotting things, of things crawling with vermin and stinking like a freshly turned grave. Fangs and fingernails clipped into talons.’

‘I like it. I like how you think.’

‘My pleasure. Now, do I have to worry about these wards?’

‘No. In fact, I can show you where all the mechanisms are for the alarms.’

‘Won’t that give you away?’

‘Give me away? Why, I am coming with you, of course. Assuming you can get us both out of here.’

‘Oh, I see. I’m sure we’ll manage. What is your name, by the way?’

‘Harlest Eberict.’

Shurq cocked her head, then said, ‘Oh. But you died ten years ago, according to your brother.’

‘Ten years? Is that all?’

‘He said you fell down the stairs, I believe. Or something like that.’

‘Stairs. Or pitched off the balcony. Maybe both.’

‘And what did you do or fail to do that earned such punishment?’

‘I don’t remember. Only that I was incompetent.’

‘That was long before Gerun saved the king’s life. How could he have afforded the sorcery needed to bind your soul to your body?’

‘I believe he called in a favour.’

Shurq swung back to the door. ‘Does this lead to his office?’

‘No, that one goes to his love-making room. You want the one over here.’

‘Any chance of anyone hearing us talking right now, Harlest?’

‘No, the walls are thick.’

‘One last thing,’ Shurq said, eyeing Harlest. ‘Why didn’t Gerun bind your loyalty with magic?’

The pale, patchy face displayed surprise. ‘Well, we’re brothers!’
Alarms negated, the two undead stood in Finadd Gerun Eberict's office.

'He doesn't keep much actual coin here,' Harlest said. 'Mostly writs of holding. He spreads his wealth around to protect it.'

'Very wise. Where is his seal?'

'On the desk.'

'Very unwise. Do me a favour and start collecting those writs.' She walked over to the desk and gathered up the heavy, ornate seal and the thick sheets of wax piled beside it. 'This wax is an exclusive colour?'

'Oh yes. He paid plenty for that.' Harlest had gone to a wall and was removing a large tapestry behind which was an inset cabinet. He disengaged a number of tripwires, then swung open the small door. Within were stacks of scrolls and a small jewelled box.

'What's in the box?' Shurq asked.

Harlest lifted it out and tossed it to Shurq. 'His cash. Like I said, he never keeps much around.'

She examined the clasp. Satisfied that it wasn't booby-trapped, she slid it to one side and tipped back the lid. 'Not much? Harlest, this is full of diamonds.'

The man, his arms loaded with scrolls, walked over. 'It is?'

'He's called in a few of his holdings, I think.'

'He must have. I wonder why?'

'To use it,' she replied, 'for something very expensive. Oh well, he'll just have to go without.'

'Gerun will be so angry,' Harlest said, shaking his head. 'He will go mad. He'll start hunting us down, and he won't stop until he finds us.'

'And then what? Torture? We don't feel pain. Kill us? We're already dead—’

'He'll take his money back—’

'He can't if it doesn't exist any more.'

Harlest frowned.

Smiling, Shurq closed the box and reset the clasp. 'It's not like you and I have any use for it, is it? No, this is the equivalent of tossing Gerun off the balcony or down the stairs, only financially rather than physically.'

'Well, he is my brother.'

'Who murdered you and wouldn't even leave it at that.'

'That's true.'

'So, we're heading out via the balcony. I have a companion who is about to begin another diversion. Are you with me, Harlest?'

'Can I still get the fangs?'

'I promise.'

'Okay, let's go.'

It was nearing dawn, and the ground steamed. Kettle sat on a humped root and watched a single trailing leg slowly edge its way into the mulch. The man had lost a boot in the struggle, and she watched his toes twitch a
moment before they were swallowed up in the dark earth.

He'd fought hard, but with his lower jaw torn off and his throat filling with blood, it hadn't lasted long. Kettle licked her fingers.

It was good that the tree was still hungry.

The bad ones had begun a hunt beneath the ground, clawing and slithering and killing whatever was weak. Soon there would be a handful left, but these would be the worst ones. And then they would come out.

She was not looking forward to that. And this night, she'd had a hard time finding a victim in the streets, someone with unpleasant thoughts who was where he didn't belong for reasons that weren't nice.

It had been getting harder, she realized. She leaned back and pushed her stained fingers through her filthy hair, wondering where all the criminals and spies had disappeared to. It was strange, and troubling.

And her friend, the one buried beneath the oldest tree, he'd told her he was trapped. He couldn't go any further, even with her assistance. But help was on the way, although he wasn't certain it would arrive in time.

She thought about that man, Tehol, who had come by last night to talk. He seemed nice enough. She hoped he would visit again. Maybe he'd know what to do – she swung round on the root and stared up at the square tower – yes, maybe he'd know what to do, now that the tower was dead.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Faded sails ride the horizon
So far and far away to dwindle
The dire script
Writ on that proven canvas.

I know the words belong to me
They belong to me
These tracks left by the beast
Of my presence

Then, before and now, later
And all the moments between
Those distant sails driven
Hard on senseless winds

That even now circle
My stone-hearted self
The grit of tears I never shed
Biting my eyes.

Approach or flee unbidden times
In that belly swollen
With unheard screams so far
And far and so far and away.

This Blind
Longing Isbarath (of the Shore)

Drawn to the shoreline, as if among the host of unwritten truths in a mortal soul could be found a recognition of what it meant to stand on land's edge, staring out into the depthless unknown that was the sea. The yielding sand and stones beneath one's feet whispered uncertainty, rasped promises of dissolution and erosion of all that was once solid.

In the world could be assembled all the manifest symbols to reflect the human spirit, and in the subsequent dialogue was found all meaning, every hue and every flavour, rising in legion before the eyes. Leaving to the witness the decision of choosing recognition or choosing denial.

Udinaas sat on a half-buried tree trunk with the sweeping surf clawing at his mocassins. He was not blind and there was no hope for denial. He saw the sea for what it was, the dissolved memories of the past witnessed in the present and fertile fuel for the future, the very face of time. He saw the tides in their immutable susurration, the vast swish like blood from the cold heart moon, a beat of time measured and therefore measurable. Tides one could not hope to hold back.

Every year a Letherii slave, chest-deep in the water and casting nets, was grasped by an undertow and swept out to sea. With some, the waves later carried them back, lifeless and swollen and crab-eaten. At other times the tides delivered corpses and carcasses from unknown calamities, and the wreckage of ships. From living to death, the vast wilderness of water beyond the shore delivered the same message again and again.
He sat huddled in his exhaustion, gaze focused on the distant breakers of the reef, the rolling white ribbon that came again and again in heartbeat rhythm, and from all sides rushed in waves of meaning. In the grey, heavy sky. In the clarion cries of the gulls. In the misty rain carried by the moaning wind. The uncertain sands trickling away beneath his soaked moccasins. Endings and beginnings, the edge of the knowable world.

She'd run from the House of the Dead. The young woman at whose feet he'd tossed his heart. In the hope that she might glance at it – Errant take him, even pick it up and devour it like some grinning beast. Anything, anything but... running away.

He had fallen unconscious in the House of the Dead – ah, is there meaning in that? – and had been carried out, presumably, back to the cot in the Sengar longhouse. He had awoken later – how long he did not know, for he'd found himself alone. Not even a single slave present in the building. No food had been prepared, no dishes or other signs of a meal left behind. The hearth was a mound of white ash covering a few lingering embers. Outside, beyond the faint voice of the wind and the nearer dripping of rainwater, was silence.

Head filled with fog, his movements slow and awkward, he'd rebuilt the fire. Found a rain cape, and had then walked outside. Seeing no-one nearby, he had made his way down to the shoreline. To stare at the empty, filled sea, and the empty, filled sky. Battered by the silence and its roar of wind and gull screams and spitting rain. Alone on the beach in the midst of this clamouring legion.

The dead warrior who was alive.

The Letherii priestess who had fled in the face of a request for help, to give solace and to comfort a fellow Letherii.

In the citadel of the Warlock King, Udinaas suspected, the Edur were gathered. Wills locked in a dreadful war, and, like an island around which the storm raged in endless cycles, the monstrous form of Rhulad Sengar, who had risen from the House of the Dead. Armoured in gold, clothed in wax, probably unable to walk beneath all that weight – until, of course, those coins were removed.

The art of Udinaas... undone.

There would be pain in that. Excruciating pain, but it had to be done, and quickly. Before the flesh and skin grew to embrace those coins.

Rhulad was not a corpse, nor was he undead, for an undead would not scream. He lived once more. His nerves awake, his mind afire. Trapped in a prison of gold.

As was I, once. As every Letherii is trapped. Oh, he is poetry animate, is Rhulad Sengar, but his words are for the Letherii, not for the Edur.

Just one meaning culled from that dire legion, and one that would not leave him alone. Rhulad was going to go mad. There was no doubt about that in the mind of Udinaas. Dying, only to return to a body that was no longer his, a body that belonged to the forest and the leaves and barrow earth. What kind of journey had that been? Who had opened the path, and why?

It's the sword. It has to be. The sword that would not release his hands. Because it was not finished with Rhulad Sengar. Death means nothing to it. It's not finished.

A gift meant, it seemed, for Hannan Mosag. Offered by whom?

But Hannan Mosag will not have that sword. It has claimed Rhulad instead. And that sword with its power now hangs over the Warlock King.

This could tear the confederacy apart. Could topple Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan. Unless, of course, Rhulad Sengar submitted to the Warlock King's authority.

A less problematic issue had it been Fear, or Trull. Perhaps even Binadas. But no, the sword had chosen Rhulad, the unblooded who had been eager for war, a youth with secret eyes and rebellion in his soul. It might be that he was broken, but Udinaas suspected otherwise. I was able to bring him back, to quell those screams. A
respite from the madness, in which he could gather himself and recall all that he had been.

It occurred to Udinaas that he might have made a mistake. A greater mercy might have been to not impede that swift plummet into madness.

And now he would have me as his slave.

Foam swirled around his ankles. The tide was coming in.

* * *

'We might as well be in a village abandoned to the ghosts,' Buruk the Pale said, using the toe of one boot to edge a log closer to the fire, grimacing at the steam that rose from its sodden bark.

Seren Pedac stared at him a moment longer, then shrugged and reached for the battered kettle that sat on a flat stone near the flames. She could feel the handle's heat through her leather gloves as she refilled her cup. The tea was stewed, but she didn't much care as she swallowed a mouthful of the bitter liquid. At least it was warm.

'How much longer is this going to go on?'

'Curb your impatience, Buruk,' Seren advised. 'There will be no satisfaction in the resolution of all this, assuming a resolution is even possible. We saw him with our own eyes. A dead man risen, but risen too late.'

'Then Hannan Mosag should simply lop off the lad's head and be done with it.'

She made no reply to that. In some ways, Buruk was right. Prohibitions and traditions only went so far, and there was – there could be – no precedent for what had happened. They had watched the two Sengar brothers drag their sibling out through the doorway, the limbed mass of wax and gold that was Rhulad. Red welts for eyes, melted shut, the head lifting itself up to stare blindly at the grey sky for a moment before falling back down. Braided hair sealed in wax, hanging like strips from a tattered sail. Threads of spit slinging down from his gaping mouth as they carried him towards the citadel.

Edur gathered on the bridge. On the far bank, the village side, and emerging from the other noble longhouses surrounding the citadel. Hundreds of Edur, and even more Letherii slaves, drawn to witness, silent and numbed and filled with horror. She had watched most of the Edur then file into the citadel. The slaves seemed to have simply disappeared.

Seren suspected that Feather Witch was casting the tiles, in some place less public than the huge barn where she had last conducted the ritual. At least, there had been no-one there when she had looked.

And now, time crawled. Buruk's camp and the Nerek huddled in their tents had become an island in the mist, surrounded by the unknown.

She wondered where Hull had gone. There were ruins in the forest, and rumours of strange artefacts, some massive and sprawling, many days' travel to the northeast. Ancient as this forest was, it had found soil fertile with history. Destruction and dissolution concluded every passing of the cycle, and the breaking down delivered to the exhausted world the manifold parts to assemble a new whole.

But healing belonged to the land. It was not guaranteed to that which lived upon it. Breeds ended; the last of a particular beast, the last of a particular race, each walked alone for a time. Before the final closing of those singular eyes, and the vision behind them.

Seren longed to hold on to that long view. She desperately sought out the calm wisdom it promised, the peace that belonged to an extended perspective. With sufficient distance, even a range of mountains could look flat, the valleys between each peak unseen. In the same manner, lives and deaths, mortality's peaks and valleys, could be levelled. Thinking in this way, she felt less inclined to panic.

And that was becoming increasingly important.
'And where in the Errant's name is that delegation?' Buruk asked.

'From Trate,' Seren said, 'they'll be tacking all the way. They're coming.'

'Would that they had done so before all this.'

'Do you fear that Rhulad poses a threat to the treaty?'

Buruk's gaze remained fixed on the flames. 'It was the sword that raised him,' he said in a low voice. 'Or whoever made it and sent it to the Edur. Did you catch a glimpse of the blade? It's mottled. Made me think of one of the Daughters they worship, the dappled one, what was her name?'

'Sukul Ankhadu.'

'Maybe she exists in truth. An Edur goddess—'

'A dubious gift, then, for the Edur view Sukul Ankhadu as a fickle creature. She is feared. They worship Father Shadow and Daughter Dusk, Sheltatha Lore. And, on a day to day basis, more of the latter than the former.' Seren finished the tea then refilled the tin cup. 'Sukul Ankhadu. I suppose that is possible, although I can't recall any stories about those gods and goddesses of the Edur ever manifesting themselves in such a direct manner. It seemed more like ancestor worship, the founders of the tribes elevated into holy figures, that sort of thing.' She sipped and grimaced.

'That will burn holes in your gut, Acquitor.'

'Too late for that, Buruk.'

'Well, if not Ankhadu, then who? That sword came from somewhere.'

'I don't know.'

'Nor does it sound as if you even care. This listlessness ill suits you, Acquitor.'

'It's not listlessness, Buruk, it's wisdom. I'm surprised you can't tell the difference.'

'Is it wisdom taking the life from your eyes, the sharpness from your thoughts? Is it wisdom that makes you indifferent to the nightmare miracle we witnessed yesterday?'

'Absolutely. What else could it be?'

'Despair?'

'And what have I that's worthy of despair?'

'I'm hardly the one to answer that.'

'True—'

'But I'll try anyway.' He drew out a flask and pulled out the stopper, then tilted it back. Two quick swallows, after which he sighed and leaned back. 'It strikes me you're a sensitive type, Acquitor, which probably is a quality for someone in your profession. But you're not able to separate business from everything else. Sensitivity is a pervasive kind of vulnerability, after all. Makes you easy to hurt, makes the scars you carry liable to open and weep at the slightest prod.' He took another drink, his face growing slack with the effects of the potent liquor and nectar, a looseness coming to his words as he continued, 'Hull Beddict. He's pushed you away, but you know him too well. He is rushing headlong. Into a fate of his own choosing, and it will either kill him or destroy him. You want to do something about it, maybe even stop him, but you can't. You don't know how, and you feel that as your own failure. Your own flaw. A weakness. Thus, for the fate that will befall him, you choose not to blame him, but yourself. And why not? It's easier.'

She had chosen to stare at the bitter dregs in the cup embraced by her hands, sometime during the course of Buruk's pronouncements. Eyes tracking the battered rim, then out to the fingers and thumbs, swathed in stained,
scarred leather. Flattened pads polished and dark, seams fraying, the knuckles stretched and gnarled. Somewhere within was skin, flesh, muscle, tendon and callus. And bone. Hands were such extraordinary tools, she mused. Tools, weapons, clumsy and deft, numb and tactile. Among tribal hunters, they could speak, a flurry of gestures eloquent in silence. But they could not taste. Could not hear. Could not weep. For all that, they killed so easily.

While from the mouth sounds issued forth, recognizably shaped into meanings of passion, of beauty, of blinding clarity. Or muddied or quietly cutting, murderous and evil. Sometimes all at once. Language was war, vaster than any host of swords, spears and sorcery. The self waging battle against everyone else. Borders enacted, defended, sallies and breaches, fields of corpses rotting like tumbled fruit. Words ever seeking allies, ever seeking iconic verisimilitude in the heaving press.

And, she realized, she was tired. Tired of it all. Peace reigned in silence, inside and out, in isolation and exhaustion.

'Why do you say nothing, Acquitor?'

He sat alone, unspeaking, a cloak of bear fur draped over his hunched shoulders, sword held point-down between his gold-clad feet, the long banded blade and broad bell-hilt in front of him. Somehow, he had managed to open his eyes, and the glitter was visible within the hooded shadows beneath his brow, framed in waxed braids. His breath came in a low rasp, the only sound in the massive chamber in the wake of the long, stilted exchange between Tomad Sengar and Hannan Mosag.

The last words had fallen away, leaving a sense of profound helplessness. None among the hundreds of Edur present moved or spoke.

Tomad could say no more on behalf of his son. Some subtle force had stolen his authority, and it came, Trull realized with dread, from the seated figure of black fur and glittering gold, from the eyes shining out from their dark holes. From the motionless sword.

Standing in the centre dais, the Warlock King's hard eyes had slowly shifted from Tomad to Rhulad, and they held there now, calculating and cold.

The sword needed to be surrendered. Hannan Mosag had sent them to retrieve it, and that task could not be called complete until Rhulad placed it in the hands of the Warlock King. Until that happened, Fear, Binadas, Trull, Theradas and Midik Buhn all stood in dishonour.

It fell now, finally, to Rhulad. To make the gesture, to heal this ragged wound.

Yet he made no move.

Trull was not even sure his brother was capable of speaking, given the terrible weight encasing his chest. Breathing sounded difficult, excruciatingly laboured. It was extraordinary that Rhulad was able to keep his arms up, the hands on the grip of the sword. From a lithe, supple youth, he had become something hulking, bestial.

The air in the hall was humid and rank. The smell of fear and barely restrained panic swirled amidst the smoke from the torches and the hearth. The rain outside was unceasing, the wind creaking the thick planks of the walls.

The rasping breath caught, then a thin, broken voice spoke. 'The sword is mine.'

A glitter of fear from Hannan Mosag's eyes. 'This must not be, Rhulad Sengar.'

'Mine. He gave it to me. He said I was the one, not you. Because you were weak.'

The Warlock King recoiled as if he had been struck in the face.

Who? Trull shot the question with a sharp glance at Fear. Their eyes met, and Fear shook his head.
Their father was facing Rhulad now. Emotions worked across his face for a moment and it seemed he was ageing centuries before their very eyes. Then he asked, 'Who gave you this sword, Rhulad?'

Something like a smile. 'The one who rules us now, Father. The one Hannan Mosag made pact with. No, not one of our lost ancestors. A new ... ally.'

'This is not for you to speak of,' the Warlock King said, his voice trembling with rage. 'The pact was—'

'Was something you intended to betray, Hannan Mosag,' Rhulad cut in savagely, leaning forward to glare past his hands where they were folded about the sword's grip. 'But that is not the Edur way, is it? You, who would lead us, cannot be trusted. The time has come, Warlock King, for a change.'

Trull watched as Rhulad surged to his feet. And stood, balanced and assured, back straight and head held high. The bear cloak was swept back, revealing the rippling coins. The gold mask of Rhulad's face twisted. 'The sword is mine, Hannan Mosag! I am equal to it. You are not. Speak, then, if you would reveal to all here the secret of this weapon. Reveal the most ancient of lies! Speak, Warlock King!'

'I shall not.'

A rustling step forward. 'Then ... kneel.'

'Rhulad!'

'Silence, Father! Kneel before me, Hannan Mosag, and pledge your brotherhood. Think not I will simply cast you aside, for I have need of you. We all have need of you. And your K'risnan.'

'Need?' Hannan Mosag's face was ravaged, as if gripped by a physical pain.

Rhulad swung about, glittering eyes fixing on his three brothers, one by one. 'Come forward, brothers, and pledge your service to me. I am the future of the Edur. Theradas Buhn. Midik Buhn. Come forward and call me your brother. Bind yourselves to me. Power awaits us all, power you cannot yet imagine. Come. I am Rhulad, youngest son of Tomad Sengar. Blooded in battle, and I have known death!'

Abruptly, he turned about, sword-point scraping along the floor. 'Death,' he muttered, as if to himself. 'Faith is an illusion. The world is not as it seems. We are fools, all of us. Such ... stupidity.' In the same low tone he continued, 'Kneel before me, Hannan Mosag. It is not so much to surrender, is it? We shall know power. We shall be as we once were, as we were meant to be. Kneel, Warlock King, and receive my blessing.'

The head lifted once more, a flash of gold in the gloom. 'Binadas. You know pain, a wound resisting mending. Come forward, and I will release you from that pain. I will heal the damage.'

Binadas frowned. 'You know nothing of sorcery, Rhulad—'

'Come here!' The shriek echoed in the vast chamber.

Binadas flinched, then limped closer.

Rhulad's golden hand snapped out, fingers slashing across his brother's chest. The faintest of touches, and Binadas reeled back. Fear rushed close to hold him upright. Eyes wide, Binadas righted himself. He said nothing, but it was clear as he straightened that the pain in his hip was gone. Tremors shook him.

'Thus,' Rhulad said in a whisper. 'Come, my brothers. It is time.'

Trull cleared his throat. He had to speak. He had to ask his questions, to say what no-one else would say. 'We saw you dead.'

'And I have returned.'

'By the power of the sword you hold, Rhulad? Why would this ally give the Edur such a thing? What does that ally hope to gain? Brother, the tribes have been unified. We have won our peace—'
'You are the weakest of us, Trull. Your words betray you. We are Tiste Edur. Have you forgotten what that
means? I think you have.' He looked round. 'I think you all have. Six pathetic tribes, six pathetic kings. Hannan
Mosag knew a greater ambition. Sufficient to conquer. He was necessary, but he cannot achieve what must
come now.'

Trull could hear the brother he knew in Rhulad's words, but something new was threaded through them.
Strange, poisonous roots – was this the voice of power?

Dull clicking of coin edges, as Rhulad faced the silent crowd beyond the inner circle. 'The Edur have lost
sight of their destiny. The Warlock King would twist you away from what must be. My brothers and sisters –
all of you here are that to me, and more. I shall be your voice. Your will. The Tiste Edur have journeyed
beyond kings and warlock kings. What awaits us is what we once possessed, yet lost long ago. Of what am I
speaking, brothers and sisters? I shall give answer. Empire.'

Trull stared at Rhulad. Empire. And for every empire ... there is an emperor.

Kneel, Rhulad had commanded. Of Hannan Mosag. Of everyone here. Tiste Edur do not kneel before mere
kings...

Fear spoke. 'You would be emperor, Rhulad?'

His brother swung to face him and spread his arms in a deprecatting gesture. 'Do I make you want to turn
away in horror, Fear? In revulsion? Oh, but did not that slave fashion well? Am I not a thing of beauty?'

There was an edge of hysteria in the tone.

Fear made no reply.

Rhulad smiled and continued, 'I should tell you, the weight no longer drags at me. I feel ... unburdened. Yes,
my brother, I find myself pleased. Oh, does that shock you? Why? Can you not see my wealth? My armour?
Am I not a bold vision of an Edur warrior?'

'I am not sure,' Fear replied, 'what I am seeing. Is it truly Rhulad who dwells within that body?'

'Die, Fear, and claw your way back. Then ask yourself if the journey has not changed you.'

'Did you find yourself among our ancestors?' Fear asked.

Rhulad's answering laugh was brutal. He swung the sword into the air, twisting the blade into a wild salute,
revealing a grace with the weapon that Trull had never before seen in his brother. 'Our ancestors! Proud ghosts.
They stood in ranks ten thousand deep! Roaring their welcome! Blooded kin was I, worthy to join them in their
stalwart defence of precious memories. Against that vast host of ignorance. Oh yes, Fear, it was a time of such
glory.'

'Then, by your tone, Rhulad, you would challenge all that we hold dear. You would deny our beliefs—'

'And who among you can gainsay me?'

'The shadow wraiths—'

'Are Tiste Andii, brother. Slaves to our will. And I will tell you this: those who serve us died by our hands.'

'Then where are our ancestors?'

'Where?' Rhulad's voice was a rasp. 'Where? Nowhere, brother. They are nowhere. Our souls flee our bodies,
flee this world, for we do not belong here. We have never belonged here.'

'And shall you lead us home, then, Rhulad?'

The eyes flashed. 'Wise brother. I knew you would find the path first.'
'Why do you demand that we kneel?'

The head tilted to one side. 'I would you pledge yourself to our new destiny. A destiny into which I will lead the Tiste Edur.'

'You would take us home.'

'I would.'

Fear stepped forward, then sank to one knee, head bowing. 'Lead us home, Emperor.'

In Trull's mind, he heard a sound.

Like a spine breaking.

And he turned, as did so many others, to face Hannan Mosag and his cadre of sorcerors, to witness the Warlock King descending from the dais. To watch him kneel before Rhulad, before the emperor of the Tiste Edur.

Like a spine breaking.

The water tugging at his shins, swirling around numbed flesh, Udinaas struggled to stand. The waves rocked him, made him totter. Out on the bay, ships. Four in all, pushing through the mist, their dark hulks crouching on the grey water like migratory leviathans, sweeps crabbing the swells. He could hear the chorus of dull creaks and the slap of wooden blades in the water. Hooded, cloaked figures small on the distant decks. The delegation had arrived.

He felt as if he was standing on pegs of ice, the jagged points driven up through his knees. He did not think he was able to walk. In fact, he was moments from falling over, down into the foaming water. So easy, pulled out by the undertow, the cold flooding his lungs, washing black through his mind. Until, in perfect accord with the acceptance of surrender, it was over.

Claws stabbed into his shoulders and lifted him thrashing from the waves. Talons punching through the rain cloak, biting into flesh. Too stunned to scream, he felt himself whipped through the air, legs scissoring in a spray of water.

Flung down onto a bed of wet stones fifteen paces up from the tideline.

Whatever had dragged him was gone, although fire burned in his chest and back where the talons had been. Floundering in a strange helplessness, Udinaas eventually pulled himself round so that he lay on his back, staring up at the colourless clouds, the rain on his face.

Locqui Wyval. Didn't want me dead, I suppose.

He lifted an arm and felt the fabric of the rain cloak. No punctures. Good. He'd have trouble explaining had it been otherwise.

Feeling was returning to his lower legs. He pushed himself onto his hands and knees. Wet, shivering. There could be no answer for Rhulad, it was as simple as that. The Warlock King would have to kill him. Assuming that works.

Kill him, or surrender. And what could make Hannan Mosag surrender? To a barely blooded whelp? No, chop off his hands, sever his head and crush it flat. Burn the rest into dusty ashes. Destroy the monstrosity, for Rhulad Sengar was truly a monster.

Footsteps on the stones behind him. Udinaas sat back on his haunches, blinking rain from his eyes. He looked up as Hulad stepped into view.

'Udinaas, what are you doing here?'

'Did she cast the tiles, Hulad? Did she?'
'She tried.'

'Tried?'

'It failed, Udinaas. The Holds were closed; she was blind to them. She was frightened. I've never seen her so frightened.'

'What else has happened?'

'I don't know. The Edur are still in the citadel.'

'They can't all be there.'

'No, only the nobility. The others are in their homes. They have banished their slaves for now. Most of them had nowhere to go. They're just huddled in the forest. Soaked through. There seems no end in sight.' He reached down and helped Udinaas to stand. 'Let's go to the longhouse. Get dry and warm.'

He let Hulad guide him back to the Sengar longhouse. 'Did you see the ships, Hulad?' he asked as they walked. 'Did you see them?'

'Yes. They're lowering boats, but no welcome seems forthcoming.'

'I wonder what they'll think of that?'

Hulad did not reply.

They entered. Sudden warmth, the crackle of flames the only sound. Hulad helped him remove the rain cloak. As he did so, he gasped and pulled at Udinaas's shirt.

'Where did you get those?'

Udinaas frowned down at the almost-black bruises where the Wyval's talons had been. 'I don't know.'

'They remind me of Feather Witch's wounds, from that demon. Just the same. Udinaas, what is happening to you?'

'Nothing. I'm going to sleep.'

Hulad said nothing more as Udinaas walked down the length of the main chamber towards his sleeping pallet.

Fighting the outflow, the three scows edged closer to the bank on the south side of the river. Each craft held about a dozen Letherii, most of them bodyguards in full armour, the visors closed on their helms.

Four steps behind Buruk the Pale, Seren followed the merchant down to the strand. It seemed they would be the sole welcoming committee, at least to begin with. 'What do you intend to tell them?' she asked.

Buruk glanced back at her, rain dripping from the rim of his hood. 'I was hoping you would say something.'

She did not believe him, but appreciated the effort. 'I'm not even certain of the protocol. Nifadas is leading the delegation, but the prince is here as well. Who do I acknowledge first?'

Buruk shrugged. 'The one most likely to be offended if you bow to other one first.'

'Assuming,' she replied, 'I do not intend a calculated insult.'

'Well, there is that. Mind you, Acquitor, you are supposed to be neutral.'

'Perhaps I should direct my bow to a space directly between them.'

'Whereupon they will both conclude that you have lost your mind.'
'Which is at least even-handed.'

'Aah, humour. That is much better, Acquitor. Despair gives way to anticipation.'

They reached the strand and stood side by side, watching the scows approach. The rain elected that moment to fall harder, a growing downpour prattling on the stones and hissing on the current- and tide-twisted water. The scows blurred behind a grey wall, almost vanished entirely, then reappeared suddenly, the first one crunching and lurching as it grounded. Sweeps rose and then descended as the crew stored them. Guards splashed down and clambered onto the strand. One made his way to Buruk and Seren. His expression below the visor and nose-bar was grim.

'I am Finadd Moroch Nevath, of the Prince's Guard. Where are the Edur?'

Moroch seemed to be facing Seren, so she spoke in reply, 'In the citadel, Finadd. There has been an ... event.'

'What in the Errant's name does that mean?'

Behind the Finadd and his guards, Prince Quillas Diskanar was being carried by servants over the waves. The First Eunuch Nifadas had eschewed any such assistance and was wading onto the strand.

'It's rather complicated,' Seren said. 'Buruk's guest camp is just on the other side of the bridge. We can get under cover from the rain—'

'Never mind the rain,' Moroch snapped. Then he swung about and saluted as Quillas Diskanar, sheltered beneath a four-point umbrella held aloft by two servants, strode to halt before Buruk and Seren. 'My prince,' the Finadd said in a growl, 'it would appear the Tiste Edur have chosen this moment to be preoccupied.'

'Hardly an auspicious beginning,' Quillas snapped, turning a sneer on Seren Pedac. 'Acquitor. Has Hull Beddict elected the wise course and departed this village?'

She blinked, struggling to disguise her alarm at the preeminence the question of Hull had assumed. Do they fear him that much?

'He is nearby, my prince.'

'I intend to forbid his attendance, Acquitor.'

'I believe an invitation has been extended to him,' she said slowly, 'by the Warlock King.'

'Oh? And will Hull speak for the Edur now?'

Buruk spoke for the first time. 'My prince, that is a question we would all like answered.'

Quillas shifted his attention. 'You are the merchant from Trate.'

'Buruk the Pale.' With a deep bow from which Buruk had difficulty recovering.

'A drunk merchant at that.'

Seren cleared her throat. 'Your arrival was sudden, my prince. The Edur have been sequestered in the citadel for a day and a half. We've had little to do but wait.'

The First Eunuch was standing a pace back, seemingly uninterested in the conversation, his small, glittering eyes fixed on the citadel. He appeared equally indifferent to the rain pummelling his hood and cape-clad shoulders. It occurred to Seren that here was a different kind of power, and in silence the weight was being stolen from Prince Quillas Diskanar.

Proof of that was sudden, as the prince swung round to Nifadas and said, 'What do you make of all this, then, First Eunuch?'

Expressionless eyes settled on Quillas. 'My prince, we have arrived at a moment of crisis. The Acquitor and the merchant know something of it, and so we must needs await their explanation.'
'Indeed,' Quillas said. 'Acquitor, inform us of this crisis.'

Whilst you stand beneath that umbrella and we get soaked and chilled to the bone. 'Of course, my prince. The Warlock King despatched a party of warriors into the ice wastes to retrieve what turned out to be a sword. They were, however, set upon by Jheck Soletaken. One of the warriors, who was wielding that sword, was slain. The others brought his body back for burial, but the corpse would not release its grip upon the sword. The Warlock King was greatly animated by this detail, and made his demand for the weapon plain and unequivocal. There was a public clash between him and the dead warrior's father.'

'Why not just cut off the body's fingers?' Quillas Diskanar demanded, his brows lifted in contemptuous disbelief.

'Because,' Nifadas replied, laconic and overly patient, 'there is traditional sanctity accorded a fallen warrior among the Edur. Please, Acquitor, go on. It is hard to believe this impasse is yet to be resolved.'

She nodded. 'It was but the beginning, and indeed it became something of a moot point. For the corpse returned to life.'

Quillas snorted. 'What manner of jest is this, woman?'

'No jest,' Buruk the Pale answered. 'My prince, we saw him with our own eyes. He was alive. The truth was announced by his screams, such terrible screams, for he had been dressed—'

'Dressed?' the prince asked, looking around.

The First Eunuch's eyes had widened. 'How far along, Merchant Buruk?'

'The coins, First Eunuch. And the wax.'

'Errant defend,' Nifadas whispered. 'And this sword – he will not yield it?'

Seren shook her head. 'We don't know, First Eunuch.'

'Describe the weapon, if you would, Acquitor.'

'Two-handed grip, but a thin blade. Some kind of alloy, yet reluctant to fuse. There is iron, and some sort of black metal that appears in elongated shards.'

'Origin? Can you discern anything from the style?'

'Not much, First Eunuch. The bell-hilt bears some resemblance to the drawn twist technique used by the Meckros—'

'The Meckros?' Quillas asked. 'Those traders from the floating cities?'

'Yes, although the pattern on that bell-hilt has been shaped to resemble links of chain.'

Buruk faced her with a wry expression. 'You've sharp eyes, Acquitor. All I saw was a sword.'

'I suggest,' Nifadas said, 'we retire to the merchant's camp.'

Quillas hissed, 'You will swallow this insult, First Eunuch?'

'There is no insult,' Nifadas replied easily, striding past the prince to hook arms with a surprised Seren Pedac. 'Escort me, please, Acquitor.'

'Of course, First Eunuch.'

The others had no choice but to trail after them.

Nifadas walked quickly. After a dozen or so paces, he asked in a quiet, conversational tone, 'Was Hull Beddict witness to all this?'
'No. At least I don't think so. He's been gone for some time.'

'But he will return.'

'Yes.'

'I have left the majority of my guard aboard the Risen *Pale*, including Finadd Gerun Eberict.'

'Gerun – oh.'

'Indeed. Would it be, do you think, propitious that I send for him?'

'I – I am not sure, First Eunuch. It depends, I imagine, on what you would have him do.'

'Perhaps a word or two with Hull, upon his return?'

'Is the Finadd a persuasive man?'

'Not by way of personality, no ...'

She nodded, struggled to repress a shiver – unsuccessfully, it turned out.

'Chilled, Acquitor?'

'The rain.'

'Of course. I trust Buruk's servants are feeding a fire of some sort?'

'Rather too eagerly.'

'Well, I doubt if anyone will complain. You and Buruk have waited here some time, I take it.'

'Yes. Some time. There was an audience with the Warlock King, but in keeping with my role I departed before anything of substance was discussed. And as to what was said, neither Hull nor Buruk has revealed anything.'

'Hull was there for that, was he?' He swung a faint smile on her. 'Nothing of substance was revealed to you, Acquitor? I admit to having trouble quite believing that assertion.'

Seren Pedac hesitated.

'Acquitor,' Nifadas said in a low voice, 'the privilege of neutrality no longer exists in this matter. Make your choice.'

'It is not that, First Eunuch,' she said, knowing her claim was untrue. 'I have a fear that whatever position the Warlock King may have chosen back then is no longer relevant.' She glanced over at him. 'I do not think Rhulad will relinquish that sword.'

'Rhulad. What can you tell me of this Rhulad?'

'Youngest son of a noble family, the Sengar.'

'The Sengar? Eldest son is Fear, yes? Commander of the Edur warriors. Prestigious blood, then.'

'Yes. Another brother is Binadas, who is blood-sworn with Hull Beddict.'

'Interesting. I begin to grasp the complexity awaiting us, Acquitor.'

*And so, it seems, do I. For I appear to have made my choice.*

*As if Nifadas gave me any other option, as I walk here arm in arm with the First Eunuch...*

*Wake up, Udinaas.*
Lids slid back from stinging, burning eyes. Udinaas stared up at the angled wall above him. 'No. I need to sleep—'

'Not so loud. What you need, fool, is to walk to the citadel.'

'Why? They'll cut my throat for intruding—'

'No, they won't. Rhulad won't let them, for you are his slave now, and no-one else's. They must be informed. The Letherii delegation awaits.'

'Leave me be, Wither.'

'The Tiste Edur emperor wants you. Now.'

'Right. And does he know it?'

'Not yet.'

'As I thought.' He closed his eyes once more. 'Go away, wraith.'

'The Wyval and I are in agreement in this, Udinaas. You must step to the forefront. You must make yourself invaluable to Rhulad. Tell me, do you want Feather Witch for your own or not?'

Udinaas blinked, then sat up. 'What?'

'Go now, and you will see.'

'Not until you explain that, Wither.'

'I shall not, slave. Go to the citadel. Serve the Edur emperor.'

Udinaas pulled aside his blankets and reached for his sodden moccasins. 'Why don't you all leave me alone.'

'She raped you, Udinaas. She took your seed. Why did she do that?'

He went still, one moccasin on, the other cold in his hands. 'Menandore.'

'The bitch has designs, she does. No love for Edur or Andii, no, not her.'

'What has that to do with anything?'

The wraith made no reply.

Udinaas rubbed at his face, then pulled on the second moccasin and tugged at the soaked leather ties. 'I am a slave, Wither. Slaves are not given slaves, and that is the only way I could win Feather Witch. Unless you plan on invading her mind and twisting her will. In which case, it won't be Feather Witch, will it?'

'You accord me powers I do not possess.'

'Only to emphasize the absurdity of your promises, Wither. Now, be quiet. I'm going.' He rose and stumbled from the cell. Hulad was crouched by the hearth, heating soup or stew.

'You were talking to yourself, Udinaas. You shouldn't do that.'

'That's what I keep telling myself,' he replied, making his way to the doors, collecting a rain cape on the way.

Outside, the rain was a deluge. He could barely make out the anchored ships in the bay. There were figures on the strand. Soldiers.

He pulled up the hood then headed for the citadel that had once belonged to the Warlock King.

Serve the Edur emperor. And where will you take your people, Rhulad Sengar?
The shadow wraiths guarding the entrance made no move to oppose the Letherii slave as he ascended the steps. Both hands on the doors, pushing them aside, striding in on a gust of pelting rain. *Come, you damned Edur. Slide a blade across my throat. Through my chest.* There were no guards within the reception chamber, and the curtain beyond was drawn closed.

He shook the rain from his cape, then continued forward.

To the curtains. He pulled them aside.

To see the Edur kneeling. All of them, kneeling before the glimmering form of Rhulad Sengar, who stood on the dais, the sword raised in one hand above his head. Bear fur on his shoulders, face a rippling mask of gold surrounding the deep holes of his eye sockets.

Not blind, then. Nor crippled. And if this was madness, then it was a poison riding the chamber's thick currents.

Udinaas felt the emperor's eyes fix on him, as palpable as talons digging into his mind. 'Approach, slave,' he said, his voice ragged.

Heads lifted and turned as Udinaas threaded through the crowd, making his way down the tiers. The Letherii did not glance at any faces, his gaze focused solely on Rhulad Sengar. In his peripheral vision he saw Hannan Mosag, kneeling with head bowed, and behind him his K'risnan in identical positions of subservience.

'Speak, Udinaas.'

'The delegation has arrived, Emperor.'

'We are bound, are we not, Udinaas? Slave and master. You heard my summons.'

'I did, master.' Lies, he realized, were getting easier.

'The delegation waits in the merchant's camp. Bring them to us, Udinaas.'

'As you command.' He bowed, then began the laborious effort of backing out.

'There is no need for that, Udinaas. I am not offended by a man's back. Go, and tell them that the ruler of the Edur will greet them now.'

Udinaas swung about and made his way from the chamber.

Beneath the rain once more, across the bridge. Solitude might invite thought, but Udinaas refused the invitation. The fog of the world beyond was mirrored in his own mind. He was a slave. Slaves did what was commanded of them.

Woodsmoke drifting out from under a broad canopy near the trader wagons. Figures standing beneath it. Acquitor Seren Pedac turned and saw him first. Yes. *There is more in her than she realizes. The ghosts like her, hovering like moths around a candle flame. She doesn't even see them.* He watched her say something, then the others swung to face him.

Udinaas halted just outside the tarp, keeping his gaze averted. 'The ruler of the Edur bids you come to the citadel.'

A soldier growled, then said, 'You stand before your prince, Letherii. Drop to your knees or I'll cut your head from your shoulders.'

'Then draw your sword,' Udinaas replied. 'My master is Tiste Edur.'

'He is nothing,' said the young, expensively dressed man at the soldier's side. A flutter of one hand. 'We are invited, finally. First Eunuch, will you lead us?'

The large, heavy man with a face as sombre as his clothes stepped out to stand beside Udinaas. 'Acquitor,
please accompany us.'

Seren Pedac nodded, drawing her cloak’s hood over her head and joining the First Eunuch.

Udinaas led them back across the bridge. A wind had begun whipping the rain in biting sheets that ripped across their path. Among the longhouses of the nobility, then towards the steps.

Shadow wraiths swirled before the door.

Udinaas faced Quillas Diskanar. 'Prince, your bodyguards are not welcome.'

The young man scowled. 'Wait here with your men, Finadd.'

Moroch Nevath grunted, then directed his guards to fan out to either side of the citadel’s entrance.

The wraiths edged back to provide a corridor to the double doors.

Udinaas strode forward and pushed them open, moved inside then turned about. A step behind him were Nifadas and the Acquitor, the prince, his expression dark, trailing.

The First Eunuch frowned at the curtain at the far end. 'The throne room is filled with Edur nobles? Then why do I hear nothing?'

'They await your arrival,' Udinaas said. 'The ruler of the Tiste Edur stands on the centre dais. His appearance will startle you—'

'Slave,' Quillas said, making the word contemptuous, 'we are not anticipating that the negotiations will commence immediately. We are but to be proclaimed guests—'

'I am not the one to guarantee that,' Udinaas cut in, unperturbed. 'I would advise that you be ready for anything.'

'But this is absurd—'

'Let us be about it, then,' the First Eunuch said.

The prince was not used to these constant interruptions, his face flushing.

Acquitor Seren Pedac spoke. 'Udinaas, by your words I conclude that Hannan Mosag has been usurped.'

'Yes.'

'And Rhulad Sengar has proclaimed himself the new king of the Tiste Edur.'

'No, Acquitor. Emperor.'

There was silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then the prince snorted in disbelief. 'What empire? Six tribes of seal-hunters? This fool has gone mad.'

'It is one thing,' Nifadas said slowly, 'to proclaim oneself an emperor. It is another to force the Edur nobility to bend knee to such a claim. Udinaas, have they done so?'

'They have, First Eunuch.'

'That is... astonishing.'

'Hannan Mosag?' Seren asked.

'He too has knelt and pledged allegiance, Acquitor.'

Once again no-one spoke for a time.

Then the First Eunuch nodded to Udinaas and said, 'Thank you. I am ready to meet the emperor now.'
Udinaas nodded and approached the curtain. Pulling it aside, he stepped through into the chamber beyond. The nobles had moved to form an avenue leading down to the centre dais. Everyone was standing. On the dais, Rhulad Sengar leaned on his sword. His motions had dislodged a few coins, leaving mottled patches of burnt skin. Humidity, heat and oil lamps made the air mist-laden and lurid. Udinaas sought to look upon the scene as if he was a stranger, and was shocked at its raw barbarity. *These are a fallen people.*

*Who would rise anew.*

The First Eunuch and the Acquitor appeared on the threshold, and Nifadas moved to his left to give space for Prince Quillas Diskanar.

Udinaas raised his voice. 'Emperor. First Eunuch Nifadas and Prince Quillas Diskanar. The Letherii treaty delegation.'

'Come forward,' came the rasping invitation from the emperor. 'I am Rhulad Sengar, and I proclaim you guests of the Tiste Edur Empire.'

Nifadas bowed his head. 'We thank your highness for his welcome.'

'It is the desire of the Letherii king to establish a formal treaty with us,' Rhulad said, then shrugged. 'I was under the impression we already had one. And, while we honour it, your people do not. Thus, what value a new agreement?'

As the First Eunuch was about to speak, Quillas stepped forward. 'You confiscated a harvest of tusked seals. So be it. Such things cannot be reversed, can they? None the less, there is the matter of debt.'

Udinaas smiled, not needing to look up to see the shocked expressions from the gathered nobility.

'Hannan Mosag,' Rhulad said after a moment, 'will speak for the Edur in this matter.'

Udinaas glanced up to see the once-Warlock King stepping forward to stand in front of the dais. He was without expression. 'Prince, you will need to explain how you Letherii have arrived at the notion of debt. The harvest was illegal — do you deny it?'

'We do not — no, Nifadas, I am speaking. As I was saying to you, Hannan Mosag, we do not dispute the illegality of the harvest. But its illegality does not in turn refute the reality that it took place. And that harvest, conducted by Letherii, is now in Edur hands. The present treaty, you may recall, has an agreed market value for tusked seals, and it is this price we expect to be honoured.'

'Extraordinary logic, Prince,' Hannan Mosag said, his voice a smooth rumble.

'We are, fortunately,' Quillas continued, 'prepared for a compromise.'

'Indeed?'

Udinaas wondered why Nifadas was remaining silent. His lack of interruption could only be interpreted as tacit allegiance to the prince and the position he was advocating.

'A compromise, yes. The debt shall be forgiven, in exchange for land. Specifically, the remainder of Trate Reach, which, as we both know, serves only as seasonal fishing camps for your people. Such camps would not be prohibited, of course. They shall remain available to you, for a modest percentage of your catch.'

'As it now stands, then,' Hannan Mosag said, 'we begin this treaty in your debt.'

'Yes.'

'Based upon the presumption that we possess the stolen harvest.'

'Well, of course—'

'But we do not possess it, Prince Quillas Diskanar.'
'What? But you must!'

'You are welcome to visit our store houses for yourself,' Hannan Mosag went on reasonably. 'We punished the harvesters, as was our right. But we did not retrieve the harvest.'

'The ships arrived in Trate with their holds empty!'

'Perhaps, in fleeing our wrath, they discharged their burden, so as to quicken their pace. Without success, as it turned out.' As the prince simply stared, Hannan Mosag went on, 'Thus, we are not in your debt. You, however, are in ours. To the market value of the harvested tusked seals. We are undecided, at the moment, on the nature of recompense we will demand of you. After all, we have no need of coin.'

'We have brought gifts!' Quillas shouted.

'For which you will then charge us, with interest. We are familiar with your pattern of cultural conquest among neighbouring tribes, Prince. That the situation is now reversed earns our sympathy, but as you are wont to say, business is business.'

Nifadas finally spoke. 'It seems we have much to consider, the two of us, Emperor. Alas, our journey has been long and wearying. Perhaps you could permit us to retire for a time, to reconvene this meeting on the morrow?'

'Excellent idea,' Rhulad said, the coins on his face twisting as he smiled. 'Udinaas, escort the delegation to the guest longhouse. Then return here. A long night awaits us.'

The prince stood like a puppet with its strings cut. The faces of the Acquitor and the First Eunuch, however, remained composed.

Even so, it seems we are all puppets here ...

Trull Sengar watched the slave lead the Acquitor and the delegation out of the chamber. The world had not crumbled, it had shattered, and before his eyes he saw the jagged pieces, a chamber fissured and latticed, a thousand shards bearing countless reflected images. Edur faces, broken crowds, the smear of smoke. Disjointed motion, a fevered murmur of sound, the liquid glint of gold and a sword as patched and fragmented as everything else in sight.

Like a crazed mosaic, slowly being reassembled by a madman's hand. He did not know where he belonged, where he fit. Brother to an emperor. It is Rhulad, yet it is not. I don't know him. And I know him all too well and, Daughter take me, I am frightened most by that.

Hannan Mosag had been speaking quietly with Rhulad, conveying an ease with his new role that Trull knew was intended to calm the witnesses gathered here. Trull wondered what it was costing the Warlock King.

A nod and a wave of the hand dismissed Hannan Mosag, who retreated to stand near his K'risnan. At Rhulad's instructions a large chair was carried to the dais, and the emperor sat, revealing to Trull's knowing gaze his brother's exhaustion. It would take time to acquire the strength necessary to sustain that vast, terrible weight for any length of time. The emperor settled his head back and looked out upon the nobles. His attention quickly silenced the crowd.

'I have known death,' Rhulad said, his voice rough. 'I have returned, and I am not the same, not the unblooded warrior you saw before we began our journey to the ice wastes. I have returned, to bring to you the memory of our destiny. To lead you.' He was silent then, as if needing to recover from his short speech. A dozen heartbeats, before he continued, 'Fear Sengar. Brother, step forward.'

Fear did as commanded, halting on the inner ring in front of the dais.

Rhulad stared down at him, and Trull saw a sudden hunger in those brittle eyes.

'Second only to Hannan Mosag's, your loyalty, Fear, is my greatest need.'
Fear looked rattled, as if such a matter did not need to be questioned.
The slave Udinaas returned then, but held back, his red-rimmed eyes scanning the scene. And Trull wondered at the sudden narrowing of that Letherii's gaze.

'What, Emperor,' Fear said, 'do you ask of me?'
'A gift, brother.'
'All I have is yours—'
'Are you true to that claim, Fear?' Rhulad demanded, leaning forward.
'I would not make it otherwise.'

Oh. No, Rhulad — no—
'The emperor,' Rhulad said, settling back, 'requires an empress.'
Comprehension cast a pall on Fear's face.
'A wife. Fear Sengar, will you gift me a wife?'
You grotesque bastard— Trull stepped forward.
Rhulad's hand snapped out to stay him. 'Be careful, Trull. This is not your concern.' He bared stained teeth. 'It never was.'
'Must you break those who would follow you?' Trull asked.
'Another word!' Rhulad shrieked. 'One more word, Trull, and I will have you flayed alive!'
Trull recoiled at the vehemence, stunned into silence.

A coin clattered onto the dais as Rhulad lifted a hand to his face and clawed at some extremity of emotion, then he snatched his hand away and held it before him, watching it curl into a fist. 'Kill me. That is all you need do. For your proof. Yes, kill me. Again.' The glittering eyes fixed on Trull. 'You knew I was alone, guarding the rear slope. You knew it, Trull, and left me to my fate.'

'What? I knew no such thing, Rhulad—'
'No more lies, brother. Fear, gift me your betrothed. Give me Mayen. Would you stand between her and the title of empress? Tell me, are you that selfish?'
As ugly as driving knives into Fear, one after another. As rendering his flesh into ruin. This, Trull realized, this was Rhulad. The child and his brutal hungers, his vicious appetites. Tell us, are you that selfish?
'She is yours, Emperor.'

Words bled of all life, words that were themselves a gift to one who had known death. Though Rhulad lacked the subtle mind to comprehend that.

Instead, his face twisted beneath the coins into a broad smile, filled with glee and triumph. His eyes lifted to a place in the crowd where the unwedded maidens stood. 'Mayen,' he called. 'It is done. Come forward. Join your emperor.'

Tall, regal, the young woman strode forward as if this moment had been rehearsed a thousand times.
But that is not possible.

She walked past Fear without a glance, and came to stand, facing outward, on the left side of the chair. Rhulad's hand reached out with a gesture of smug familiarity and she clasped it.
That final act struck Fear as would a physical blow to his chest. He took a step back.

'Thank you, Fear,' Rhulad said, 'for your gift. I am assured of your loyalty, and proud to call you my brother. You, Binadas, Midik Buhn, Theradas Buhn, Hannan Mosag ... and,' the gaze shifted, 'Trull, of course. My closest brothers. We are bound by the blood of our ancestors ...'

He continued, but Trull had ceased listening. His eyes were on Mayen's face. On the horror writ there that she could not disguise. In his mind, Trull cried out to Fear. Look, brother! She did not seek this betrayal! Look!

With an effort he pulled his gaze from Mayen, and saw that Fear had seen. Seen what everyone present could see, everyone but Rhulad.

It saved them all. Salvation to the desperate. She showed them that some truths could not be broken, that even this insane thing on its throne could not crush the visceral honour remaining to the Tiste Edur. And in her face was yet another promise. She would withstand his crimes, because there was no choice. A promise that was also a lesson to everyone present. Withstand. Suffer. Live as you must now live. There will, one day, be answer to this.

Yet Trull wondered. Who could give answer? What waited in the world beyond the borders of their knowledge, sufficiently formidable to challenge this monstrosity? And how long would they have to wait? We were fallen, and the emperor proclaims that we shall rise again. He is insane, for we are not rising. We are falling, and I fear there will be no end to that descent.

Rhulad had stopped speaking, as if growing aware that something was happening among his followers, something that had nothing to do with him and his newfound power. He rose suddenly from the chair. 'This gathering is done. Hannan Mosag, you and your K'risnan will remain here with me and the Empress, for we have much to discuss. Udinaas, bring to Mayen her slaves, so that they may attend her needs. The rest, leave me now. Spread the word of the rise of the new empire of the Edur. And, brothers and sisters, see to your weapons ...'

Please, someone, give answer to this.

* * *

A dozen paces from the citadel a figure emerged from the rain to stand in front of Udinaas.

The Acquitor.

'What has he done?'

Udinaas studied her for a moment, then shrugged. 'He stole his brother's betrothed. We have an empress, and she does poorly at a brave face.'

'The Edur are usurped,' Seren Pedac said. 'And a tyrant sits on the throne.'

Udinaas hesitated, then said, 'Tell the First Eunuch. You must prepare for war.'

She revealed no surprise at his words; rather, a heavy weariness dulled her eyes. She turned away, walked into the rain and was gone.

I am a bearer of good tidings indeed. And now, it's Feather Witch's turn ...

Rain rushed down from the sky, blinding and blind, indifferent and mindless, but it held no meaning beyond that. How could it? It was just rain, descending from the sky's massed legion of grieving clouds. And the crying wind was the breath of natural laws, born high in the mountains or out at sea. Its voice promised nothing.

There was no meaning to be found in lifeless weather, in the pulsing of tides and in the wake of turning seasons.
No meaning to living and dying, either.

The tyrant was clothed in gold, and the future smelled of blood.

It meant nothing.
BOOK THREE

ALL THAT LIES UNSEEN
The man who never smiles
Drags his nets through the deep
And we are gathered
To gape in the drowning air
Beneath the buffeting sound
Of his dreaded voice
Speaking of salvation
In the repast of justice done
And fed well on the laden table
Heaped with noble desires
He tells us all this to hone the edge
Of his eternal mercy
Slicing our bellies open
One by one.

In the Kingdom of Meaning Well
Fisher kel Tath
The frog atop the stack of coins dares not jump.

‘Five wings will buy you a grovel. I admit, master, the meaning of that saying escapes me.’

Tehol ran both hands through his hair, pulling at the tangles. ‘Ouch. It’s the Eternal Domicile, Bugg. Wings numbering five, a grovel at the feet of the Errant, at the feet of destiny. The empire is risen. Lether awakens to a new day of glory.’

They stood side by side on the roof.

‘But the fifth wing is sinking. What about four wings?’

‘Gulls in collision, Bugg. My, it’s going to be hot, a veritable furnace. What are the tasks awaiting you today?’

‘My first meeting with Royal Engineer Grum. The shoring up we’ve done with the warehouses impressed him, it seems.’

‘Good.’ Tehol continued staring out over the city for another moment, then he faced his servant. ‘Should it have?’

‘Impressed him? Well, the floors aren’t sagging and they’re bone dry. The new plaster isn’t showing any cracks. The owners are delighted—’

‘I thought I owned those warehouses.’

‘Aren’t you delighted?’

‘Well, you’re right, I am. Every one of me.’

‘That’s what I told the Royal Engineer when I responded to his first missive.’

‘What about the people fronting me on those investments?’

‘They’re delighted, too.’

‘Well,’ Tehol sighed, ‘it’s just that kind of day, isn’t it?’

Bugg nodded. ‘Must be, master.’

‘And is that all you have planned? For the whole day?’

‘No. I need to scrounge some food. Then I need to visit Shand and her partners to give them that list of yours again. It was too long.’

‘Do you recall it in its entirety?’

‘I do. Puryst Rott Ale, I liked that one.’

‘Thank you.’

‘But they weren’t all fake, were they?’

‘No, that would give it away too quickly. All the local ones were real. In any case, it’ll keep them busy for a
while. I hope. What else?'

'Another meeting with the guilds. I may need bribe money for that.'

'Nonsense. Stand fast – they're about to be hit from another quarter.'

'Strike? I hadn't heard—'

'Of course not. The incident that triggers it hasn't happened yet. You know the Royal Engineer's obliged to hire guild members only. We have to see that conflict eliminated before it gives us trouble.'

'All right. I also need to check on that safe-house for Shurq and her newfound friend.'

'Harlest Eberict. That was quite a surprise. Just how many undead people are prowling around in this city anyway?'

'Obviously more than we're aware of, master.'

'For all we know, half the population might be undead – those people on the bridge there, there, those ones with all those shopping baskets in tow, maybe they're undead.'

'Possibly, master,' Bugg conceded. 'Do you mean undead literally or figuratively?'

'Oh, yes, there is a difference, isn't there? Sorry, I got carried away. Speaking of which, how are Shurq and Ublala getting along?'

'Swimmingly.'

'Impressively droll, Bugg. So, you want to check on their hidden abode. Is that all you're up to today?'

'That's just the morning. In the afternoon—'

'Can you manage a short visit?'

'Where?'

'Rat Catchers' Guild.'

'Scale House?'

Tehol nodded. 'I have a contract for them. I want a meeting – clandestine – with the Guild Master. Tomorrow night, if possible.'

Bugg looked troubled. 'That guild—'

'I know.'

'I can drop by on my way to the gravel quarry.'

'Excellent. Why are you going to the gravel quarry?'

'Curiosity. They opened up a new hill to fill my last order, and found something.'

'What?'

'Not sure. Only that they hired a necromancer to deal with it. And the poor fool disappeared, apart from some hair and toe nails.'

'Hmm, that is interesting. Keep me informed.'

'As always, master. And what have you planned for today?'

'I thought I'd go back to bed.'
Brys lifted his gaze from the meticulous scroll and studied the scribe seated across from him. 'There must be some mistake,' he said.

'No, sir. Never, sir.'

'Well, if these are just the reported disappearances, what about those that haven't been reported?'

'Between thirty and fifty per cent, I would say, sir. Added on to what we have. But those would be the blue-edged scrolls. They're stored on the Projected Shelf.'

'The what?'

'Projected. That one, the one sticking out from the wall over there.'

'And what is the significance of the blue edges?'

'Posited realities, sir, that which exists beyond the statistics. We use the statistics for formal, public statements and pronouncements, but we operate on the posited realities or, if possible, the measurable realities.'

'Different sets of data?'

'Yes, sir. It's the only way to operate an effective government. The alternative would lead to anarchy. Riots, that sort of thing. We have posited realities for those projections, of course, and they're not pretty.'

'But' – Brys looked back down at the scroll – 'seven thousand disappearances in Letheras last year?'

'Six thousand nine hundred and twenty-one, sir.'

'With a possible additional thirty-five hundred?'

'Three thousand four hundred and sixty and a half, sir.'

'And is anyone assigned to conduct investigations on these?'

'That has been contracted out, sir.'

'Clearly a waste of coin, then—'

'Oh no, the coin is well spent.'

'How so?'

'A respectable amount, sir, which we can use in our formal and public pronouncements.'

'Well, who holds this contract?'

'Wrong office, sir. That information is housed in the Chamber of Contracts and Royal Charters.'

'I've never heard of it. Where is it?'

The scribe rose and walked to a small door squeezed between scroll-cases. 'In here. Follow me, sir.'

The room beyond was not much larger than a walk-in closet. Blue-edged scrolls filled cubby-holes from floor to ceiling on all sides. Rummaging in one cubby-hole at the far wall, the scribe removed a scroll and unfurled it. 'Here we are. It's a relatively new contract. Three years so far. Ongoing investigations, biannual reports delivered precisely on the due dates, yielding no queries, each one approved without prejudice.'

'With whom?'

'The Rat Catchers' Guild.'

Brys frowned. 'Now I am well and truly confused.'
The scribe shrugged and rolled up the scroll to put it away. Over his shoulder he said, 'No need to be, sir. The guild is profoundly competent in a whole host of endeavours—'

'Competence doesn't seem a relevant notion in this matter,' Brys observed.

'I disagree. Punctual reports. No queries. Two renewals without challenge. Highly competent, I would say, sir.'

'Nor is there any shortage of rats in the city, as one would readily see with even a short walk down any street.'

'Population management, sir. I dread to think what the situation would be like without the guild.'

Brys said nothing.

A defensiveness came to the scribe's expression as he studied the Finadd for a long moment. 'We have nothing but praise for the Rat Catchers' Guild, sir.'

'Thank you for your efforts,' Brys said. 'I will find my own way out. Good day.'

'And to you, sir. Pleased to have been of some service.'

Out in the corridor, Brys paused, rubbing at his eyes. Archival chambers were thick with dust. He needed to get outside, into what passed for fresh air in Letheras.

Seven thousand disappearances every year. He was appalled.

So what, I wonder, has Tehol stumbled onto? His brother remained a mystery to Brys. Clearly, Tehol was up to something, contrary to outward appearances. And he had somehow held on to a formidable level of efficacy behind – or beneath – the scenes. That all too public fall, so shocking and traumatic to the financial tolls, now struck Brys as just another feint in his brother's grander scheme – whatever that was.

The mere thought that such a scheme might exist worried Brys. His brother had revealed, on occasion, frightening competence and ruthlessness. Tehol possessed few loyalties. He was capable of anything.

All things considered, the less Brys knew of Tehol's activities, the better. He did not want his own loyalties challenged, and his brother might well challenge them. As with Hull. Oh, Mother, it is the Errant's blessing that you are not alive to see your sons now. Then again, how much of what we are now is what you made us into?

Questions without answers. There seemed to be too many of those these days.

He made his way into the more familiar passages of the palace. Weapons training awaited him, and he found himself anticipating that period of blissful exhaustion. If only to silence the cacophony of his thoughts.

There were clear advantages to being dead, Bugg reflected, as he lifted the flagstone from the warehouse office floor, revealing a black gaping hole and the top rung of a pitted bronze ladder. Dead fugitives, after all, needed no food, no water. No air, come to that. Made hiding them almost effortless.

He descended the ladder, twenty-three rungs, to arrive at a tunnel roughly cut from the heavy clay and then fired to form a hard shell. Ten paces forward to a crooked stone arch beneath which was a cracked stone door crowded with hieroglyphs. Old tombs like this were rare. Most had long since collapsed beneath the weight of the city overhead or had simply sunk so far down in the mud as to be unreachable. Scholars had sought to decipher the strange sigils on the doors of the tombs, while common folk had long wondered why tombs should have doors at all. The language had only been partially deciphered, sufficient to reveal that the glyphs were curse-laden and aspected to the Errant in some mysterious way. All in all, cause enough to avoid them, especially since, after a few had been broken into, it became known that the tombs contained nothing of value, and were peculiar in that the featureless plain stone sarcophagus each tomb housed was empty. There was the added unsubstantiated rumour that those tomb-robbers had subsequently suffered horrid fates.
The door to this particular tomb had surrendered its seal to the uneven heaving descent of the entire structure. Modest effort could push it to one side.

In the tunnel, Bugg lit a lantern using a small ember box, and set it down on the threshold to the tomb. He then applied his shoulder to the door.

'Is that you?' came Shurq's voice from the darkness within.

'Why yes,' Bugg said, 'it is.'

'Liar. You're not you, you're Bugg. Where's Tehol? I need to talk to Tehol.'

'He is indisposed,' Bugg said. Having pushed the door open to allow himself passage into the tomb, he collected the lantern and edged inside.

'Where's Harlest?'

'In the sarcophagus.'

There was no lid to the huge stone coffin. Bugg walked over and peered in. 'What are you doing, Harlest?'

He set the lantern down on the edge.

'The previous occupant was tall. Very tall. Hello, Bugg. What am I doing? I am lying here.'

'Yes, I see that. But why?'

'There are no chairs.'

Bugg turned to Shurq Elalle. 'Where are these diamonds?'

'Here. Have you found what I was looking for?'

'I have. A decent price, leaving you the majority of your wealth intact.'

'Tehol can have what's left in the box there. My earnings from the whorehouse I'll keep.'

'Are you sure you don't want a percentage from this, Shurq? Tehol would be happy with fifty per cent. After all, the risk was yours.'

'No. I'm a thief. I can always get more.'

Bugg glanced around. 'Will this do for the next little while?'

'I don't see why not. It's dry, at least. Quiet, most of the time. But I need Ublala Pung.'

Harlest's voice came from the sarcophagus. 'And I want sharp teeth and talons. Shurq said you could do that for me.'

'Work's already begun on that, Harlest.'

'I want to be scary. It's important that I be scary. I've been practising hissing and snarling.'

'No need for concern there,' Bugg replied. 'You'll be truly terrifying. In any case, I should be going—'

'Not so fast,' Shurq cut in. 'Has there been any word on the robbery at Gerun Eberict's estate?'

'No. Not surprising, if you think about it. Gerun's undead brother disappears, the same night as some half-giant beats up most of the guards. Barring that, what else is certain? Will anyone actually attempt to enter Gerun's warded office?'

'If I eat human flesh,' Harlest said, 'it will rot in my stomach, won't it? That means I will stink. I like that. I like thinking about things like that. The smell of doom.'
'The what? Shurq, probably they don't know they've been robbed. And even if they did, they wouldn't make a move until their master returns.'

'I expect you're right. Anyway, be sure to send me Ublala Pung. Tell him I miss him. Him and his—'

'I will, Shurq. I promise. Anything else?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'Let me think.'

Bugg waited.

'Oh, yes,' she said after a time, 'what do you know about these tombs? There was a corpse here, once, in that sarcophagus.'

'How can you be certain?'

Her lifeless eyes fixed on his. 'We can tell.'

'Oh. All right.'

'So, what do you know?'

'Not much. The language on the door belongs to an extinct people known as Forkrul Assail, who are collectively personified in our Fulcra by the personage we call the Errant. The tombs were built for another extinct people, called the Jaghut, whom we acknowledge in the Hold we call the Hold of Ice. The wards were intended to block the efforts of another people, the T'lan Imass, who were the avowed enemies of the Jaghut. The T'lan Imass pursued the Jaghut in a most relentless manner, including those Jaghut who elected to surrender their place in the world – said individuals choosing something closely resembling death. Their souls would travel to their Hold, leaving their flesh behind, the flesh being stored in tombs like this one. That wasn't good enough for the T'lan Imass. Anyway, the Forkrul Assail considered themselves impartial arbiters in the conflict, and that was, most of the time, the extent of their involvement. Apart from that,' Bugg said with a shrug, 'I really can't say.'

Harlest Eberict had slowly sat up during Bugg's monologue and was now staring at the manservant. Shurq Elalle was motionless, as the dead often were. Then she said, 'I have another question.'

'Go ahead.'

'Is this common knowledge among serving staff?'

'Not that I am aware of, Shurq. I just pick up things here and there, over time.'

'Things no scholar in Letheras picks up? Or are you just inventing as you go along?'

'I try to avoid complete fabrication.'

'And do you succeed?'

'Not always.'

'You'd better go now, Bugg.'

'Yes, I'd better. I'll have Ublala visit you tonight.'

'Do you have to?' Harlest asked. 'I'm not the voyeuristic type—'

'Liar,' Shurq said. 'Of course you are.'

'Okay, so I'm lying. It's a useful lie, and I want to keep it.'

'That position is indefensible—'
'That's a rich statement, coming from you and given what you'll be up to tonight—'.

Bugg collected the lantern and slowly backed out as the argument continued. He pushed the door back in place, slapped the dust from his hands, then returned to the ladder.

Once back in the warehouse office, he replaced the flagstone, then, collecting his drawings, he made his way to the latest construction site. Bugg's Construction's most recent acquisition had once been a school, stately and reserved for children of only the wealthiest citizens of Letheras. Residences were provided, creating the typical and highly popular prison-style educational institution. Whatever host of traumas were taught within its confines came to an end when, during one particularly wet spring, the cellar walls collapsed in a sluice of mud and small human bones. The floor of the main assembly hall promptly slumped during the next gathering of students, burying children and instructors alike in a vast pit of black, rotting mud, in which fully a third drowned, and of these the bodies of more than half were never recovered. Shoddy construction was blamed, leading to a scandal.

Since that event, fifteen years past, the derelict building had remained empty, reputedly haunted by the ghosts of outraged proctors and bewildered hall monitors.

The purchase price had been suitably modest.

The upper levels directly above the main assembly hall were structurally compromised, and Bugg's first task had been to oversee the installation of bracing, before the crews could re-excavate the pit down to the cellar floor. Once that floor was exposed – and the jumble of bones dispatched to the cemetery – shafts were extended straight down, through lenses of clay and sand, to a thick bed of gravel. Cement was poured in and a ring of vertical iron rods put in place, followed by alternating packed gravel and cement for half the depth of the shaft. Limestone pillars, their bases drilled to take the projecting rods, were then lowered. From there on upwards, normal construction practices followed. Columns, buttresses and false arches, all the usual techniques in which Bugg had little interest.

The old school was being transformed into a palatial mansion. Which they would then sell to some rich merchant or noble devoid of taste. Since there were plenty of those, the investment was a sure one.

Bugg spent a short time at the site, surrounded by foremen thrusting scrolls in his face describing countless alterations and specifications requiring approval. A bell passed before he finally managed to file his drawings and escape.

The street that became the road that led to the gravel quarry was a main thoroughfare wending parallel with the canal. It was also one of the oldest tracks in the city. Built along the path of a submerged beach ridge of pebbles and cobbles sealed in clay, the buildings lining it had resisted the sagging decay common to other sections of the city. Two hundred years old, many of them, in a style so far forgotten as to seem foreign.

Scale House was tall and narrow, squeezed between two massive stone edifices, one a temple archive and the other the monolithic heart of the Guild of Street Inspectors. A few generations past, a particularly skilled stone carver had dressed the limestone façade and formal, column-flanked entrance with lovingly rendered rats. In multitudes almost beyond counting. Cavorting rats, dancing rats, fornicating rats. Rats at war, at rest, rats feasting on corpses, swarming feast-laden tabletops amidst sleeping mongrels and drunk servants. Scaly tails formed intricate borders to the scenes, and in some strange way it seemed to Bugg as he climbed the steps that the rats were in motion, at the corner of his vision, moving, writhing, grinning.

He shook off his unease, paused a moment on the landing, then opened the door and strode inside.

'How many, how bad, how long?'

The desk, solid grey Bluerose marble, almost blocked the entrance to the reception hall, spanning the width of the room barring a narrow space at the far right. The secretary seated behind it had yet to look up from his ledgers. He continued speaking after a moment. 'Answer those questions, then tell us where and what you're willing to pay and is this a one-off or are you interested in regular monthly visits? And be advised we're not accepting contracts at the moment.'
'No.'

The secretary set down his quill and looked up. Dark, small eyes glittered with suspicion from beneath a single wiry brow. Ink-stained fingers plucked at his nose, which had begun twitching as if the man was about to sneeze. 'We're not responsible.'

'For what?'

'For anything.' More tugging at his nose. 'And we're not accepting any more petitions, so if you're here to deliver one you might as well just turn round and leave.'

'What sort of petition might I want to hand to you?' Bugg asked.

'Any sort. Belligerent tenement associations have to wait in line just like everyone else.'

'I have no petition.'

'Then we didn't do it, we were never there, you heard wrong, it was someone else.'

'I am here on behalf of my master, who wishes to meet with your guild to discuss a contract.'

'We're backed up. Not taking any more contracts—'

'Price is not a consideration,' Bugg cut in, then smiled, 'within reasonable limits.'

'Ah, but then it is a consideration. We may well have unreasonable limits in mind. We often have, you know.'

'I do not believe my master is interested in rats.'

'Then he's insane ... but interesting. The board will be in attendance tonight on another matter. Your master will be allotted a short period at the meeting's end, which I will note in the agenda. Anything else?'

'No. What time tonight?'

'Ninth bell, no later. Come late and he will be barred outside the chamber door. Be sure he understands that.'

'My master is always punctual.'

The secretary made a face. 'Oh, he's like that, is he? Poor you. Now, begone. I'm busy.'

Bugg abruptly leaned forward and stabbed two fingers into the secretary's eyes. There was no resistance. The secretary tilted his head back and scowled.

'Cute,' Bugg smiled, stepping back. 'My compliments to the guild sorceror.'

'What gave me away?' the secretary asked as Bugg opened the door.

The manservant glanced back. 'You are far too rat-like, betraying your creator's obsession. Even so, the illusion is superb.'

'I haven't been found out in decades. Who in the Errant's name are you?'

'For that answer,' Bugg said as he turned away, 'you'll need a petition.'

'Wait! Who's your master?'

Bugg gave a final wave then shut the door. He descended the steps and swung right. A long walk to the quarries was before him, and, as Tehol had predicted, the day was hot, and growing hotter.

Summoned to join the Ceda in the Cedance, the chamber of the tiles, Brys descended the last few steps to the landing and made his way onto the raised walkway. Kuru Qan was circling the far platform in a distracted manner, muttering under his breath.
'Ceda,' Brys called as he approached. 'You wished to see me?'

'Unpleasant, Finadd, all very unpleasant. Defying comprehension. I need a clearer mind. In other words, not mine. Perhaps yours. Come here. Listen.'

Brys had never heard the Ceda speak with such fraught dismay. 'What has happened?'

'Every Hold, Finadd. Chaos. I have witnessed a transformation. Here, see for yourself. The tile of the Fulcra, the Dolmen. Do you see? A figure huddled at its base. Bound to the menhir with chains. All obscured by smoke, a smoke that numbs my mind. The Dolmen has been usurped.'

Brys stared down at the tile. The figure was ghostly, and his vision blurred the longer he stared at it. 'By whom?'

'A stranger. An outsider.'

'A god?'

Kuru Qan massaged his lined brow with his fingers as he continued pacing. 'Yes. No. We hold no value in the notion of gods. Upstarts who are as nothing compared to the Holds. Most of them aren't even real, simply projections of a people's desires, hopes, Fears. Of course,' he added, 'sometimes that's all that's needed.'

'What do you mean?'

Kuru Qan shook his head. 'And the Azath Hold, this troubles me greatly. The centre tile, the Heartstone, can you sense it? The Azath Heartstone, my friend, has died. The other tiles clustered together around it, at the end, drawing tight as blood gathers in a wounded body. The Tomb is breached. Portal stands unguarded. You must make a journey for me to the square tower, Finadd. And go armed.'

'What am I to look for?'

'Anything untoward. Broken ground. But be careful – the dwellers within those tombs are not dead.'

'Very well.' Brys scanned the nearest tiles. 'Is there more?'

Kuru Qan halted, brows lifting. 'More? Dragon Hold has awakened. Wyval. Blood-Drinker. Gate. Consort. Among the Fulcra, the Errant is now positioned in the centre of things. The Pack draws nearer, and Shapefinder has become a chimera. Ice Hold's Huntress walks frozen paths. Child and Seed stir to life. The Empty Hold – you can well see – has become obscured. Every tile. A shadow stands behind the Empty Throne. And look, Saviour and Betrayer, they have coalesced. They are one and the same. How is this possible? Wanderer, Mistress, Watcher and Walker, all hidden, blurred by mysterious motion. I am frightened, Finadd.'

'Ceda, have you heard from the delegation?' 'The delegation? No. From the moment of their arrival in the Warlock King's village, all contact with them has been lost. Blocked by Edur sorcery, of a sort we've not experienced before. There is much that is troubling. Much.' 'I should leave now, Ceda, while there's still daylight.' 'Agreed. Then return here with what you have discovered.'

'Very well.'

The track leading to the quarries climbed in zigzag fashion to a notch in the hillside. The stands of coppiced trees on the flanks were sheathed in white dust. Goats coughed in the shade.

Bugg paused to wipe sweaty grit from his forehead, then went on.

Two wagons filled with stonemasons had passed him a short while earlier, and from the frustrated foreman came the unwelcome news that the crew had refused to work the quarry any longer, at least until the situation was resolved.

A cavity had been inadvertently breached, within which a creature of some sort had been imprisoned for what must have been a long, long time. Three 'cutters had been dragged inside, their shrieks short-lived. The hired necromancer hadn't fared any better.
Bugg reached the notch and stood looking down at the quarry pit with its geometric limestone sides cut deep into the surrounding land. The mouth of the cavity was barely visible near an area that had seen recent work.

He made his way down, coming to within twenty paces of the cave before he stopped.

The air was suddenly bitter cold. Frowning, Bugg stepped to one side and sat down on a block of limestone. He watched frost form on the ground to the left of the cave, reaching in a point towards the dark opening, the opposite end spreading ever wider in a swirl of fog. The sound of ice crunching underfoot, then a figure appeared from the widening end, as if striding out from nowhere. Tall, naked from the hips upward, grey-green skin. Long, streaked blonde hair hanging loose over the shoulders and down the back. Light grey eyes, the pupils vertical slits. Silver-capped tusks. Female, heavy-breasted. She was wearing a short skirt, her only clothing barring the leather-strapped moccasins, and a wide belt holding a half-dozen scabbards in which stabbing knives resided.

Her attention was on the cave. She anchored her hands on her hips and visibly sighed.

'He's not coming out,' Bugg said.

'She glanced over. 'Of course he isn't, now that I'm here.'

'What kind of demon is he?'

'Hungry and insane, but a coward.'

'Did you put him there?'

She nodded. 'Damned humans. Can't leave things well enough alone.'

'I doubt they knew, Jaghut.'

'No excuse. They're always digging. Digging here, digging there. They never stop.'

Bugg nodded, then asked, 'So now what?'

She sighed again.

The frost at her feet burgeoned into angular ice, which then crawled into the cave mouth. The ice grew swiftly, filling the hole. The surrounding stone groaned, creaked, then split apart, revealing solid ice beneath it. Sandy earth and limestone chunks tumbled away.

Bugg's gaze narrowed on the strange shape trapped in the centre of the steaming ice. 'A Khalibaral? Errant take us, Huntress, I'm glad you decided to return.'

'Now I need to find for him somewhere else. Any suggestions?'

Bugg considered for a time, then he smiled.

Brys made his approach between two of the ruined round towers, stepping carefully around tumbled blocks of stone half hidden in the wiry yellow grasses. The air was hot and still, the sunlight molten gold on the tower walls. Grasshoppers rose from his path in clattering panic and, at the faint sensation of crunching underfoot, Brys looked down to see that the ground was crawling with life. Insects, many of them unrecognizable to his eyes, oversized, awkward, in dull hues, scrambling to either side as he walked.

Since they were all fleeing, he was not unduly concerned.

He came within sight of the square tower. The Azath. Apart from its primitive style of architecture, there seemed to be little else to set it apart. Brys was baffled by the Ceda's assertion that a structure of stone and wood could be sentient, could breathe with a life of its own. A building presupposed a builder, yet Kuru Qan claimed that the Azath simply rose into being, drawn together of its own accord. Inviting suspicion on every law of causality generations of scholars had posited as irrefutable truth.
The surrounding grounds were less mysterious, if profoundly more dangerous. The humped barrows in the
overgrown yard were unmistakable. Gnarled and stunted, dead trees rose here and there, sometimes from the
highest point of the mound, but more often from the flanks. A winding flagstone pathway began opposite the
front door, the gate marked by rough pillars of unmortared stone wrapped in vines and runners. The remnants
of a low wall enclosed the grounds.

Brys reached the edge of the yard along one side, the gate to his right, the tower to the left. And saw
immediately that many of the barrows within sight had slumped on at least one of their sides, as if gutted from
within. The weeds covering the mounds were dead, blackened as if by rot.

He studied the scene for a moment longer, then made his way round the perimeter towards the gateway.
Striding between the pillars, onto the first flagstone – which pitched down to one side with a grinding clunk.
Brys tottered, flinging his arms out for balance, and managed to recover without falling.

High-pitched laughter from near the tower's entrance.

He looked up.

The girl emerged from the shadow cast by the tower. 'I know you. I followed the ones following you. And
killed them.'

'What has happened here?'

'Bad things.' She came closer, mould-patched and dishevelled. 'Are you my friend? I was supposed to help it
stay alive. But it died anyway, and things are busy killing each other. Except for the one the tower chose. He
wants to talk to you.'

'To me?'

'To one of my grown-up friends.'

'Who,' Brys asked, 'are your other grown-up friends?'

'Mother Shurq, Father Tehol, Uncle Ublala, Uncle Bugg.'

Brys was silent. Then, 'What is your name?'

'Kettle.'

'Kettle, how many people have you killed in the past year?'

She cocked her head. 'I can't count past eight and two.'

'Ah.'

'Lots of eight and twos.'

'And where do the bodies go?'

'I bring them back here and push them into the ground.'

'All of them?'

She nodded.

'Where is this friend of yours? The one who wants to talk to me?'

'I don't know if he's a friend. Follow me. Step where I step.'

She took him by the hand and Brys fought to repress a shiver at that clammy grip. Off the flagstoned path,
between barrows, the ground shifting uncertainly beneath each cautious step. There were more insects, but of
fewer varieties, as if some kind of attrition had occurred on the grounds of the Azath. 'I have never seen insects
'Like these before,' Brys said. 'They're ... big.'

'Old, from the times when the tower was born,' Kettle said. 'Eggs in the broken ground. Those stick-like brown ones with the heads at both ends are the meanest. They eat at my toes when I sit still too long. And they're hard to crush.'

'What about those yellow, spiky ones?'

'They don't bother me. They eat only birds and mice. Here.'

She had stopped before a crumpled mound on which sat one of the larger trees in the yard, the wood strangely streaked grey and black, the twigs and branches projecting in curves rather than sharp angles. Roots spread out across the entire barrow, the remaining bark oddly scaled, like snake skin.

Brys frowned. 'And how are we to converse, with him in there and me up here?'

'He's trapped. He says you have to close your eyes and think about nothing. Like you do when you fight, he says.'

Brys was startled. 'He's speaking to you now?'

'Yes, but he says that isn't good enough, because I don't know enough ... words. Words and things. He has to show you. He says you've done this before.'

'It seems I am to possess no secrets,' Brys said.

'Not many, no, so he says he'll do the same in return. So you can trust each other. Somewhat.'

'Somewhat. His word?'

She nodded.

Brys smiled. 'Well, I appreciate his honesty. All right, I will give this a try.' He closed his eyes. Kettle's cold hand remained in his, small, the flesh strangely loose on the bones. He pulled his thoughts from that detail. A fighter's mind was not in truth emptied during a fight. It was, instead, both coolly detached and mindful. Concentration defined by a structure which was in turn assembled under strict laws of pragmatic necessity. Thus, observational, calculating, and entirely devoid of emotion, even as every sense was awakened.

He felt himself lock into that familiar, reassuring structure.

And was stunned by the strength of the will that tugged him away. He fought against a rising panic, knowing he was helpless before such power. Then relented.

Above him, a sky transformed. Sickly, swirling green light surrounding a ragged black wound large enough to swallow a moon. Clouds twisted, tortured and shorn through by the descent of innumerable objects, each object seeming to fight the air as it fell, as if this world was actively resisting the intrusion. Objects pouring from that wound, tunnelling through layers of the sky.

On the landscape before him was a vast city, rising up from a level plain with tiered gardens and raised walkways. A cluster of towers rose from the far side, reaching to extraordinary heights. Farmland reached out from the city's outskirts in every direction for as far as Brys could see, strange shadows flowing over it as he watched.

He pulled his gaze from the scene and looked down, to find that he stood on a platform of red-stained limestone. Before him steep steps ran downward, row upon row, hundreds, to a paved expanse flanked by blue-painted columns. A glance to his right revealed a sharply angled descent. He was on a flat-topped pyramid-shaped structure, and, he realized with a start, someone was standing beside him, on his left. A figure barely visible, ghostly, defying detail. It was tall, and seemed to be staring up at the sky, focused on the terrible dark wound.

Objects were striking the ground now, landing hard but with nowhere near the velocity they should have
possessed. A loud crack reverberated from the concourse between the columns below, and Brys saw that a massive stone carving had come to rest there. A bizarre beast-like human, squatting with thickly muscled arms reaching down the front, converging with a two-handed grip on the penis. Shoulders and head were fashioned in the likeness of a bull. A second set of legs, feminine, were wrapped round the beast-man's hips, the platform on which he crouched cut, Brys now saw, into a woman's form, lying on her back beneath him. From nearby rose the clatter of scores of clay tablets – too distant for Brys to see if there was writing on them, though he suspected there might be – skidding as if on cushions of air before coming to a rest in a scattered swath.

Fragments of buildings – cut limestone blocks, cornerstones, walls of adobe, wattle and daub. Then severed limbs, blood-drained sections of cattle and horses, a herd of something that might have been goats, each one turned inside out, intestines flopping. Dark-skinned humans – or at least their arms, legs and torsos.

Above, the sky was filling with large pallid fragments, floating down like snow.

And something huge was coming through the wound. Wreathed in lightning that seemed to scream with pain, shrieks unending, deafening.

Soft words spoke in Brys's mind. 'My ghost, let loose to wander, perhaps, to witness. They warred against Kallor; it was a worthy cause. But... what they have done here ...'

Brys could not pull his eyes from that howling sphere of lightning. He could see limbs within it, the burning arcs entwined about them like chains. 'What – what is it?'

'A god, Brys Beddict. In its own realm, it was locked in a war. He could see limbs within it, the burning arcs entwined about them like chains. 'What – what is it?'

'This a vision of the past?' Brys asked.

'The past lives on,' the figure replied. 'There is no way of knowing ... standing here. How do we measure the beginning, the end – for all of us, yesterday was as today, and as it will be tomorrow. We are not aware. Or perhaps we are, yet choose – for convenience, for peace of mind – not to see. Not to think.' A vague gesture with one hand. 'Some say twelve mages, some say seven. It does not matter, for they are about to become dust.'

The massive sphere was roaring now, burgeoning with frightening speed as it plunged earthward. It would, Brys realized, strike the city.

'In answer to a perceived desperation, fuelled by seething rage, they called down a god. And died with the effort. Does that mean that they failed in their gambit? No, I do not speak of Kallor. I speak of their helplessness which gave rise to their desire for change. Brys Beddict, were their ghosts standing with us now, here in the future world where our flesh resides, thus able to see what their deed has wrought, they would recognize that all that they sought has come to pass.

'That which was chained to the earth has twisted the walls of its prison. Beyond recognition. Its poison has spread out and infected the world and all who dwell upon it.'

'You leave me without hope,' Brys said.

'I am sorry for that. Do not seek to find hope among your leaders. They are the repositories of poison. Their interest in you extends only so far as their ability to control you. From you, they seek duty and obedience, and
they will ply you with the language of stirring faith. They seek followers, and woe to those who question, or voice challenge.

'Civilization after civilization, it is the same. The world falls to tyranny with a whisper. The frightened are ever keen to bow to a perceived necessity, in the belief that necessity forces conformity, and conformity a certain stability. In a world shaped into conformity, dissidents stand out, are easily branded and dealt with. There is no multitude of perspectives, no dialogue. The victim assumes the face of the tyrant, self-righteous and intransigent, and wars breed like vermin. And people die.'

Brys studied the firestorm engulfing what was once a city of great beauty. He did not know its name, nor the civilization that had birthed it, and, it now struck him, it did not matter.

'In your world,' the figure said, 'the prophecy approaches its azimuth. An emperor shall arise. You are from a civilization that sees war as an extension of economics. Stacked bones become the foundation for your roads of commerce, and you see nothing untoward in that—'

'Some of us do.'

'Your legacy of crushed cultures speaks its own truth. You intend to conquer the Tiste Edur. You claim that each circumstance is different, unique, but it is neither different nor unique. It is all the same. Your military might proves the virtue of your cause. But I tell you this, Brys Beddict, there is no such thing as destiny. Victory is not inevitable. Your enemy lies in waiting, in your midst. Your enemy hides without need for disguise, when belligerence and implied threat are sufficient to cause your gaze to shy away. It speaks your language, takes your words and uses them against you. It mocks your belief in truths, for it has made itself the arbiter of those truths.'

'Lether is not a tyranny—'

'You assume the spirit of your civilization is personified in your benign king. It is not. Your king exists because it is deemed permissible that he exist. You are ruled by greed, a monstrous tyrant lit gold with glory. It cannot be defeated, only annihilated.' Another gesture towards the fiery chaos below. 'That is your only hope of salvation, Brys Beddict. For greed kills itself, when there is nothing left to hoard, when the countless legions of labourers are naught but bones, when the grisly face of starvation is revealed in the mirror.

'The god is fallen. He crouches now, seeding devastation. Rise and fall, rise and fall, and with each renewal the guiding spirit is less, weaker, more tightly chained to a vision bereft of hope.'

'Why does this god do this to us?'

'Because he knows naught but pain, and yearns only to share it, to visit it upon all that lives, all that exists.'

'Why have you shown me this?'

'I make you witness, Brys Beddict, to the symbol of your demise.'

'Why?'

The figure was silent for a moment, then said, 'I advised you to not look for hope from your leaders, for they shall feed you naught but lies. Yet hope exists. Seek for it, Brys Beddict, in the one who stands at your side, from the stranger upon the other side of the street. Be brave enough to endeavour to cross that street. Look neither skyward nor upon the ground. Hope persists, and its voice is compassion, and honest doubt.'

The scene began to fade.

The figure at his side spoke one last time. 'That is all I would tell you. All I can tell you.'

He opened his eyes, and found himself once more standing before the barrow, the day dying around him. Kettle still held his hand in her cold clasp.

'You will help me now?' she asked.
'The dweller within the tomb spoke nothing of that.'

'He never does.'

'He showed me virtually nothing of himself. I don't even know who, or what, he is.'

'Yes.'

'He made no effort to convince me ... of anything. Yet I saw ...' Brys shook his head.

'He needs help escaping his tomb. Other things are trying to get out. And they will. Not long now, I think. They want to hurt me, and everyone else.'

'And the one we're to help will stop them?'

'Yes.'

'What can I do?'

'He needs two swords. The best iron there is. Straight blades, two-edged, pointed. Thin but strong. Narrow hilts, heavy pommels.'

Brys considered. 'I should be able to find something in the armoury. He wants me to bring them here?'

Kettle nodded.

_He needed help. But he did not ask for it._ 'Very well. I will do this. But I will speak to the Ceda regarding this.'

'Do you trust him? He wants to know, do you trust this Ceda?'

Brys opened his mouth to reply, to say yes, then he stopped. The dweller within the barrow was a powerful creature, probably too powerful to be controlled. There was nothing here that would please Kuru Qan. Yet did Brys have a choice? The Ceda had sent him here to discover what had befallen the Azath ... He looked over at the tower. 'The Azath, it is dead?'

'Yes. It was too old, too weak. It fought for so long.'

'Kettle, are you still killing people in the city?'

'Not many. Only bad people. One or two a night. Some of the trees are still alive, but they can't feed on the tower's blood any more. So I give them other blood, so they can fight to hold the bad monsters down. But the trees are dying too.'

Brys sighed. 'All right. I will visit again, Kettle. With the swords.'

'I knew I could like you. I knew you would be nice. Because of your brother.'

That comment elicited a frown, then another sigh. He gently disengaged his hand from the dead child's grip. 'Be careful, Kettle.'

'It was a perfectly good sleep,' Tehol said as he walked alongside Bugg.

'I am sure it was, master. But you did ask for this meeting.'

'I didn't expect such a quick response. Did you do or say something to make them unduly interested?'

'Of course I did, else we would not have achieved this audience.'

'Oh, that's bad, Bugg. You gave them my name?'

'No.'
'You revealed something of my grand scheme?'

'No.'

'Well, what did you say, then?'

'I said money was not a consideration.'

'Not a consideration?' Tehol slowed his pace, drawing Bugg round. 'What do you think I'm willing to pay them?'

'I don't know,' the manservant replied. 'I have no idea of the nature of this contract you want to enter into with the Rat Catchers' Guild.'

'That's because I hadn't decided yet!'

'Well, have you decided now, master?'

'I'm thinking on it. I hope to come up with something by the time we arrive.'

'So, it could be expensive ...'

Tehol's expression brightened. 'You're right, it could be indeed. Therefore, money is not a consideration.'

'Exactly.'

'I'm glad we're in agreement. You are a wonderful manservant, Bugg.'

'Thank you, master.'

They resumed walking.

Before long they halted in front of Scale House. Tehol stared up at the riotous rodent façade for a time. 'They're all looking at me,' he said.

'They do convey that impression, don't they?'

'I don't like being the singular focus of the attention of thousands of rats. What do they know that I don't?'

'Given the size of their brains, not much.'

Tehol stared for a moment longer, then he slowly blinked and regarded Bugg. Five heartbeats. Ten.

The manservant remained expressionless, then he coughed, cleared his throat, and said, 'Well, we should head inside, shouldn't we?'

The secretary sat as he had earlier that day, working on what seemed to Bugg to be the same ledger. Once again, he did not bother looking up. 'You're early. I was expecting punctual.'

'We're not early,' Tehol said.

'You're not?'

'No, but since the bell is already sounding, any more from you and we'll be late.'

'I'm not to blame. Never was at any point in this ridiculous conversation. Up the stairs. To the top. There's only one door. Knock once then enter, and Errant help you. Oh, and the manservant can stay here, provided he doesn't poke me in the eyes again.'

'He's not staying here.'

'He's not?'
'No.'

'Fine, then. Get out of my sight, the both of you.'

Tehol led the way past the desk and they began their ascent.

'You poked him in the eyes?' Tehol asked.

'I judged it useful in getting his attention.'

'I'm pleased, although somewhat alarmed.'

'The circumstances warranted extreme action on my part.'

'Does that happen often?'

'I'm afraid it does.'

They reached the landing. Tehol stepped forward and thumped on the door. A final glance back at Bugg, suspicious and gauging, then he swung open the door. They strode into the chamber beyond.

In which rats swarmed. Covering the floor. The tabletop. On the shelves, clambering on the crystal chandelier. Crouched on the shoulders and peering from folds in the clothes of the six board members seated on the other side of the table.

Thousands of beady eyes fixed on Tehol and Bugg, including those of the three men and three women who were the heart of the Rat Catchers' Guild.

Tehol hitched up his trousers. 'Thank you one and all—'

'You're Tehol Beddict,' cut in the woman seated on the far left. She was mostly a collection of spherical shapes, face, head, torso, breasts, her eyes tiny, dark and glittering like hardened tar. There were at least three rats in her mass of upright, billowed black hair.

'And I'm curious,' Tehol said, smiling. 'What are all these rats doing here?'

'Insane question,' snapped the man beside the roundish woman. 'We're the Rat Catchers' Guild. Where else are we supposed to put the ones we capture?'

'I thought you killed them.'

'Only if they refuse avowal,' the man said, punctuating his words with a sneer for some unexplainable reason.

'Avowal? How do rats make vows?'

'None of your business,' the woman said. 'I am Onyx. Beside me sits Scint. In order proceeding accordingly, before you sits Champion Ormly, Glisten, Bubyrd and Ruby. Tehol Beddict, we suffered losses on our investments thanks to you.'

'From which you have no doubt recovered.'

'That's not the point!' said the woman called Glisten. She was blonde, and so slight and small that only her shoulders and head were above the level of the tabletop. Heaps of squirming rats passed in front of her every now and then, forcing her to bob her head up to maintain eye contact.

'By my recollection,' Tehol said reasonably, 'you lost a little less than half a peak.'

'How do you know that?' Scint demanded. 'Nobody else but us knows that!'

'A guess, I assure you. In any case, the contract I offer will be for an identical amount.'

'Half a peak!'
Tehol’s smile broadened. ‘Ah, I have your fullest attention now. Excellent.’

‘That’s an absurd amount,’ spoke Ormly for the first time. ‘What would you have us do, conquer Kolanse?’

‘Could you?’

Ormly scowled. ‘Why would you want us to, Tehol Beddict?’

‘It’d be difficult,’ Glisten said worriedly. ‘The strain on our human resources—’

‘Difficult,’ cut in Scint, ‘but not impossible. We’d need to recruit from our island cells—’

‘Wait!’ Tehol said. ‘I’m not interested in conquering Kolanse!’

‘You’re the type who’s always changing his mind,’ Onyx said. She leaned back and with a squeak a rat plummeted from her hair to thump on the floor somewhere behind her. ‘I can’t stand working with people like that.’

‘I haven’t changed my mind. It wasn’t me who brought up the whole Kolanse thing. In fact, it was Champion Ormly—’

‘Well, he can’t make up his mind neither. You two are made for each other.’

Tehol swung to Bugg. ‘I’m not indecisive, am I? Tell them, Bugg. When have you ever seen me indecisive?’

Bugg frowned.

‘Bugg!’

‘I’m thinking!’

Glisten’s voice came from behind a particularly large heap of rats. ‘I can’t see the point of any of this.’

‘That’s quite understandable,’ Tehol said evenly.

‘Describe your contract offer,’ Ormly demanded. ‘But be advised, we don’t do private functions.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I won’t waste my breath on explaining ... unless it turns out to be relevant. Is it?’

‘I don’t know. How can I tell?’

‘Well, that’s my point exactly. Now, about the contract?’

‘All right,’ Tehol said, ‘but be warned, it’s complicated.’

Glisten’s plaintive voice: ‘Oh, I don’t like the sound of that!’

Tehol made an effort to see her, then gave up. The mound of rats on the tabletop in front of her was milling. ‘You surprise me, Glisten,’ he said. ‘It strikes me that the Rat Catchers’ Guild thrives on complications. After all, you do much more than, uh, harvest rats, don’t you? In fact, your primary function is as the unofficial assassins’ guild – unofficial because, of course, it’s an outlawed activity and unpleasant besides. You’re also something of a thieves’ guild, too, although you’ve yet to achieve full compliance among the more independent-minded thieves. You also provide an unusually noble function in your unofficial underground escape route for impoverished refugees from assimilated border tribes. And then there’s the—’

‘Stop!’ Onyx shrieked. In a slightly less shrill tone she said, ‘Bubyrd, get our Chief Investigator in here. Errant knows, if anyone needs investigating, it’s this Tehol Beddict.’

Tehol’s brows rose. ‘Will that be painful?’
Onyx leered and whispered, ‘Restrain your impatience, Tehol Beddict. You’ll get an answer to that soon enough.’

‘Is it wise to threaten a potential employer?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ Onyx replied.

‘Your knowledge of our operations is alarming,’ Ormly said. ‘We don’t like it.’

‘I assure you, I have only admiration for your endeavours. In fact, my contract offer is dependent upon the fullest range of the guild’s activities. I could not make it without prior knowledge, could I?’

‘How do we know?’ Ormly asked. ‘We’ve yet to hear it.’

‘I’m getting there.’

The door behind them opened and the woman who was in all likelihood the Chief Investigator strode in past Tehol and Bugg. Stepping carefully, she took position on the far right of the table, arms crossing as she leaned against the wall.

Onyx spoke. ‘Chief Investigator Rucket, we have in our presence a dangerous liability.’

The woman, tall, lithe, her reddish hair cut short, was dressed in pale leathers, the clothing South Nerek in style, as if she had just come from the steppes. Although, of course, the nearest steppes were a hundred or more leagues to the east. She appeared to be unarmed. Her eyes, a startling tawny shade that looked more feline than human, slowly fixed on Tehol. ‘Him?’

‘Who else?’ Onyx snapped. ‘Not his manservant, surely!’

‘Why not?’ Rucket drawled. ‘He looks to be the more dangerous one.’

‘I’d agree,’ Bubyrd said in a hiss. ‘He poked my secretary in the eyes.’

Scint started. ‘Really? Just like that?’ He held up a hand and stretched out the first two fingers, then jabbed the air. ‘Like that? Poke! Like that?’

‘Yes,’ Bubyrd replied, glaring at Bugg. ‘He revealed the illusion! What’s the point of creating illusions when he just ups and pokes holes in them!’

Tehol swung to his manservant. ‘Bugg, are we going to get out of here alive?’

‘Hard to say, master.’

‘All because you poked that secretary in the eyes?’

Bugg shrugged.

‘Touchy, aren’t they?’

‘So it seems, master. Best get on with the offer, don’t you think?’

‘Good idea. Diversion, yes indeed.’

‘You idiots,’ Onyx said. ‘We can hear you!’

‘Excellent!’ Tehol stepped forward, carefully, so as to avoid crushing the seething carpet of rats. Gentle nudging aside with the toe of his mocassin seemed to suffice. ‘To wit. I need every tribal refugee in the city ushered out. Destination? The islands. Particular islands, details forthcoming. I need full resources shipped ahead of them, said supplies to be purchased by myself. You will work with Bugg here on the logistics. Second, I understand you are conducting an investigation into disappearances for the Crown. No doubt you’re telling them nothing of your findings. I, on the other hand, want to know those findings. Third, I want my back protected. In a short while, there will be people who will want to kill me. You are to stop them. Thus, my
contract offer. Half a peak and a list of safe investments, and as to that last point, I suggest you follow my financial advice to the letter and swallow the expense—'

'You want to be our financial adviser?' Onyx asked in clear disbelief. 'Those losses—'

'Could have been avoided, had we been engaged in a closer relationship back then, such as the one we are about to enter into.'

'What about those refugees who are Indebted?' Ormly asked. 'Having them all disappear could cause another crash in the Tolls.'

'It won't, because the trickle is to be so slow that no-one notices—'

'How could they not notice?'

'They will be ... distracted.'

'You've got something ugly planned, haven't you, Tehol Beddict?' Ormly's small eyes glittered. 'Meaning what happened the first time wasn't no accident. Wasn't incompetence neither. You just found yourself with a string in your hand, which you then tugged to see how much would unravel. You know what you're telling us? You're telling us you're the most dangerous man in Lether. Why would we ever let you walk out of this chamber?'

'Simple. This time I'm taking my friends with me. So the question is, are you my friends?'

'And what if our Chief Investigator investigates you right here and right now?'

'My scheme is already under way, Champion Ormly, whether I stay alive or not. It's going to happen. Of course, if I die, then nobody escapes what's coming.'

'Hold on,' Onyx said. 'You said something about expense. You becoming our financial adviser is going to cost us?'

'Well, naturally.'

'How much?'

'A quarter of a peak or thereabouts.'

'So you pay us half and we pay you back a quarter.'

'And so you come out ahead.'

'He's got a point,' Scint said, snatching a rat from the table and biting its head off.

Everyone stared, including a roomful of rats.

Scint noticed, chewed for a moment, making crunching sounds, then said around a mouthful of rat head, 'Sorry. Got carried away.' He looked down at the headless corpse in his hand, then tucked it into his shirt and out of sight.

From where Glisten sat came a plaintive sound, then, 'What did that rat ever do to you, Scinty?'

Scint swallowed. 'I said sorry!'

Tehol leaned close to Bugg and whispered, 'If you could poke any of them in the eyes ...'

'Three of 'em would likely complain, master.'

'Can I guess?'

'Go ahead.'
'Ormly, Bubyrd and Rucket.'

'I'm impressed.'

'What are you two whispering about?' Onyx demanded. Tehol smiled at her. 'Do you accept my offer?'

Brys found the Ceda in his work room, hunched over an upended crab lying on the table. He had removed the flat carapace covering the underside and was prodding organs with a pair of copper probes. The crab appeared to be dead.

Burners had been lit beneath a cauldron behind Kuru Qan, and the lid was rocking to gusts of steam.

'Finadd, this array of organs is fascinating. But I'm distracting myself. Shouldn't do that, not at this critical juncture.' He set the instruments down and picked up the crab. 'What have you to tell me?'

Brys watched the Ceda nudge the cauldron's lid aside then drop the crab in. 'The Azath tower is dead.'

Kuru Qan pushed the lid back into place then walked back to sit in his chair. He rubbed at his eyes. 'What physical evidence is there?'

'Little, admittedly. But a child is resident there, on the grounds,' Brys replied. 'The tower was in some sort of communication with her.'

'The role of Keeper? Odd that the Hold should choose a child. Unless the original Keeper had died. And even then ... odd.'

'There is more,' Brys said. 'A resident within one of the barrows was accorded the role of protector. The child, Kettle, believes that person is capable of destroying the others – all of whom are close to escaping their prisons.'

'The Hold, in its desperation, made a bargain, then. What else does this Kettle know of that resident?'

'He speaks to her constantly. He speaks through her, as well. At the moment, he is trapped. He can go no further, and no, I don't know how that situation will be resolved. Ceda, I also spoke to that stranger.'

Kuru Qan looked up. 'He reached into your mind? And showed you what?'

Brys shook his head. 'He made no effort to convince me of anything, Ceda. Voiced no arguments in his own defence. Instead, I was made witness to an event, from long ago, I believe.'

'What kind of event?'

'The bringing down of a god. By a cadre of sorcerors, none of whom survived the ritual.'

Kuru Qan's eyes widened at these words. 'Relevant? Errant bless me, I hope not.'

'You have knowledge of this, Ceda?'

'Not enough, Finadd, I'm afraid. And this stranger was witness to that dire scene?'

'He was. Inadvertently, he said.'

'Then he has lived a very long time.'

'Is he a threat?'

'Of course he is. None here could match his power, I would think. And, assuming he is successful in destroying the other residents of the yard, the question one must face is, what then?'

'It strikes me as a huge assumption, Ceda. Killing the others. Why would he hold to his bargain with a now-dead Azath?'
'One must believe that the Hold chose wisely, Finadd. Do you have doubts?'

'I'm not sure. He has asked for weapons. Two swords. I am inclined to accede to his request.'

The Ceda slowly nodded. 'Agreed. No doubt you were thinking of finding something in the armoury. But for an individual such as this, a normal weapon won't do, even one of Letherii steel. No, we must go to my private hoard.'

'I wasn't aware you had one.'

'Naturally. Now, a moment.' Kuru Qan rose and walked back to the cauldron. Using large tongs, he retrieved the crab, the shell now a fiery red. 'Ah, perfect. Of course, it can cool down some. So, follow me.'

Brys had thought he knew virtually every area of the old palace, but the series of subterranean chambers the Ceda led him into were completely unfamiliar to him, although not a single hidden door was passed through on the way. By the Finadd's internal map, they were now under the river.

They entered a low-ceilinged chamber with rack-lined walls on which were hundreds of weapons. Brys had collected a lantern along the way and he now hung it from a hook in a crossbeam. He walked to a rack crowded with swords. 'Why a private collection, Ceda?'

'Curios, most of them. Some antiques. I am fascinated with forging techniques, particularly those used by foreign peoples. Also, there is sorcery invested in these weapons.'

'All of them?' Brys lifted one particular weapon from its hooks, a close match to the description relayed to him by Kettle.

'Yes. No, put that one back, Finadd. It's cursed.'

Brys replaced it.

'In fact,' Kuru Qan went on in a troubled voice, 'they're all cursed. Well, this could prove a problem.'

'Perhaps I should go to the regular armoury—'

'Patience, Finadd. It's the nature of curses that allows us to possibly find a reasonable solution. Two swords, you said?'

'Why would sorcerors curse a weapon?'

'Oh, most often not an intentional act on their parts. Often it's simply a matter of incompetence. In many cases, the sorcerous investment refuses to function. The iron resists the imposition, and the better the forging technique the more resistant the weapon is. Sorcery thrives on flaws, whether structural in the physical sense, or metaphorical in the thematic sense. Ah, I see your eyes glazing over, Finadd. Never mind. Let's peruse the antiques, shall we?'

The Ceda led him to the far wall, and Brys immediately saw a perfect weapon, long and narrow of blade, pointed and double-edged, modest hilt. 'Letherii steel,' he said, reaching for it.

'Yes, in the Blue Style, which, as you well know, is the very earliest technique for Letherii steel. In some ways, the Blue Style produces finer steel than our present methods. The drawbacks lie in other areas.'

Brys tested the weight of the weapon. 'The pommel needs to be replaced, but otherwise ...' Then he looked up. 'But it's cursed?'

'Only in so far as all Blue Style weapons are cursed. As you know, the blade's core is twisted wire, five braids of sixty strands each. Five bars are fused to that core to produce the breadth and edge. Blue Style is very flexible, almost unbreakable, with one drawback. Finadd, touch the blade to any other here. Lightly, please. Go ahead.'

Brys did so, and a strange sound reverberated from the Blue Style sword. A cry, that went on, and on.
‘Depending on where on the blade you strike, the note is unique, although each will eventually descend or ascend to the core’s own voice. The effect is cumulative, and persistent.’

‘Sounds like a dying goat.’

‘There is a name etched into the base of the blade, Finadd. Arcane script. Can you read it?’

Brys squinted, struggled a moment with the awkward lettering, then smiled. ‘Glory Goat. Well, it seems a mostly harmless curse. Is there any other sorcery invested in it?’

‘The edges self-sharpen, I believe. Nicks and notches heal, although some material is always lost. Some laws cannot be cheated.’ The Ceda drew out another sword. ‘This one is somewhat oversized, I’ll grant you—’

‘No, that’s good. The stranger was very tall.’

‘He was now, was he?’

Brys nodded, shifting the first sword to his left hand and taking the one Kuru Qan held in his right. ‘Errant, this would be hard to wield. For me, that is.’

‘Sarat Wept,’ the Ceda said. ‘About four generations old. One of the last in the Blue Style. It belonged to the King’s Champion of that time.’

Brys frowned. ‘Urudat?’

‘Very good.’

‘I’ve seen images of him in frescos and tapestries. A big man—’

‘Oh, yes, but reputedly very quick.’

‘Remarkable, given the weight of this sword.’ He held it out. ‘The blade pulls. The line is a hair’s breadth outward. This is a left-handed weapon.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well,’ Brys considered, ‘the stranger fights with both hands, and he specified two full swords, suggesting—’

‘A certain measure of ambidexterity. Yes.’

‘Investment?’

‘To make it shatter upon its wielder’s death.’

‘But—’

‘Yes, another incompetent effort. Thus, two formidable weapons in the Blue Style of Letherii steel. Acceptable?’

Brys studied both weapons, the play of aquamarine in the lantern-light. ‘Both beautiful and exquisitely crafted. Yes, I think these will do.’

‘When will you deliver them?’

‘Tomorrow. I have no desire to enter those grounds at night.’ He thought of Kettle, and felt once more the clasp of her cold hand. It did not occur to him then that he had not informed the Ceda of one particular detail from his encounter at the tower. It was a matter that, outwardly at least, seemed of little relevance.

Kettle was more than just a child.

She was also dead.
Thanks to this careless omission, the Ceda's measure of fear was not as great as it should have been. Indeed, as it needed to be. Thanks to this omission, and in the last moments before the Finadd parted company with Kuru Qan, a crossroads was reached, and then, inexorably, a path was taken.

The night air was pleasant, a warm wind stirring the rubbish in the gutters as Tehol and Bugg paused at the foot of the steps to Scale House.

'That was exhausting,' Tehol said. 'I think I'll go to bed.'

'Don't you want to eat first, master?'

'You scrounged something?'

'No.'

'So we have nothing to eat.'

'That's right.'

'Then why did you ask me if I wanted to eat?'

'I was curious.'

Tehol anchored his fists on his hips and glared at his manservant. 'Look, it wasn't me who nearly got us investigated in there!'

'It wasn't?'

'Well, not all me. It was you, too. Poking eyes and all that.'

'Master, it was you who sent me there. You who had the idea of offering a contract.'

'Poking eyes!'

'All right, all right. Believe me, master, I regret my actions deeply!'

'You regret deeply?'

'Fine, deeply regret.'

'That's it, I'm going to bed. Look at this street. It's a mess!'

'I'll get around to it, master, if I find the time.'

'Well, that should be no problem, Bugg. After all, what have you done today?'

'Scant little, it's true.'

'As I thought.' Tehol cinched up his trousers. 'Never mind. Let's go, before something terrible happens.'
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Out of the white
Out of the sun's brittle dismay
We are the grim shapes
Who haunt all fate

Out of the white
Out of the wind's hoarse bray
We are the dark ghosts
Who haunt all fate

Out of the white
Out of the snow's worldly fray
We are the sword's wolves
Who haunt all fate

Jheck Marching Chant

Fifteen paces, no more than that. Between emperor and slave. A stretch of Letherii rugs, booty from some raid a century or more past, on which paths were worn deep, a pattern of stolen colour mapping stunted roads across heroic scenes. Kings crowned. Champions triumphant. Images of history the Edur had walked on, indifferent and intent on their small journeys in this chamber.

Udinaas wasn't prepared to ascribe any significance to these details. He had come to his own pattern, a gaze unwavering and precise, the mind behind it disconnected, its surface devoid of ripples and its depths motionless.

It was safer that way. He could stand here, equidistant between two torch sconces and so bathed by the light of neither, and in this indeterminate centre he looked on, silently watching as Rhulad discarded his bearskin, to stand naked before his new wife.

Udinaas might have been amused, had he permitted the emotion, to see the coins burned into the emperor's penis pop off, one, two, two more, then four, as Rhulad's desire became apparent. Coins thumping to the rug-strewn floor, a few bouncing and managing modest rolls before settling. He might have been horrified at the look in the emperor's red-rimmed eyes as he reached out, beckoning Mayen closer. Waves of sympathy for the hapless young woman were possible, but only in the abstract.

Witnessing this macabre, strangely comic moment, the slave remained motionless, without and within, and the bizarre reality of this world played itself out without comment.

Her self-control was, at first, absolute. He took her hand and drew it down, pulling her closer. 'Mayen,' the emperor said in a rasp, in a voice that reached for tenderness and achieved little more than rough lust. 'Should I reveal to you that I have dreamed of this moment?' A harsh laugh. 'Not quite. Not like this. Not... in so much ... detail.'

'You made your desires known, Rhulad. Before ... this.'

'Yes, call me Rhulad. As you did before. Between us, nothing need change.'

'Yet I am your empress.'

'My wife.'

'We cannot speak as if nothing has changed.'
'I will teach you, Mayen. I am still Rhulad.'

He embraced her then, an awkward, child-like encirclement in gold. 'You need not think of Fear,' he said. 'Mayen, you are his gift to me. His proof of loyalty. He did as a brother should.'

'I was betrothed—'

'And I am emperor! I can break the rules that would bind the Edur. The past is dead, Mayen, and it is I who shall forge the future! With you at my side. I saw you looking upon me, day after day, and I could see the desire in your eyes. Oh, we both knew that Fear would have you in the end. What could we do? Nothing. But I have changed all that.' He drew back a step, although she still held him with one hand. 'Mayen, my wife.' He began undressing her.

Realities. Moments one by one, stumbling forward. Clumsy necessities. Rhulad's dreams of this scene, whatever they had been in detail, were translated into a series of mundane impracticalities. Clothes were not easily discarded, unless designed with that in mind, and these were not. Her passivity under his ministrations added to the faltering, until this became an event bereft of romance.

Udinaas could see his lust fading. Of course it would revive. Rhulad was young, after all. The feelings of the object of his hunger were irrelevant, for an object Mayen had become. His trophy.

That the emperor sensed the slipping away of any chance of interlocking desires became evident as he began speaking once more. 'I saw in your eyes how you wanted me. Now, Mayen, no-one stands between us.'

But he does, Rhulad. Moreover, your monstrosity has become something you now wear on your flesh. And now what had to arrive. Letherii gold yields to its natural inclination. Now, Letherii gold rapes this Tiste Edur. Ha.

The emperor's lust had returned. His own statements had convinced him.

He pulled her towards the bed at the far wall. It had belonged to Hannan Mosag, and so was crafted for a single occupant. There was no room for lying side by side, which proved no obstacle for Rhulad's intentions. He pushed her onto her back. Looked down at her for a moment, then said, 'No, I would crush you. Get up, my love. You will descend upon me. I will give you children. I promise. Many children, whom you will adore. There will be heirs. Many heirs.'

An appeal, Udinaas could well hear, to sure instincts, the promise of eventual redemption. Reason to survive the ordeal of the present.

Rhulad settled down on the bed. Arms out to the sides.

She stared down at him.

Then moved to straddle this cruciform-shaped body of gold. Descending over him.

A game of mortality, the act of sex. Reduced so that decades became moments. Awakening, revelling in overwrought sensation, a brief spur to procreate, spent exhaustion, then death. Rhulad was young. He did not last long enough to assuage his ego.

Even so, at the moment before he spasmed beneath her, before his heavy groan that thinned into a whimper, Udinaas saw Mayen's control begin to crumble. As if she had found a spark within her that she could flame into proper desire, perhaps even pleasure. Then, as he released, that spark flickered, died.

None of which Rhulad witnessed, for his eyes were closed and he was fully inside himself.

He would improve, of course. Or so it was reasonable to expect. She might even gain a measure of control over this act, and so revive and fan into life that spark.

At that moment, Udinaas believed Mayen became the empress, wife to the emperor. At that moment, his faith in her spirit withered – if faith was the right word, that singular war between expectation and hope. Had he
compassion to feel, he might have understood, and so softened with empathy. But compassion was engagement, a mindfulness beyond that of mere witness, and he felt none of that.

He heard soft weeping coming from another place of darkness in the chamber, and slowly turned his head to look upon the fourth and last person present. As he had been, a witness to the rape with its hidden, metaphorical violence. But a witness trapped in the horror of feeling.

Among the crisscrossing worn paths of faded colour, one led to her.

Feather Witch huddled, pressed up against the wall, hands covering her face, racked with shudders.

Much more of this and she might end up killed. Rhulad was a man growing ever more intimate with dying. He did not need reminding of what it cost him and everyone around him. Even worse, he was without constraints.

Udinaas considered walking over to her, if only to tell her to be quiet. But his eyes fell on the intervening expanse of rugs and their images, and he realized that the distance was too great.

Mayen had remained straddling Rhulad, her head hanging down.

'Again,' the emperor said.

She straightened, began her motions, and Udinaas watched her search for that spark of pleasure. And then find it.

Wanting good, yearning for bad. As simple as that? Was this contradictory, confused map universally impressed upon the minds of men and women? That did not seem a question worth answering, Udinaas decided. He had lost enough already.

'Shut that bitch up!'

The slave started at the emperor's hoarse shout.

The weeping had grown louder, probably in answer to Mayen's audible panting.

Udinaas pushed himself forward, across the rugs to where Feather Witch crouched in the gloom.

'Get her out of here! Both of you, get out!'

She did not resist as he lifted her to her feet. Udinaas leaned close. 'Listen, Feather Witch,' he said under his breath. 'What did you expect?'

Her head snapped up and he saw hatred in her eyes. 'From you,' she said in a snarl, 'nothing.'

'From her. Don't answer – we must leave.'

He guided her to the side door, then through into the servants' corridor beyond. He closed the door behind them, then pulled her another half-dozen steps down the passage. 'There's no cause for crying,' Udinaas said. 'Mayen is trapped, just like us, Feather Witch. It is not for you to grieve that she has sought and found pleasure.'

'I know what you're getting at, Indebted,' she said, twisting her arm out of his grip. 'Is that what you want? My surrender? My finding pleasure when you make use of me?'

'I am as you say, Feather Witch. Indebted. What I want? My wants mean nothing. They have fallen silent in my mind. You think I still pursue you? I still yearn for your love? He shook his head as he studied her face. 'You were right. What is the point?''

'I want nothing to do with you, Udinaas.'

'Yes, I know. But you are Mayen's handmaiden. And I, it appears, am to be Rhulad's own slave. Emperor and empress. That is the reality we must face. You and I, we are a conceit. Or we were. Not any more, as far as I am
concerned.'

'Good. Then we need only deal with each other as necessity demands.'

He nodded.

Her eyes narrowed. 'I do not trust you.'

'I do not care.'

Uncertainty. Unease. 'What game are you playing at, Udinaas? Who speaks through your mouth?' She stepped back. 'I should tell her. About what hides within you.'

'If you do that, Feather Witch, you will destroy your only chance.'

'My only chance? What chance?'

'Freedom.'

Her face twisted. 'And with that you would purchase my silence? You are foolish, Indebted. I was born a slave. I have none of your memories to haunt me—'

'My memories? Feather Witch, my memory of freedom is as an Indebted trapped in a kingdom where even death offers no absolution. My memory is my father's memory, and would have been my children's memory. But you misunderstood. I did not speak of my freedom. I spoke only of yours. Not something to be recaptured, but found anew.'

'And how do you plan on freeing me, Udinaas?'

'We are going to war, Feather Witch. The Tiste Edur will wage war against Lether.'

She scowled. 'What of it? There have been wars before—'

'Not like this one. Rhulad isn't interested in raids. This will be a war of conquest.'

'Conquer Lether? They will fail—'

'Yes, they might. The point is, when the Edur march south, we will be going with them.'

'Why are you so certain of all this? This war? This conquest?'

'Because the Emperor has summoned the shadow wraiths. All of them.'

'You cannot know such a thing.'

He said nothing.

'You cannot,' Feather Witch insisted.

Then she spun round and hurried down the passage.

Udinaas returned to the door. To await the summons he knew would come, eventually.

Emperor and slave. A score of paces, a thousand leagues. In the span of intractable command and obedience, the mind did not count distance. For the path was well worn, as it always had been and as it would ever be.

The wraiths gathered, in desultory legions, in the surrounding forest, among them massive demons bound in chains that formed a most poignant armour. Creatures heaving up from the sea to hold the four hundred or more K'orthan raider ships now being readied, eager to carry them south. Among the tribes, in every village, the sorcerors awakening to the new emperor's demand.

A summons to war.
Across a worn rug.

Heroes triumphant.

From beyond the wooden portal came Mayen's cry.

He emerged from the forest, his face pallid, his expression haunted, and halted in surprise at seeing the readied wagons, Buruk swearing at the Nerek as they scurried about. Seren Pedac had completed donning her leather armour and was strapping on her sword-belt.

She watched him approach.

'Dire events, Hull Beddict.'

'You are leaving?'

'Buruk has so commanded.'

'What of the iron he sought to sell?'

'It goes back with us.' She looked about, then said, 'Come, walk with me. I need to speak one last time with the First Eunuch.'

Hull slowly nodded. 'Good. There is much that I must tell you.'

Her answering smile was wry. 'It was my intent to accord the same to you.'

They set off for the guest house near the citadel. Once more through the ringed divisions of the Edur city. This time, however, the citizens they passed were silent, sombre. Seren and Hull moved among them like ghosts.

'I visited the old sites,' Hull said. 'And found signs of activity.'

'What old sites?' Seren asked.

'North of the crevasse, the forest cloaks what was once a vast city, stretching on for leagues. It was entirely flag-stoned, the stone of a type I've never seen before. It does not break, and only the action of roots has succeeded in shifting the slabs about.'

'Why should there be any activity at such places? Beyond that of the usual ghosts and wraiths?'

Hull glanced at her momentarily, then looked away. 'There are ... kill sites. Piles of bones that have long since turned to stone. Skeletal remains of Tiste. Along with the bones of some kind of reptilian beast—'

'Yes, I have seen those,' Seren said. 'They are collected and ground into medicinal powder by the Nerek.'

'Just so. Acquitor, these sites have been disturbed, and the tracks I found were most disconcerting. They are, I believe, draconic.'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'The Hold of the Dragon has remained inactive, according to the casters of the tiles, for thousands of years.'

'When did you last speak to a caster?'

Seren hesitated, thinking back on Feather Witch's efforts. When, it was hinted, all was in flux. 'Very well. Draconic' The thought of dragons, manifest in this world, was terrifying. 'But I cannot see how this relates to the Tiste Edur—'

'Seren Pedac, you must have realized by now that the Tiste Edur worship dragons. Father Shadow, the three Daughters, they are all draconic. Or Soletaken. In the depths of the crevasse a short distance from here can be found the shattered skull of a dragon. I believe that dragon is Father Shadow, the one the Edur call Scabandari Bloodeye. Perhaps this is the source of the betrayal that seems to be the heart of Edur religion. I found tracks
there as well. Edur footprints.'

'And what significance have you drawn from all this, Hull?'

'There will be war. A fated war, born of a renewed sense of destiny. I fear for Hannan Mosag, for I think he has grasped a dragon’s tail – perhaps more than figuratively. This could prove too much, even for him and his K’risnan.'

'Hull, the Warlock King no longer rules the Edur.'

Shock; then his expression darkened. 'Did the delegation arrive with assassins in its company?'

'He was deposed before the delegation’s arrival,' she replied. 'Oh, I don’t know where to begin. Binadas’s brother, Rhulad. He died, then rose again, within his possession a sword – the gift that Hannan Mosag sought. Rhulad has proclaimed himself emperor. And Hannan Mosag knelt before him.'

Hull’s eyes shone. 'As I said, then. Destiny.'

'Is that what you choose to call it?'

'I hear anger in your voice, Acquitor.'

'Destiny is a lie. Destiny is justification for atrocity. It is the means by which murderers armour themselves against reprimand. It is a word intended to stand in place of ethics, denying all moral context. Hull, you are embracing that lie, and not in ignorance.'

They had reached the bridge. Hull Beddict halted and rounded on her. 'You knew me once, Seren Pedac. Enough to give me back my life. I am not blind to this truth, nor to the truth of who you are. You are honourable, in a world that devours honour. And would that I had been able to take more from you than I did, to become like you. Even to join my life to yours. But I haven’t your strength. I could not refashion myself.’ He studied her for a moment, then continued before she could respond. 'You are right, I am not blind. I understand what it means to embrace destiny. What am I trying to tell you is, it is the best I can do.’

She stepped back, as if buffeted by consecutive blows. Her eyes locked with his, and she saw in them the veracity of his confession. She wanted to scream, to loose her anguish, a sound to ring through the city as if to answer, finally and irrefutably, all that had happened.

But no. I am a fool to think that others feel as I do. This tide is rising, and there are scant few who would stand before it.

With heartbreaking gentleness, Hull Beddict reached out and took her arm. 'Come, let us pay a visit to the First Eunuch.'

'At the very least,' Seren tried as they crossed the bridge, 'your own position has become less relevant, making you in less danger than you might otherwise have been.'

'Do you think so?'

'You don’t?'

'That depends. Rhulad may not accept my offer of alliance. He might not trust me.'

'What would you do then, Hull?'

'I don’t know.'

* * *

The guest house was crowded. Finadd Gerun Eberict had arrived, along with the First Eunuch’s own bodyguard, the Rulith, and a dozen other guards and officials. As Seren and Hull entered, they found themselves in the midst of a fierce exhortation from Prince Quillas Diskanar.
—sorcerors in both our camps. If we strike now, we might well succeed in cutting out the heart of this treacherous tyranny! He swung round. 'Finadd Moroch Nevath, are our mages present?'

'Three of the four, my prince,' the warrior replied. 'Laerdas remains with the ships.'

'Very good. Well, First Eunuch?'

Nifadas was studying the prince, expressionless. He made no reply to Quillas, turning instead to regard Hull and Seren. 'Acquitor, does the rain continue to fall?'

'No, First Eunuch.'

'And is Buruk the Pale ready to depart?'

She nodded.

'I asked you a question, Nifadas! Quillas said, his face darkening.

'Answering it,' the First Eunuch said slowly, fixing his small eyes on the prince, 'makes implicit the matter is worth considering. It is not. We are facing more than Hannan Mosag the warlock and his K'risnan. The emperor and his sword. Together, they are something ... other. Those accompanying me are here under my guidance, and at present we shall remain in good faith. Tell me, Prince, how many assassins have you brought along with your sorcerors?'

Quillas said nothing.

Nifadas addressed Gerun Eberict. 'Finadd?'

'There are two,' the man replied. 'Both present in this chamber.'

The First Eunuch nodded, then seemed to dismiss the issue. 'Hull Beddict, I am hesitant to offer you welcome.'

'I am not offended by that admission, First Eunuch.'

'Has the Acquitor apprised you of the situation?'

'She has.'

'And?'

'For what it is worth, I advise you to leave. As soon as possible.'

'And what will you do?'

Hull frowned. 'I see no reason to answer that.'

'You are a traitor!' Quillas said in a hiss. 'Finadd Moroch, arrest him!'

There was dismay on the First Eunuch's features as Moroch Nevath drew his sword and stepped close to Hull Beddict.

'You cannot do that,' Seren Pedac said, her heart thundering in her chest.

All eyes fixed on her.

'I am sorry, my prince,' she continued, struggling to keep her voice even. 'Hull Beddict is under the protection of the Tiste Edur. He was granted guest status by Binadas Sengar, brother to the emperor.'

'He is Letherii!'

'The Edur will be indifferent to that detail,' Seren replied.
We are done here,' Nifadas said. 'There will be no arrests. Prince Quillas, it is time.'

'Do we scurry at this emperor's command, First Eunuch?' Quillas was shaking with rage. 'He asks for us, well enough. Let the bastard wait.' He wheeled on Hull Beddict. 'Know that I intend to proclaim you an outlaw and traitor of Lether. Your life is forfeit.'

A weary smile was Hull's only reply.

Nifadas spoke to Seren. 'Acquitor, will you accompany us to our audience with the emperor?'

She was surprised by the offer, and more than a little alarmed. 'First Eunuch?'

'Assuming Buruk is prepared to wait, of course. I am certain he will be, and I will send someone to inform him.' He gestured and one of his servants hurried off. 'Hull Beddict, I presume you are on your way to speak with Emperor Rhulad? At the very least, accompany us to the citadel. I doubt there will be any confusion of purposes once we enter.'

Seren could not determine the motives underlying the First Eunuch's invitations. She felt rattled, off balance.

'As you wish,' Hull said, shrugging.

Nifadas in the lead, the four Letherii left the guest house and made their way towards the citadel. Seren drew Hull a pace behind the First Eunuch and Prince Quillas. 'I'm not sure I like this,' she said under her breath.

Hull grunted, and it was a moment before Seren realized it had been a laugh.

'What is funny about that?'

'Your capacity for understatement, Acquitor. I have always admired your ability to stay level."

'Indecisiveness is generally held to be a flaw, Hull.'

'If it is certainty you want, Seren, then join me.'

The offer was uttered low, barely audible. She sighed. 'I do not want certainty,' she replied. 'In fact, certainty is the one thing I fear the most.'

'I expected that sort of answer.'

Two K'risnan met the party at the entrance and escorted them into the throne chamber.

Emperor Rhulad was seated once more, his new wife standing at his side, on the left. Apart from the two K'risnan, no-one else was present. Although Mayen's face was fixed and without expression, something about it, ineffable in the way of the secret language among women, told Seren that a consummation had occurred, a binding that was reflected in Rhulad's dark eyes, a light of triumph and supreme confidence. 'Hull Beddict,' he said in his rough voice, 'blood brother to Binadas, you arrive in questionable company.'

'Emperor,' Hull said, 'your brother's faith in me is not misplaced.'

'I see. And how does your prince feel about that?'

'He is no longer my prince. His feelings mean nothing to me.'

Rhulad smiled. 'Then I suggest you step to one side. I would now speak to the official delegation from Lether, such as it is.'

Hull bowed and walked three paces to the right.

'Acquitor?'

'Emperor, I come to inform you that I am about to leave, as escort to Buruk the Pale.'
'We appreciate the courtesy, Acquitor. If that is all that brings you into our presence, best you join Hull.'

She bowed in acquiescence and moved away. *Now why did Nifadas want this?*

'Emperor Rhulad,' Nifadas said, 'may I speak?'

The Edur regarded the First Eunuch with half-closed lids. 'We permit it.'

'The kingdom of Lether is prepared to enter negotiations regarding the debts incurred as a result of the illegal harvest of tusked seals.'

Like a snake whose tail had just been stepped on, Quillas hissed and spat in indignation.

'The issue of debt,' Rhulad responded, ignoring the prince, 'is no longer relevant. We care nothing for your gold, First Eunuch. Indeed, we care nothing for you at all.'

'If isolation is your desire—'

'We did not say that, First Eunuch.'

Prince Quillas suddenly smiled, under control once more. 'An opening of outright hostility between our peoples, Emperor? I would warn you against such a tactic, which is not to say I would not welcome it.'

'How so, Prince Quillas?'

'We covet the resources you possess, to put it bluntly. And now you give us the opportunity to acquire them. A peaceful solution could have been found in your acknowledgement of indebtedness to Lether. Instead, you voice the absurd lie that is it we who owe you!'

Rhulad was silent a moment, then he nodded and said, 'Letherii economics seems founded on peculiar notions, Prince.'

'Peculiar? I think not. Natural and undeniable laws guide our endeavours. The results of which you will soon discover, to your regret.'

'First Eunuch, does the prince speak for Lether?'

Nifadas shrugged. 'Does it matter, Emperor?'

'Ah, you are clever indeed. Certainly more worthy of conversation with ourselves than this strutting fool whose nobility resides only in the fact of his crawling out from between a queen's legs. You are quite right, First Eunuch. It no longer matters. We were simply curious.'

'I feel no obligation to assuage that curiosity, Emperor.'

'And now you show your spine, at last, Nifadas. We are delighted. Deliver these words to your king, then. The Tiste Edur no longer bow in deference to your people. Nor are we interested in participating in your endless games of misdirection and the poisonous words you would have us swallow.' A sudden, strange pause, the ghost of some kind of spasm flitting across the emperor's face. Then he shook himself, settled back. But the look in his eyes was momentarily lost. He blinked, frowned, then the gleam of awareness returned. 'Moreover,' he resumed, 'we choose now to speak for the tribes you have subjugated, for the hapless peoples you have destroyed. It is time you answered for your crimes.'

Nifadas slowly tilted his head. 'Is this a declaration of war?' he asked in a soft voice.

'We shall announce our intention with deeds, not words, First Eunuch. We have spoken. Your delegation is dismissed. We regret that you travelled so far for what has turned out to be a short visit. Perhaps we will speak again in the future, although, we suspect, in very different circumstances.'

Nifadas bowed. 'Then, if you will excuse us, Emperor, we must make ready to depart.'
'You may go. Hull Beddict, Acquitor, remain a moment.'

Seren watched Quillas and Nifadas walk stiffly from the throne chamber. She was still thinking about that display from Rhulad. A crack, a fissure. I think I saw him then, young Rhulad, there inside.

'Acquitor,' Rhulad said as soon as the curtains fell back into place, drawing her attention round, 'inform Buruk the Pale that he has right of passage for his flight. However, the duration of the privilege is short, so he best make haste.'

'Emperor, the wagons perforce—'

'We fear he will not have sufficient time to take his wagons with him.'

She blinked. 'You expect him to abandon the iron in his possession?'

'There are always risks in business, Acquitor, as you Letherii are quick to point out when it is to your advantage. Alas, the same applies when the situation is reversed.'

'How many days do you permit us?'

'Three. One more detail. The Nerek remain here.'

'The Nerek?'

'Are Indebted to Buruk, yes, we understand that. Yet another vagary of economics, alas, under which the poor man must suffer. He has our sympathy.'

'Buruk is a merchant, Emperor. He is used to travelling by wagon. Three days for the return journey may well be beyond his physical abilities.'

'That would be unfortunate, for him.' The dead, cold gaze shifted. 'Hull Beddict, what have you to offer us?'

Hull dropped to one knee. 'I swear myself to your cause, Emperor.'

Rhulad smiled. 'You do not yet know that cause, Hull Beddict.'

'I believe I comprehend more than you might think, sire.'

'Indeed...'

'And I would stand with you.'

The emperor swung his attention back to Seren. 'Best take your leave now, Acquitor. This discussion is not for you.'

Seren looked across at Hull, and their eyes met. Although neither moved, it seemed to her that he was retreating before her, growing ever more distant, ever further from her reach. The intervening space had become a vast gulf, a distance that could not be bridged.

And so I lose you.

To this ... creature.

Her thoughts ended there. As blank as the future now breached, the space beyond naught but oblivion, and so we plunge forward... 'Goodbye, Hull Beddict.'

'Fare you well, Seren Pedac.'

Her legs felt wobbly beneath her as she walked to the curtained exit.

Gerun Eberict was waiting for her ten paces from the citadel doors. There was smug amusement in his expression. 'He remains inside, does he? For how long?'
Seren struggled to compose herself. 'What do you want, Finadd?'

'That is a difficult question to answer, Acquitor. I was asked by Brys Beddict to speak to his brother. But the opportunity seems increasingly remote.'

And if I tell him that Hull is lost to us, what would he do then?

Gerun Eberict smiled, as if he had read the thoughts in her mind.

She looked away. 'Hull Beddict is under the emperor's protection.'

'I am pleased for him.'

She glared. 'You do not understand. Look around, Finadd. This village is filled with shadows, and in those shadows are wraiths – servants to the Edur.'

His brows rose. 'You believe I desire to kill him? Where has that suspicion come from, Acquitor? I did say "speak", did I not? I was not being euphemistic.'

'Your reputation gives cause for alarm, Finadd.'

'I have no reason to proclaim Hull my enemy, regardless of his political allegiance. After all, if he proves to be a traitor, then the kingdom possesses its own means of dealing with him. I have no interest in interceding in such a matter. I was but endeavouring to consummate my promise to Brys.'

'What did Brys hope to achieve?'

'I'm not sure. Perhaps I was, once, but clearly everything has changed.'

Seren studied him.

'And what of you, Acquitor?' he asked. 'You will escort the merchant back to Trate. Then what?'

She shrugged. There seemed little reason to dissemble. 'I am going home, Finadd.'

'Letheras? That residence has seen little of you.'

'Clearly that is about to change.'

He nodded. 'There will be no demand for Acquitors in the foreseeable future, Seren Pedac. I would be honoured if you would consider working for me.'

'Work?'

'My estate. I am involved in ... extensive enterprises, You have integrity, Acquitor. You are someone I could trust.' He hesitated, then added, 'Do not feel you need to answer here and now. I ask that you think on it. I shall call upon you in Letheras.'

'I think, Finadd,' Seren said, 'that you will find yourself rather preoccupied with your military duties, given what is about to happen.'

'My position is in the palace. I do not command armies.' He looked round, and his gap-toothed smile returned. 'These savages won't reach Letheras. They'll be lucky to make it across the frontier. You forget, Acquitor, we've faced similar enemies before. The Nerek had their spirit goddess – what was it called?'

'The Eres'al.'

'Yes, that's it. The Eres'al. And the Tarthenal their five Seregahl, the Wrath Wielders. Warlocks and witches, curses and demons, we obliterated them one and all. And the Ceda and his cadre barely broke a sweat.'

'I fear this time it will be different, Finadd.'
He cocked his head. 'Acquitor, when you think of the Merchant Tolls, what do you imagine it to be?'

'I don't understand—'

'The commercial core, the heart of the financial system which drives all of Lether, its every citizen, its very way of looking at the world. The Tolls are not simply coins stacked high in some secret vault. Not just traders howling their numbers before the day's close. The Tolls are the roots of our civilization, the fibres reaching out to infest everything. **Everything.**'

'What is your point, Finadd?'

'You are cleverer than that, Acquitor. You understand full well. That heart feeds on the best and the worst in human nature. Exaltation and achievement, ambition and greed, all acting in self-serving concert. Thus, four facets of our nature, and not one sits well with constraints on its behaviour, on its expression. We win not just with armies, Seren Pedac. We win because our system appeals to the best and worst within all people, not just humans.'

'Destiny. '

He shrugged. 'Call it what you will. But we have made it inevitable and all-devouring—'

'I see little of exaltation and achievement in what we do, Finadd. It would seem there is a growing imbalance —'

His laugh cut her off. 'And that is the truth of freedom, Seren Pedac.'

She could feel her anger rising. 'I always believed freedom concerned the granted right to be different, without fear of repression.'

'A lofty notion, but you won't find it in the real world. We have hammered freedom into a sword. And if you won't be like us we will use that sword to kill you one by one, until your spirit is broken.'

'What if the Tiste Edur surprise you, Finadd? Will you in turn choose to die in defence of your great cause?'

'Some can die. Some will. Indeed, unlikely as it is, we may all die. But, unless the victors leave naught but ashes in their wake, the heart will beat on. Its roots will find new flesh. The emperor may have his demons of the seas, but we possess a monster unimaginably vast, and it devours. And what it cannot devour, it will smother, or starve. Win or lose, the Tiste Edur still lose.'

She stepped back. 'Finadd Gerun Eberict, I want nothing to do with your world. And so you need not wait for my answer, for I have just given it.'

'As you like, but know that I will think no less of you when you change your mind.'

'I won't.'

He turned away. 'Everyone has to work to eat, lass. See you in Letheras.'

Udinaas had stood quietly in the gloom during the audience with the delegation. His fellow Letherii had not marked his presence. And, had they done so, it would not have mattered, for it was the emperor who commanded the exchange. After the dismissal of the delegation and the Acquitor's departure, Rhulad had beckoned Hull Beddict closer.

'You swear your fealty to us,' the emperor said in a murmur, as if tasting each word before it escaped his mangled lips.

'I know the details you need, Emperor, the location and complement of every garrison, every frontier encampment. I know their tactics, the manner in which armies are arrayed for battle. The way sorcery is employed. I know where the food and water caches are hidden – these are the military repositories, and they are massive.'
Rhulad leaned forward. 'You would betray your own people. Why?'

'Vengeance,' Hull Beddict replied.

The word chilled Udinaas.

'Sire,' Hull continued, 'my people betrayed me. Long ago. I have long awaited an opportunity such as this one.

'And so, vengeance. A worthy sentiment?'

'Emperor, there is nothing else left for me.'

'Tell us, Hull Beddict, will the mighty Letherii fleet take to the waves to challenge us?'

'No, I don't think so. Not at first, anyway.'

'And their armies?'

'The doctrine is one of an initial phase of rolling, mobile defence, drawing your forces ever forward. Then counterattack. Deep strikes to cut your supply lines. Attack and withdraw, attack and withdraw. By the third phase, they will encircle your armies to complete the annihilation. Their fleets will avoid any sea engagement, for they know that to conquer Lether you must make landing. Instead, I suspect they will send their ships well beyond sight of the coastline, then attack your homeland. The villages here, which they will burn to the ground. And every Tiste Edur they find here, old or young, will be butchered.'

Rhulad grunted, then said, 'They think we are fools.'

'The Letherii military is malleable, Emperor. Its soldiers are trained to quick adaptation, should the circumstances warrant it. A formidable, deadly force, exquisitely trained and, employing the raised roads constructed exclusively for it, frighteningly mobile. Worse, they have numerical superiority—'

'Hardly,' Rhulad cut in, smiling. 'The Edur possess new allies, Hull Beddict, as you shall soon discover. Very well, we are satisfied, and we conclude that you shall prove useful to us. Go now to our father's house, and make greeting with Binadas, who will be pleased to see you.'

The Letherii bowed and strode from the chamber.

'Hannan Mosag,' Rhulad called in a low voice.

A side curtain was drawn aside and Udinaas watched the once-Warlock King enter.

'It would seem,' Rhulad said, 'your studies of the Letherii military have yielded you an accurate assessment. His description of their tactics and strategies matches yours exactly.'

'How soon, Emperor?'

'Are the tribes readying themselves?'

'With alacrity.'

'Then very soon indeed. Tell us your thoughts on Nifadas and the prince.'

'Nifadas understood quickly that all was lost, but the prince sees that loss as a victory. At the same time, both remain confident in their kingdom's military prowess. Nifadas mourns for us, Emperor.'

'Poor man. Perhaps he has earned our mercy for that misguided sentiment.'

'Given the course you have chosen for our people, Emperor, mercy is a notion dangerous to entertain. You can be certain that none will be accorded us.'

Another spasm afflicted Rhulad, such as the one Udinaas had witnessed earlier. He thought he understood its
source. A thousand bindings held together Rhulad's sanity, but madness was assailing that sanity, and the
defences were buckling. Not long ago, no more than the youngest son of a noble family, strutting the village
but not yet blooded. In his mind, panoramic visions of glory swinging in a slow turn round the place where he
stood. The visions of a youth, crowded with imagined scenarios wherein Rhulad could freely exercise his own
certainty, and so prove the righteousness of his will.

And now that boy sat on the Edur throne.

*He just had to die to get there.*

The sudden manifestation of glory still fed him, enough to shape his words and thoughts and feed his
imperial comportment, as if the royal 'we' was something to which he had been born. But this was at the barest
edge of control. An imperfect façade, bolstered by elaborately constructed speech patterns, a kind of awkward
articulation that suited Rhulad's childlike notions of how an emperor should speak. These were games of
persuasion, as much to himself as to his audience.

But, Udinaas was certain, other thoughts remained in Rhulad's mind, gnawing at the roots and crawling like
pallid worms through his necrotic soul. For all the glittering gold, the flesh beneath was twisted and scarred. To
fashion the façade, all that lay beneath it had been malformed.

The slave registered all this in the span of Rhulad's momentary spasm, and was unmoved. His gaze drifted to
Mayen, but she gave nothing away, not even an awareness of her husband's sudden extremity.

Across Hannan Mosag's face, however, Udinaas saw a flash of fear, quickly buried beneath a bland regard.

A moment's consideration and Udinaas thought he understood that reaction. Hannan Mosag needed his
emperor to be sane and in control. Even power unveiled could not have forced him to kneel before a madman.
Probably, the once-Warlock King also comprehended that a struggle was under way within Rhulad, and had
resolved to give what aid he could to the emperor's rational side.

And should the battle be lost, should Rhulad descend completely into insanity, what would Hannan Mosag
do then?

The Letherii slave's eyes shifted to the sword the emperor held like a sceptre in his right hand, the point
anchored on the dais near the throne's ornate foot. *The answer hides in that sword, and Hannan Mosag knows
far more about that weapon — and its maker — than he has revealed.*

*Then again, I do as well.* Wither, the shadow wraith that had adopted Udinaas, had whispered some truths.
The sword's power had given Rhulad command of the wraiths. *The Tiste Andii spirits.*

Wither had somehow avoided the summons, announcing its victory with a melodramatic chuckle rolling
through the slave's head, and the wraith's presence now danced with exaggerated glee in the Letherii's mind.
Witness to all through his eyes.

'Emperor,' Hannan Mosag said as soon as Rhulad had visibly regained himself, 'the warlocks among the
Arapay—'

'Yes. They are not to resist. They are to give welcome.'

'And the Nerek you have claimed from the merchant?'

'A different consideration.' Momentary unease in Rhulad's dark eyes. 'They are not to be disturbed. They are
to be respected.'

'Their hearth and the surrounding area has seen sanctification,' Hannan Mosag said, nodding. 'Of course that
must be respected. But I have sensed little power from that blessing.'

'Do not let that deceive you. The spirits they worship are the oldest this world has known. Those spirits do
not manifest in ways we might easily recognize.'
'Ah. Emperor, you have been gifted with knowledge I do not possess.'

'Yes, Hannan Mosag, I have. We must exercise all caution with the Nerek. I have no desire to see the rising of those spirits.'

The once-Warlock King was frowning. 'The Letherii sorcerors had little difficulty negating – even eradicating – the power of those spirits. Else the Nerek would not have crumbled so quickly.'

'The weakness the Letherii exploited was found in the mortal Nerek, not in the spirits they worshipped. It is our belief now, Hannan Mosag, that the Eres'al was not truly awakened. She did not rise to defend those who worshipped her.'

'Yet something has changed.'

Rhulad nodded. 'Something has.' He glanced up at Mayen. 'Begun with the blessing of the Edur woman who is now my wife.'

She flinched and would meet neither Rhulad's nor Hannan Mosag's eyes.

The emperor shrugged. 'It is done. Need we be concerned? No. Not yet. Perhaps never. None the less, we had best remain cautious.'

Udinaas resisted the impulse to laugh. Caution, born of fear. It was pleasing to know that the emperor of the Tiste Edur could still be afflicted with that emotion. *Then again, perhaps I have read Rhulad wrongly. Perhaps fear is at the core of the monster he has become.* Did it matter? Only if Udinaas endeavoured to entertain the game of prediction.

Was it worth the effort?

'The Den-Ratha are west of Breed Bay,' Hannan Mosag said. 'The Merude can see the smoke of their villages.'

'How many are coming by sea?'

'About eight thousand. Every ship. Most of them are warriors, of course. The rest travel overland and the first groups have already reached the Sollanta border.'

'Supplies?' the emperor asked.

'Sufficient for the journey.'

'And nothing is being left behind?'

'Naught but ashes, sire.'

'Good.'

Udinaas watched Hannan Mosag hesitate, then say, 'It is already begun. There is no going back now.'

'You have no reason to fret,' Rhulad replied. 'I have already sent wraiths to the borderlands. They watch. Soon, they will cross over, into Lether.'

'The Ceda's frontier sorcerors will find them.'

'Eventually, but the wraiths will not engage. Merely flee. I have no wish to show their power yet. I mean to encourage overconfidence.'

The two Edur continued discussing strategies. Udinaas listened, just one more wraith in the gloom.

Trull Sengar watched his father rebuilding, with meticulous determination, a kind of faith. Stringing together words spoken aloud yet clearly meant for himself, whilst his wife looked on with the face of an old, broken woman. Death had arrived, only to be shattered by a ghastly reprise, a revivification that offered nothing worth
rejoicing in. A king had been cast down, an emperor risen in his place. The world was knocked askew, and Trull found himself detached, numb, witness to these painful, tortured scenes in which the innumerable facets of reconciliation were being attempted, resulting in exhausted silences in which tensions slowly returned, whispering of failure.

They had one and all knelt before their new emperor. Brother and son, the kin who had died and now sat bedecked in gold coins. A voice ravaged yet recognizable. Eyes that belonged to one they had all once known, yet now looked out fevered with power and glazed with the unhealed wounds of horror.

Fear had given up his betrothed.

A terrible thing to have done.

Rhulad had demanded her. And that was ... obscene.

Trull had never felt so helpless as he did now. He pulled his gaze from his father and looked over to where Binadas stood in quiet conversation with Hull Beddict. The Letherii, who had sworn his allegiance to Rhulad, who would betray his own people in the war that Trull knew was now inevitable. What has brought us all to this? How can we stop this inexorable march?

'Do not fight this, brother.'

Trull looked over at Fear, seated on the bench beside him. 'Fight what?'

His brother's expression was hard, almost angry. 'He carries the sword, Trull.'

'That weapon has nothing to do with the Tiste Edur. It is foreign, and it seeks to make its wielder into our god. Father Shadow and his Daughters, they are to be cast aside?'

'The sword is naught but a tool. It falls to us, to those around Rhulad, to hold to the sanctity of our beliefs, to maintain that structure and so guide Rhulad.'

Trull stared at Fear. 'He stole your betrothed.'

'Speak of that again, brother, and I will kill you.'

His eyes flinched away, and he could feel the thud of his heart, rapid in his chest. 'Rhulad will accept no guidance, not from us, Fear, not from anyone. That sword and the one who made it guide him now. That, and madness.'

'Madness is what you have decided to see.'

Trull grunted. 'Perhaps you are right. Tell me, then, what you see.'

'Pain.'

And that is something you share. Trull rubbed at his face, slowly sighed. 'Fight this, Fear? There was never a chance.' He looked over again. 'But do you not wonder? Who has been manipulating us, and for how long? You called that sword a tool – are we any different?'

'We are Tiste Edur. We ruled an entire realm, once. We crossed swords with the gods of this world—'

'And lost.'

'Were betrayed.'

'I seem to recall you shared our mother's doubts—'

'I was mistaken. Lured into weakness. We all were. But we must now cast that aside, Trull. Binadas understands. So does our father. Theradas and Midik Buhn as well, and those whom the emperor has proclaimed his brothers of blood. Choram Irard, Kholb Harat and Matra Brith—'
'His unblooded friends of old,' Trull cut in, with a wry smile. 'The three he always defeated in contests with sword and spear. Them and Midik.'

'What of it?'

'They have earned nothing, Fear. And no amount of proclaiming can change that. Yet Rhulad would have us take orders from those—'

'Not us. We too are brothers of blood, you forget. And I still command the warriors of the six tribes.'

'And how do you think the other noble warriors feel? They have all followed the time-honoured path of blooding and worthy deeds in battle. They now find themselves usurped—'

'The first warrior under my command who complains will know the edge of my sword.'

'That edge may grow dull and notched.'

'No. There will be no rebellion.'

After a moment, Trull nodded. 'You are probably right, and that is perhaps the most depressing truth yet spoken this day.'

Fear stood. 'You are my brother, Trull, and a man I admire. But you walk close to treason with your words. Were you anyone else I would have silenced you by now. With finality. No more, Trull. We are an empire now. An empire reborn. And war awaits us. And so I must know – will you fight at the sides of your brothers?'

Trull leaned his back against the rough wall. He studied Fear for a moment, then asked, 'Have I ever done otherwise?'

His brother's expression softened. 'No, you have not. You saved us all when we returned from the ice wastes, and that is a deed all now know, and so they look upon you with admiration and awe. By the same token, Trull, they look to you for guidance. There are many who will find their decisions by observing your reaction to what has happened. If they see doubt in your eyes...'

'They will see nothing, Fear. Not in my eyes. Nor will they find cause for doubt in my actions.'

'I am relieved. The emperor shall be calling upon us soon. His brothers of blood.'

Trull also rose. 'Very well. But for now, brother, I feel in need of solitude.'

'Will that prove dangerous company?'

If it does, then I am as good as dead. 'It hasn't thus far, Fear.'

'Leave me now, Hannan Mosag,' the emperor said, his voice revealing sudden exhaustion. 'And take the K'risnan with you. Everyone, go – not you, slave. Mayen, you too, wife. Please go.'

The sudden dismissal caused a moment of confusion, but moments later the chamber was vacated barring Rhulad and Udinaas. To the slave's eyes, Mayen's departure looked more like flight, her gait stilted as if driven by near hysteria.

There would be more moments like this, Udinaas suspected. Sudden breaks in the normal proceedings. And so he was not surprised when Rhulad beckoned him closer, and Udinaas saw in the emperor's eyes a welling of anguish and terror.

'Stand close by me, slave,' Rhulad gasped, fierce trembling sweeping over him. 'Remind me! Please! Udinaas...'

The slave thought for a moment, then said; 'You died. Your body was dressed for honourable burial as a blooded warrior of the Hiroth. Then you returned. By the sword now in your hand, you returned and are alive once more.'
'Yes, that is it. Yes.' A laugh that rose to a piercing shriek, stopping abruptly as a spasm ripped through Rhulad. He gaped, as if in pain, then muttered, 'The wounds ...'

'Emperor?'

'No matter. Just the memory. Cold iron pushing into my body. Cold fire. I tried. I tried to curl up around those wounds. Up tight, to protect what I had already lost. I remember...'

Udinaas was silent. Since the emperor would not look at him, he was free to observe. And arrive at conclusions.

The young should not die. That final moment belonged to the aged. Some rules should never be broken, and whether the motivation was compassionate or coldly calculated hardly mattered. Rhulad had been dead too long, too long to escape some kind of spiritual damage. If the emperor was to be a tool, then he was a flawed one.

And what value that?

'We are imperfect.'

Udinaas started, said nothing.

'Do you understand that, Udinaas?'

'Yes, Emperor.'

'How? How do you understand?'

'I am a slave,'

Rhulad nodded. His left hand, gauntleted in gold, lifted to join his right where it gripped the handle of the sword. 'Yes, of course. Yes. Imperfect. We can never match the ideals set before us. That is the burden of mortality.' A twisted grimace. 'Not just mortals.' A flicker of the eyes, momentarily fixing on the slave's own, then away again. 'He whispers in my mind. He tells me what to say. He makes me cleverer than I am. What does that make me, Udinaas? What does that make me?'

'A slave.'

'But I am Tiste Edur.'

'Yes, Emperor.'

A scowl. 'The gift of a life returned.'

'You are Indebted.'

Rhulad flinched back in his chair, his eyes flashing with sudden rage. 'We are not the same, slave! Do you understand? I am not one of your Indebted. I am not a Letherii.' Then he sagged in a rustle of coins. 'Daughter take me, the weight of this ...'

'I am sorry, Emperor. It is true. You are not an Indebted. Nor, perhaps, are you a slave. Although perhaps it feels that way, at times. When exhaustion assails you.'

'Yes, that is it. I am tired. That's all. Tired.'

Udinaas hesitated, then asked, 'Emperor, does he speak through you now?'

A fragile shake of the head. 'No. But he does not speak through me. He only whispers advice, helps me choose my words. Orders my thoughts – but the thoughts are mine. They must be. I am not a fool. I possess my own cleverness. Yes, that is it. He but whispers confidence.'

'You have not eaten,' Udinaas said. 'Nor drunk anything. Do you know hunger and thirst, Emperor? Can I get
you something to replenish your strength?

'Yes, I would eat. And ... some wine. Find a servant.'

'At once, master.'

Udinaas walked to the small curtain covering the entrance to the passage that led to the kitchens. He found a servant huddled in the corridor a dozen paces from the door. Terrified eyes glistened up at him as he approached. 'On your feet, Virrick. The emperor wants wine. And food.'

'The god would eat?'

'He's not a god. Food and drink, Virrick. Fit for an emperor, and be quick about it.'

The servant scrambled up, seemed about to bolt.

'You know how to do this,' Udinaas said in a calm voice. 'It's what you have been trained to do.'

'I am frightened—'

'Listen to me. I will tell you a secret. You always like secrets, don't you, Virrick?'

A tentative nod.

'It is this,' Udinaas said. 'We slaves have no reason to fear. It is the Edur who have reason, and that gives us leave to continue laughing behind their backs. Remember doing that, Virrick? It's your favourite game.'

'I – I remember, Udinaas.'

'Good. Now go into the kitchens and show the others. You know the secret, now. Show them, and they will follow. Food, and wine. When you are ready, bring it to the curtain and give the low whistle, as you would do normally. Virrick, we need things to return to normal, do you understand? And that task falls to us, the slaves.'

'Feather Witch ran—'

'Feather Witch is young, and what she did was wrong. I have spoken to her and shall do so again.'

'Yes, Udinaas. You are the emperor's slave. You have the right of it; there is much wisdom in your words. I think we will listen to you, Indebted though you are. You have been ... elevated.' He nodded. 'Feather Witch failed us—'

'Do not be so harsh on her, Virrick. Now, go.'

He watched the servant hurry off down the corridor, then Udinaas swung about and returned to the throne chamber.

'What took you so long?' Rhulad demanded in near panic. 'I heard voices.'

'I was informing Virrick of your requirements, Emperor.'

'You are too slow. You must be quicker, slave.'

'I shall, master.'

'Everyone must be told what to do. No-one seems capable of thinking for themselves.'

Udinaas said nothing, and did not dare smile even as the obvious observation drifted through his mind.

'You are useful to us, slave. We will need ... reminding ... again. At unexpected times. And that is what shall you do for us. That, and food and drink at proper times.'

'Yes, master.'
'Now, stand in attendance, whilst we rest our eyes for a time.'

'Of course, master.'

He stood, waiting, watching, a dozen paces away.

The distance between emperor and slave.

As he made his way onto the bridge, Trull Sengar saw the Acquitor. She was standing midway across the bridge, motionless as a frightened deer, her gaze fixed on the main road leading through the village. Trull could not see what had snared her attention.

He hesitated. Then her head turned and he met her eyes.

There were no words for what passed between them at that instant. A gaze that began searchingly, then swiftly and ineffably transformed into something else. That locked contact was mutually broken in the next moment, instinctive reactions from them both.

In the awkward wake, nothing was said for a half-dozen heartbeats. Trull found himself struggling against a sense of vast emptiness deep in his chest.

Seren Pedac spoke first. 'Is there no room left, Trull Sengar?'

And he understood. 'No, Acquitor. No room left.'

'I think you would have it otherwise, wouldn't you?'

The question brushed too close to the wordless recognition they had shared only a few moments earlier, and he saw once again in her eyes a flicker of ... something. He mentally recoiled from an honest reply. 'I serve my emperor.'

The flicker vanished, replaced by a cool regard that slipped effortlessly through his defences, driving like a knife into his chest. 'Of course. Forgive me. It is too late for questions like that. I must be leaving now, to escort Buruk the Pale back to Trate.'

Each word a twist of that knife, despite their being seemingly innocuous. He did not understand how they – and the look in her eyes – could hurt him so deeply, and he wanted to cry out. Denials. Confessions. Instead he punctuated the break of that empathy with a damning shrug. 'Journey well, Acquitor.' Nothing more, and he knew himself for a coward.

He watched her walk away. Thinking on his life's journey as much as the Acquitor's, on the stumbles that occurred, with no awareness of their potential for profundity. Balance reacquired, but the path had changed.

So many choices proved irrevocable. Trull wondered if this one would as well.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Where is the darkness
In the days gone past
When the sun bathed everything
In godling light
And we were burnished bright
In our youthful ascendancy
Delighted shrieks and
Distant laughter
Carried on the gilden stream
Of days that did not pause
For night with every shadow
Burned through
By immortal fire
Where then is the darkness
Arrived at sun's death
Arrived creeping and low
To growl revelations
Of the torrid descent
That drags us down
Onto this moment.

Immortal fire
Fisher kel Tath

A voice spoke from the darkness. 'I wouldn't go down that street, old man.'

Bugg glanced over. 'I thank you for the warning,' he replied, walking on.

Ten paces into the narrow alley he could smell spilled blood. Footsteps behind him told him the look-out had moved into his wake, presumably to block his avenue of retreat.

'I warned you.'

'I'm the one you sent for,' Bugg said.

Four more figures appeared from the gloom in front of him, cut-throats one and all. They looked frightened.

The look-out came round and stepped close to peer at Bugg's face. 'You're the Waiting Man? You ain't what I 'spected.'

'What has happened here? Who's dead and who killed him?'

'Not "who" killed 'im,' one of the four standing before Bugg muttered. 'More like "what". An' we don't know. Only it was big, skin black as canal water, with spikes on its arms. Eyes like a snake's, glowing grey.'

Bugg sniffed the air, seeking something beyond the blood.

'It ripped Strong Rall to pieces, it did, then went into that building.'

The manservant swung his gaze to where the man pointed. A derelict temple, sunken down at one corner, the peaked roof tilted sharply on that side. Bugg grunted. 'That was the last temple of the Fulcra, wasn't it?'

'Don't ask us.'
'That cult's been dead a hundred years at least,' the manservant continued, scowling at the dilapidated structure. The entranceway, wide and gaping, capped in a solid lintel stone, was once three steps higher than street level. Back when this alley had been a street. He could just make out the right corner of the top step. There seemed to be a heap of rubbish piled up just within, recently disturbed. Bugg glanced back at the five thugs. 'What were you doing skulking around here, anyway?'

An exchange of looks, then the look-out shrugged. 'We was hiding.'

'Hiding?'

'This little girl... well, uh ...'

'Ahh. Right.' Bugg faced the entrance once again.

'Hold on, old man,' the man said. 'You ain't goin' in there, are you?'

'Well, why else did you call for me?'

'We expected you to, uh, to get the city guards or something. Maybe a mage or three.'

'I might well do that. But first, better to know what we're dealing with.' Bugg then clambered into the ruined temple. Thick, damp air and profound darkness. A smell of freshly turned earth, and then, faintly, the sound of breathing. Slow and deep. The manservant fixed his gaze on the source of that sound. 'All right,' he said in a murmur, 'it's been some time since you last breathed the night air. But that doesn't give you the right to kill a hapless mortal, does it?'

A massive shape shuffled to one side near the far wall. 'Don't hurt me. I'm not going back. They're killing everyone.'

Bugg sighed. 'You'll have to do better than that.'

The shape seemed to break apart, and the manservant saw motion, fanning out. At least six new, smaller forms, each low and long. The gleam of reptilian eyes fixed on him from all along the back wall.

'So that is why you chose this temple,' Bugg said. 'Alas, your worshippers are long gone.'

'You may think so.' A half-dozen voices now, a whispered chorus. 'But you are wrong.'

'Why did you kill that mortal?'

'He was blocking the doorway.'

'So, now that you're here ...'

'I will wait.'

Bugg considered this, and the implications inherent in that statement. He slowly frowned. 'Very well. But no more killing. Stay in here.'

'I will agree to that. For now.'

'Until what you're waiting for ... arrives.'

'Yes. Then we shall hunt.'

Bugg turned away. 'That's what you think,' he said under his breath.

He reappeared outside the temple. Studied the five terrified faces in the gloom. 'Spread the word that no-one is to enter that temple.'

'That's it? What about the guards? The mages? What about Strong Rall?'
'Well, if you're interested in vengeance, I suggest you find a few thousand friends first. There will be a reckoning, eventually.'

The look-out snorted. 'The Waiting Man wants us to wait.'

Bugg shrugged. 'The best I can do. To oust this beast, the Ceda himself would have to come down here.'

'So send for him!'

'I'm afraid I don't possess that sort of clout. Go home, all of you.'

Bugg moved past them and made his way down the alley. Things were getting decidedly complicated. And that was never good. He wondered how many more creatures were escaping the barrows. From the Pack's words, not many. Which was a relief.

Even so, he decided, he'd better see for himself. The rendezvous awaiting him would have to wait a little longer. That would likely earn him an earful, but it couldn't be helped. The Seventh Closure was shaping up to be eventful. He wondered if that prophecy, of empire reborn, was in some way linked to the death of the Azath tower. He hoped not.

The night was surprisingly quiet. The usual crowds that appeared once the day's heat was past were virtually absent as Bugg made his way down the length of Quillas Canal. He came within sight of the Eternal Domicile. Well, he reminded himself, at least that had been a success. The Royal Engineer, aptly named Grum, had been a reluctant, envious deliverer of a royal contract, specifying Bugg's Construction to assume control of shoring up the compromised wings of the new palace. He had been even less pleased when Bugg ordered the old crews to vacate, taking their equipment with them. Bugg had then spent most of the following day wading flooded tunnels, just to get a feel of the magnitude of the task ahead.

True to Tehol's prediction, Bugg's modest company was climbing in the Tolls, frighteningly fast. Since the list of shares was sealed, Bugg had managed to sell four thousand and twenty-two per cent of shares, and still hold a controlling interest. Of course, he'd be headlining the Drownings if the deceit was ever discovered. 'But I'm prepared to take that risk,' Tehol had said with a broad smile. Funny man, his master.

Nearing the old palace, then into the wending alleyways and forgotten streets behind it. This part of the city seemed virtually lifeless, no-one venturing outside. Stray dogs paused in their scavenging to watch him pass. Rats scurried from his path.

He reached the wall of the square tower, walked along it until he was at the gateway. A pause, during which he wilfully suppressed his nervousness at entering the grounds. The Azath was dead, after all. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he strode forward.

The barrows to either side were strangely crumpled, but he could see no gaping holes. Yet. He left the path. Insects crunched or squirmed underfoot. The tufts of grass looked macerated and were crawling with life.

Bugg arrived at one barrow where the near side was gone, in its place a black pit across which was the toppled bole of a dead tree. There was the sound of scrabbling from within.

Then Kettle clambered into view. Clumps of white worms writhed in her straggly, matted hair, rode seething on her shoulders. She pulled herself up using a branch of the tree, then paused to brush the worms off, the gesture dainty and oddly affecting. 'It's gone,' she said. 'Uncle Bugg, this one's gone.'

'I know.'

'I didn't see it. I should have seen it.'

He shook his head. 'It is very stealthy, Kettle. And fast. All it needed was a moment when your back was turned. A single moment, no more. In any case, I've met it, and, for now at least, it won't be bothering anyone.'

'Nothing's working, Uncle Bugg. I need the one below. I need to get him out.'
'What is impeding him, do you know?'

She shook her head, the motion shedding more worms. 'At least he's got swords now. Uncle Brys brought them. I pushed them into the barrow.'

'Brys Beddict? Lass, you are finding worthy allies. Has the Ceda visited?'

'I don't know any Ceda.'

'I am surprised by that. He should come soon, once he finds out about you. '

'Me?'

'Well, more specifically, your heart.'

She cocked her head. 'I hear thumps. In my chest. Is that my heart?'

'Yes. How often are the thumps coming?'

'Maybe eight a day. Now. Before, maybe four. To start, once. Loud, hurting my head.'

'Hurting? You are feeling pain, lass?'

'Not so much any more. Aches. Twinges. That's how I know something's wrong with me. Used to be I didn't feel anything.'

Bugg ran a hand through his thinning hair. He looked up, studied the night sky. Cloud-covered, but the clouds were high, flat and unwrinkled, a worn blanket through which stars could be seen here and there. He sighed. 'All right, lass, show me where you buried the swords.'

He followed her to a barrow closer to the tower.

'He's in this one.'

But the manservant's gaze was drawn to an identical barrow beside the one she indicated. 'Now, who does that one belong to, I wonder.'

'She's always promising me things. Rewards. The five who are killing all the others won't go near her. Sometimes, her anger burns in my head like fire. She's very angry, but not at me, she says. Those bitches, she says, and that tells me she's sleeping, because she only says that when she's sleeping. When she's awake, she whispers nice things to me.'

Bugg was slowly nodding. 'It sounds absurd,' he said, mostly to himself. 'Absurd and mundane.'

'What does, Uncle?'

'She's got him by the ankles. I know. It's ridiculous, but that's why he's having trouble getting out. She's got him by the ankles.'

'To keep him where he is?'

'No. To make sure she follows him out.'

'She's cheating!'

Despite his unease, Bugg smiled. 'So she is, lass. Of course, she may only end up keeping both of them trapped.'

'Oh no, he's got the swords now. He just has to work them down. That's what he said. I didn't understand before, but I do now. He said he was going to do some sawing.'

Bugg winced.
Then he frowned. 'The five, how close are they to escaping?'

Kettle shrugged. 'They've killed most everything else. I don't know. Soon, I guess. They are going to do terrible things to me, they say.'

'Be sure to call for help before they get out.'

'I will.'

'I have to be going now.'

'Okay. Goodbye, Uncle.'

Awakened by one of the Preda's corporals, Brys quickly dressed and followed the young soldier to the Campaigns Room, where he found King Ezgara Diskanar, the Ceda, Unnultal Hebaz and the First Concubine Nisall. The king and his mistress stood at one side of a map table, opposite the Preda. Kuru Qan paced a circle around the entire ensemble, removing his strange eye-lenses for a polish every now and then.

'Finadd,' Unnultal Hebaz said, 'join us, please.'

'What has happened?' Brys asked.

'We are, it seems, at war,' the Preda replied. 'I am about to inform the king of the disposition of our forces at present.'

'I apologize for interrupting, Preda.'

Ezgara Diskanar waved a hand. 'I wanted you here, Brys. Now, Unnultal, proceed.'

'Divisions, battalions and brigades,' she said. 'And garrisons. Our land forces. I will speak of the fleets later. Thus, from west to east along the frontier. On the Reach, First Maiden Fort, its defences still under construction and nowhere near complete. I have judged it indefensible and so am sending the garrison to reinforce Fent Reach. Second Maiden Fort has a garrison of six hundred indicted soldiers, presently being retrained. The island is a penal fortress, as you know. The willingness of the prisoners to fight is of course problematic. None the less, I would suggest we leave them there. Third Maiden Fort will remain active, but with a nominal presence, there to act as forward observers should an Edur fleet round the island and make for the city of Awl.'

'Where we have an army,' the king said.

'Yes, sire. The Snakebelt Battalion, stationed in the city. The Crimson Rampant Brigade is in Tulamesh down the coast. Now, eastward from the Reach, the port of Trate. Cold Clay Battalion and the Trate Legion, with the Riven Brigade and the Katter Legion down in Old Katter. High Fort has, in addition to its rotating garrison forces, the Grass Jackets Brigade. Normally, we would have the Whitefinder Battalion there as well, but they are presently conducting exercises outside First Reach. They will of course be moving north immediately.'

'Further east, the situation is more satisfactory. At Fort Shake is the Harridict Brigade, with the Artisan Battalion encamped outside the Manse – more exercises.'

'How long will it take the Whitefinders to reach High Fort?' the king asked.

'Reach and Thetil Roads are in good repair, sire. Five days. They leave tomorrow. I would emphasize again, the Ceda's mages are a major tactical advantage. Our communications are instantaneous.'

'But I want something more,' Ezgara said in a growl. 'I want something pre-emptive, Preda. I want them to change their minds on this damned war.'

Unnultal slowly turned to catch Kuru Qan with her gaze. 'Ceda?'

'Relevant? Less than we would hope. You want their villages struck? Those just beyond the mountains? Very well.'
'How soon can you arrange it?' the king asked.

'The cadre in Trate is assembling, sire. Dawn, three days from now.'

'Pray to the Errant that it dissuades them.' The king managed a wry grin as he watched the Ceda resume his pacing. 'But you are not confident that it will, are you, Kuru Qan?'

'I am not, sire. Fortunately, I do not believe even Hull would suspect that we would attack the Edur villages.'

Brys felt his blood grow cold. 'Ceda? Has my brother ... ?'

A sorrowful nod. 'This is a path Hull Beddict has been walking on for a long time. No-one here is surprised, Finadd.'

Brys swallowed, then struggled to speak. 'I would have ... thought... given that knowledge—'

'That he would have been assassinated?' Ezgara asked. 'No, Brys. His presence is to our tactical advantage, not this damned upstart emperor's. We are well aware he is advising the Edur on our manner of waging war, and we mean to make use of that.' The king paused, looked up. 'Hull's actions in no way impugn you in our eyes, Brys. Be assured of that.'

'Thank you, sire.' And to prove your word, you invite me to this meeting.

'It is unfortunate that Nifadas failed in his mission. What do we know of this new "upstart" emperor you mentioned?'

'He has vast magic at his command,' Kuru Qan replied distractedly. 'We can discern little more than that.'

The First Concubine moved from the king's side, seemingly distracted.

'The most relevant detail for us,' Unnutal Hebaz added, 'is that he is in possession of absolute loyalty among the Edur tribes. And, although Hannan Mosag has been usurped, the Warlock King now stands at the emperor's side as his principal adviser.'

Brys was startled by that. 'The Warlock King simply stepped aside? That is ... extraordinary.'

The Preda nodded. 'Sufficient to give us pause. Our forward posts have reported sightings along the frontier. Shadows moving at night.'

'The wraiths,' the Ceda said, his expression souring. 'We have dealt with them before, of course, and effectively so. None the less, they are an irritant.'

'Do the Tiste Edur have sacred sites?' Nisall asked from where she now stood, close to the far wall. Faces turned towards her. Arms crossed, she shrugged. 'Sorcery that annihilates those sites might well weaken their hold on these wraiths. Wasn't something similar done to the Nerek and the Tarthenal?'

The Ceda seemed saddened by the suggestion, but he nodded and said, 'An interesting notion, First Concubine. The Edur are very secretive regarding their sacred sites. Although it does appear to be the case that the very ground beneath their villages is sanctified. Thus, when we destroy those villages, the result may well prove more profound than we imagine. This is a relevant consideration. As for the hidden groves and such, we should make use of the various Acquitors who are familiar with that territory.'

'How soon will the delegation reach the Mouth at Gedry?' Brys asked the Preda.

She nodded towards Kuru Qan. 'The return journey is being hastened. A week, no more.'

Then three days up the river to arrive here. The war would be well under way by then. 'Sire, may I ask a question of you?'

'Of course, Brys.'

'Where is the Queen's Battalion?'
A momentary silence, then the Preda cleared her throat. 'If I may, sire ...'

Thin-lipped, the king nodded.

'Finadd, the queen has taken personal command of her forces, along with the Quillas Brigade. She insists on independence in this matter. Accordingly, we are not factoring those assets into our discussion.'

'My dear wife has always held them to be her own, private army,' Ezgara Diskanar said. 'So be it. Better to have them pursuing her ambitions in the field than here in Letheras.'

'That being said,' Unnutal Hebaz added, 'we believe they are less than a league south of High Fort, marching northward to meet the Edur in the pass. Her doctrine seems to be one of striking first and striking hard. She will set her mages to clearing the wraiths from her path, which will no doubt be telling enough to eliminate the element of surprise.'

'Is she leading them in person?'

'She and her retinue departed four days ago,' the king said.

Brys thought back to that time. 'The royal visit to her keep at Dissent?'

'That was the pretext.'

'Then will Prince Quillas make an effort to join her?'

'My son has separated his ship from the delegation and now makes for Trate.'

'To what extent,' Brys asked, 'has her battalion made use of the caches in the region?'

'Knowing her,' the king snapped, 'she's damn near emptied them.'

'We are hastening to replace the depleted stocks,' Unnutal Hebaz said. 'Obviously, we are forced to adjust our tactics as a consequence. We will fight defensively, in keeping with our doctrine, and, yes, the Edur will be expecting that. But we will not roll back. We will not retreat. Once engaged, we intend to maintain that contact. This will be, I believe, a brutal war – perhaps the most vicious war we have fought since conquering Bluerose's League of Duchies.'

'Now,' the king said, 'I would hear details on the defence of our frontier cities and the Sea of Katter. As well, the disposition of the fleets ...'

Brys found the words that followed drifting into a formless murmur somewhere in the background. He was thinking of his brother, marching with the Tiste Edur to wage war on his homeland. On the kingdom that had so cruelly betrayed him. The queen and the prince would want him, desperately ... or, at the very least, his head. And through Hull's crimes, they would seek to strike at Brys, at his position as the king's protector. They might well send soldiers to round up Tehol as well, on some fabricated pretext. The added pleasure of avenging financial losses incurred as a result of Tehol's brilliant chaos. They would, in fact, waste little time.

Brys needed to warn Tehol.

The Rat Catchers' Guild Chief Investigator sat at a courtyard table beneath torchlight. A small heap of delicate bones sat in the centre of the large plate before her. Within reach was a crystal carafe of white wine. An extra goblet waited in front of the empty chair opposite her.

'You're not Tehol,' she said as Bugg arrived and sat down. 'Where's Tehol and his immodest trousers?'

'Not here, alas, Chief Investigator, but you can be certain that, wherever they are, they are together.'

'Ah, so he has meetings with people more important than me? After all, were he sleeping, he would not be wearing the trousers, would he?'

'I wouldn't know, Rucket. Now, you requested this meeting?'
'With Tehol.'

'Ah, so this was to be romantic?'

She sniffed and took a moment to glare at the only other occupants of this midnight restaurant, a husband and wife clearly not married to each other who were casting suspicious glances their way, punctuated with close leaning heads and heated whispers. 'This place serves a specific clientele, damn you. What's your name again?'

'Bugg.'

'Oh yes. I recall being unsurprised the first time it was mentioned. Well, you kept me waiting, you little worm, and what's that smell?'

Bugg withdrew a blackened, wrinkled strip, flat and slightly longer than his hand. 'I found an eel in the fish market. Thought I'd make soup for myself and the master.'

'Our financial adviser eats discarded eels?'

'Frugality is a virtue among financiers, Chief Investigator.' He tucked the dried strip back into his shirt. 'How is the wine? May I?'

'Well, why not? Here, care to pick the bones?'

'Possibly. What was it originally?'

'Cat, of course.'

'Cat. Oh yes, of course. Well, I never liked cats anyway. All those hair balls.' He drew the plate over and perused it to see what was left.

'You have a fascination for feline genitalia? That's disgusting, although I've heard worse. One of our minor catchers once tried to marry a rat. I myself possess peculiar interests, I freely admit.'

'That's nice,' Bugg said, popping a vertebra into his mouth to suck out the marrow.

'Well, aren't you curious?'

'No,' he said around the bone. 'Should I be?'

Rucket slowly leaned forward, as if seeing Bugg for the first time. 'You ... interest me now. I freely admit it. Do you want to know why?'

'Why you freely admit it? All right.'

'I'm a very open person, all things considered.'

'Well, I am considering those things, and so consequently admit to being somewhat surprised.'

'That doesn't surprise me in the least, Bugg. What are you doing later tonight, and what's that insect? There, on your shoulder?' He pulled the vertebra out and reached for another. 'It's of the two-headed variety. Very rare, for what I imagine are obvious reasons. I thought my master would like to see it.'

'So you permit it to crawl all over you?'

'That would take days. It's managed to climb halfway up my arm to my shoulder and that's taken over a bell.*

'What a pathetic creature.'
'I suspect it has difficulty making up its minds.'

'You're being funny, aren't you? I have a thing for funny people. Why don't you come home with me after you've finished here.'

'Are you sure you don't have any business to discuss with me? Perhaps some news for Tehol?'

'Well, there's a murderous little girl who's undead, and she's been killing lots of people, although less so lately. And Gerun Eberict has been far busier than it would outwardly seem.'

'Indeed? But why would he hide that fact?'

'Because the killings do not appear to be politically motivated.'

'Oh? Then what are his motivations?'

'Hard to tell. We think he just likes killing people.'

'Well, how many has he killed this past year?'

'Somewhere between two and three thousand, we think.'

Bugg reached with haste for his goblet. He drank the wine down, then coughed. 'Errant take us!'

'So, are you coming home with me or not? I have this cat-fur rug—'

'Alas, my dear, I have taken a vow of celibacy.'

'Since when?'

'Oh, thousands of years... it seems.'

'I am not surprised. But even more intrigued.'

'Ah, it's the lure of the unattainable.'

'Are you truly unattainable?'

'Extraordinary, but yes, I am.'

'What a terrible loss for womanhood.'

'Now you are being funny.'

'No, I am being serious, Bugg. I think you are probably a wonderful lover.'

'Aye,' he drawled, 'the very oceans heaved. Can we move on to some other subject? You want any more wine? No? Great.' He collected the carafe, then drew a flask from under his shirt and began the delicate task of pouring the wine into it.

'Is that for your eel soup?'

'Indeed.'

'What happens now that I've decided to like you? Not just like you, I freely admit, but lust after you, Bugg.'

'I have no idea, Rucket. May I take the rest of these bones?'

'You certainly may. Would you like me to regurgitate my meal for you as well? I will, you know, for the thought that you will take into you what was previously in me—'

Bugg was waving both hands in the negative. 'Please, don't put yourself out for me.'
'No need to look so alarmed. Bodily functions are a wonderful, indeed sensual, thing. Why, the mere blowing clear of a nose is a potential source of ecstasy, once you grasp its phlegmatic allure.'

'I'd best be going, Rucket.' He quickly rose. 'Have a nice night, Chief Investigator.' And was gone.

Alone once more, Rucket sighed and leaned back in her chair. 'Well,' she sighed contentedly, 'it's always been a sure-fire way of getting rid of unwanted company.' She raised her voice. 'Servant! More wine, please!' That bit about clearing the nose was especially good, she decided. She was proud of that one, especially the way she disguised the sudden nausea generated by her own suggestion.

Any man who'd cook that ... *eel* had surely earned eternal celibacy.

Outside the restaurant, Bugg paused to check the contents of his shirt's many hidden pockets. Flask, *eel*, cat bones. A successful meeting, after all. Moreover, he was appreciative of her performance. *Tehol* might well and truly like this one, I think. It was worth considering.

He stood for a moment longer, then allowed himself a soft laugh.

In any case, time to head home.

*Tehol* Beddict studied the three sad, pathetic women positioned variously in the chamber before him: Shand slumped behind the desk, her shaved pate looking dull and smudged; Rissarh lying down on a hard bench as if meditating on discomfort, her red hair spilled out and hanging almost to the floor; and Hejun, sprawled in a padded chair, refilling her pipe's bowl, her face looking sickly and wan. 'My,' Tehol said with a sigh, his hands on his hips, 'this is a tragic scene indeed.'

Shand looked up, bleary-eyed. 'Oh, it's you.'

'Hardly the greeting I was anticipating.' He strode into the room.

'He's gone,' Hejun said, face twisting as she jabbed a taper into the coals of the three-legged brazier at her side. 'And it's Shand's fault.'

'As much yours as mine,' Shand retorted. 'And don't forget Rissarh! "Oh, Ublala! Carry me around! Carry me around!"' Talk about excess!

'Ublala's departure is the cause for all this despond?' Tehol shook his head. 'My dears, you did indeed drive him away.' He paused, then added with great pleasure, 'Because none of you was willing to make a commitment. A disgusting display of self-serving objectification. Atrocious behaviour by each and every one of you.'

'All right, all right, Tehol,' Shand muttered. 'We could have been more ... compassionate.'

'Respectful,' Rissarh said.

'Yes,' Hejun said. 'How could one not respect Ublala's—'

'See?' Tehol demanded, then flung up his hands. 'I am led to despair!'

'You'll have company here,' Shand said.

'He was to have been your bodyguard. That was the intent. Instead, you abused him—'

'No we didn't!' Hejun snapped. 'Well, only a little. All in good fun, anyway.'

'And now I have to find you a new bodyguard.'

'Oh no you don't,' Shand said, sitting straighter. 'Don't even think it. We've been corrupted enough—'

*Tehol*'s brows rose. 'In any case,' he said, 'Ublala has now found someone who cares deeply for him—'

'You idiot. She's dead. She's incapable of caring.'
'Not true. Or, rather, there's something inside her that does care. A lot. My point is, it's time to get over it. There's work to be done.'

'We tried following up on that list you gave us. Half those companies don't even exist. You tricked us, Tehol. In fact, we think this whole thing is a lie.'

'What an absurd accusation. Granted, I padded the list somewhat, but only because you seemed to need to stay busy. Besides which, you're now rich, right? Wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. My investment advice has been perfect thus far. How many money-lending institutions do you now hold interest in?'

'All the big ones,' Shand admitted. 'But not controlling interest—'

'Wrong. Forty per cent is sufficient and you've acquired that.'

'How is forty per cent enough?'

'Because I hold twenty. Or, if not me, then my agents, Bugg included. We are poised, dear ladies, to loose chaos upon the Tolls.'

He had their attention now, he saw. Even Rissarh sat up. Eyes fixed upon him, eyes in which the gleam of comprehension was dawning. 'When?' Hejun asked.

'Ah, well. That is entirely another matter. There is news on the wind, which, had any of you been in a proper state, would already be known to you. It seems, my sweet friends, that Lether is at war.'

'The Tiste Edur?'

'Indeed.'

'Perfect!' Shand barked, thumping the desktop with a fist. 'We strike now and it'll all come down!'

'Likely,' Tehol said. 'And also, disastrous. Do you want the Edur to march in and burn everything to the ground?'

'Why not? It's all corrupt anyway!'

'Because, Shand, bad as it is – and we're all agreed it's bad – matters can get a whole lot worse. If, for example, the Tiste Edur win this war.'

'Hold on, Tehol! The plan was to bring about a collapse! But now you're going back on it. You must be a fool to think the Edur would win this war without our help. No-one wins against Lether. Never have, never will. But if we strike now ...'

'All very well, Shand. For myself, however, I am not convinced the Edur will prove ideal conquerors. As I said, what is to stop them from putting every Letherii to the sword, or enslaving everyone? What's to stop them from razing every city, every town, every village? It's one thing to bring down an economy, and so trigger a reformation of sorts, a reconfiguring of values and all that. It's entirely another to act in a way that exposes the Letherii to genocide.'

'Why?' Rissarh demanded. 'They've not hesitated at committing genocide of their own, have they? How many Tarthenal villages were burned to the ground? How many children of the Nerek and the Faraed were spitted on spears, how many dragged into slavery?'

'Then you would descend to their level, Rissarh? Why emulate the worst behaviours of a culture, when it is those very behaviours that fill you with horror? Reulsion at babes spitted on spears, so you would do the same in return?' He looked at each of them in turn, but they made no reply. Tehol ran a hand through his hair. 'Consider the opposite. A hypothetical situation, if you will. Letheras declares a war in the name of liberty and would therefore assert the right of the moral high ground. How would you respond?'

'With disgust,' Hejun said, relighting her pipe, face disappearing behind blue clouds.
'Why?'

'Because it's not liberty they want, not the kind of liberty that serves the people in question. Instead, it's the freedom of Letherii business interests to profit from those people.'

'And if they act to prevent genocide and tyranny, Hejun?'

'Then no moral high ground at all, for they have committed their own acts of genocide. As for tyranny, tyrannies are only reprehensible to the Letherii when they do not operate in collusion with Letherii business interests. And, by that definition, they make their claims of honour suspect to everyone else.'

'All very well. Now, I have considered each and every one of those arguments. And could only conclude one thing: the Letherii, in that situation, are damned if they do and damned if they don't. In other words, the issue is one of trust. In the past lies the evidence leading one to mistrust. In the present may be seen efforts to reacquire trust, whilst in the future awaits the proof of either one or the other.'

'This is a hypothetical situation, Tehol,' Shand said wearily. 'What is your point?'

'My point is, nothing is as simple as it might at first seem. And paradigms rarely shift through an act of will. They change as a consequence of chaos, in stumbling over a threshold, and all that is most reprehensible in our nature waits in the wings, eager to invade and so give shape to the reforging of order. It falls to every one of us to be mindful.'

'What in the Errant's name are you talking about?' Shand demanded.

'What I am saying, Shand, is that we cannot in good conscience trigger a collapse of the Letherii economy right now. Not until we determine how this war is going to play out.'

'Good conscience? Who cares about that? Our motive was revenge. The Letherii are poised to annihilate yet another people. And I want to get them!'

'Do not dismiss the Tiste Edur just yet, Shand. Our priority right now must be the secret evacuation of destitute and Indebted Nerek, Faraed and Tarthenal. Out to the islands. To my islands. The rest can wait, should wait, and will wait. Until I say otherwise.'

'You're betraying us.'

'No, I'm not. Nor am I having second thoughts. I am not blind to the underlying motives of greed upon which my civilization is founded, for all its claims of righteous destiny and unassailable integrity.'

'What makes you think,' Hejun asked, 'the Tiste Edur might succeed where everyone else has failed?'

'Succeed? That word makes me uneasy. Might they prove a difficult and at times devastating enemy? I think they will. Their civilization is old, Hejun. Far older than ours. Their golden age was long, long ago. They exist now in a state of fear, seeing the influence and material imposition of Letheras as a threat, as a kind of ongoing unofficial war of cultures. To the Edur, Lether is a poison, a corrupting influence, and in reaction to that the Edur have become a people entrenched and belligerent. In disgust at what they see ahead of them, they have turned their backs and dream only of what lay behind them. They dream of a return to past glories. Even could the Letherii offer a helping hand, they would view it as an invitation to surrender, and their pride will not permit that. Or, conversely, that hand represents an attack on all they hold dear, and so they will cut it and dance in the blood. The worst scenario I can imagine, for the Edur, is if they win this war. If they somehow conquer us and become occupiers.'

'Won't happen, and what if it did? They couldn't be worse.'

'Tehol studied Hejun briefly, then he shrugged. 'All of this awaits resolution. In the meantime, remain vigilant. There are still things that need doing. What happened to that Nerek mother and her children I sent you?'

'We shipped them to the islands,' Shand said. 'They ate more than she cooked. Started getting fat. It was all
very sad.'

'Well, it's late and I'm hungry, so I will take my leave now.'

'What about Ublala?' Rissarh demanded.

'What about him?'

'We want him back.'

'Too late, I'm afraid. That's what happens when you won't commit.'

Tehol quickly made his way out.

Walking the quiet streets back to his abode, Tehol considered his earlier words. He had to admit to himself that he was troubled. There was sufficient mystery in some of the rumours to suggest that the impending war would not be like all the others Letherii had waged. A collision of wills and desires, and beneath it a host of dubious assumptions and suspect sentiments. In that alone, no different from any other war. But in this case, the outcome was far from certain, and even the notion of victory seemed confused and elusive.

He passed through Burl Square and came to the entrance to the warehouse storage area, beyond which was the alley leading to his home. Pausing to push up his lopsided sleeves and cinch tight his trousers, he frowned. Was he losing weight? Hard to know. Wool stretched, after all.

A figure stepped from the nearby shadows of an alley mouth. 'You're late.'

Tehol started, then said, 'For what?'

Shurq Elalle came to within two paces of him. 'I've been waiting. Bugg made soup. Where have you been?'

'What are you doing out?' Tehol asked. 'You're supposed to be holed up right now. This is dangerous—'

'I needed to talk to you,' she cut in. 'It's about Harlest.'

'What about him?'

'He wants his sharp teeth and talons. It's all we ever hear. Fangs and talons, fangs and talons. We're sick of it. Where's Selush? Why haven't you made arrangements? You're treating us like corpses, but even the dead have needs, you know.'

'Well, no, I didn't know that. In any case, tell Harlest that Selush is working on this, probably right now in fact. Sharp solutions are forthcoming.'

'Don't make me laugh.'

'Sorry. Are you in need of a refill?'

'A what?'

'Well, uh, more herbs and stuff, I mean.'

'I don't know. Am I? Do I smell or something?'

'No. Only of sweet things, Shurq. I assure you.'

'I am less inspired by your assurances as time goes on, Tehol Beddict.'

'What a terrible thing to say! Have we stumbled yet?'

'When is Gerun Eberict returning?'

'Soon, it turns out. Things should get exciting then.'
'I am capable of excitement regarding one thing and one thing only, and that has nothing to do with Gerun Eberict. However, I want to steal again. Anything, from whomever. Point me in a direction. Any direction.'

'Well, there is of course the Tolls Repository. But that's impregnable, obviously. Or, let's see, the royal vaults, but again, impossible.'

'The Tolls. Yes, that sounds challenging.'

'You won't succeed, Shurq. No-one ever has, and that includes Green Pig who was a sorceror nearly to rival the Ceda himself—' 

'I knew Green Pig. He suffered from overconfidence.'

'And was torn limb from limb as a result.'

'What do you want stolen from the Tolls Repository?'

'Surq—'

'What?'

Tehol glanced round. 'All right. I want to find out which lender holds the largest royal debt. The king has been borrowing prodigiously, and not just to finance the Eternal Domicile. So, who and how much. Same for Queen Janall. And whatever she's done in her son's name.'

'Is that all? No gold? No diamonds?'

'That's right. No gold, no diamonds, and no evidence left behind that anyone was ever in there.'

'I can do that.'

'No you can't. You'll get caught. And dismembered.'

'Oh, that will hurt.'

'Maybe not, but it'll prove inconvenient.'

'I won't get caught, Tehol Beddict. Now, what did you want from the royal vaults?'

'A tally.'

'You want to know the present state of the treasury.'

'Yes.'

'I can do that.'

'No you can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because you'll have been dismembered by then.'

'Thus permitting me to slip into places where I otherwise wouldn't fit.'

'Shurq, they take your head off too, you know. It's the last thing they do.'

'Really? That's barbaric.'

'Like I said, you would be greatly inconvenienced.'

'I would at that. Well, I shall endeavour to be careful. Mind you, even a head can count.'
'What would you have me do, break in and lob your head into the vaults? Tied to a rope so I can pull you out again when you're done?'

'That sounds somewhat problematic.'

'It does, doesn't it?'

'Can't you plan any better than that, Tehol Beddict? My faith in you is fast diminishing.'

'Can't be helped, I suppose. What's this I hear about you purchasing a seagoing vessel?'

'That was supposed to be a secret. Bugg said he wouldn't tell—'

'He didn't. I have my own sources of intelligence, especially when the owner of the vessel just sold happens to be me. Indirectly, of course.'

'All right. Me and Ublala and Harlest, we want to be pirates.'

'Don't make me laugh, Shurq.'

'Now you're being cruel.'

'Sorry. Pirates, you say. Well, all three of you are notoriously hard to drown. Might work at that.'

'Your confidence and well-wishing overwhelms me.'

'And when do you plan on embarking on this new venture?'

'When you're done with us, of course.'

Tehol tugged up his trousers again. 'Yet another edifying conversation with you, Shurq. Now, I smell something that might well be soup, and you need to go back to your crypt.'

'Sometimes I really hate you.'

He led her by the hand down the shallow, crumbling steps. She liked these journeys, even though the places he took her were strange and often ... disturbing. This time, they descended an inverted stepped pyramid – at least that was what he called it. Four sides to the vast, funneled pit, and at the base there was a small square of darkness.

The air was humid enough to leave droplets on her bare arms. Far overhead, the sky was white and formless. She did not know if it was hot – memories of such sensations had begun to fade, along with so many other things.

They reached the base of the pit and she looked up at the tall, pale figure at her side. His face was becoming more visible, less blurred. It looked handsome, but hard. 'I'm sorry,' she said after a moment, 'that she's got you by the ankles.'

'We all have our burdens, Kettle.'

'Where are we?'

'You have no recognition of this place?'

'No. Maybe.'

'Let us continue down, then.'

Into the darkness, three rungs to a landing, then a spiral staircase of black stone.

'Round and round,' Kettle said, giggling.
A short while later they came to the end, the stairs opening out onto a sprawling, high-ceilinged chamber. The gloom was no obstacle to Kettle, nor, she suspected, to her companion. She could see a ragged mound heaped against the far wall to their right, and made to move towards it, but his hand drew her back.

'No, lass. Not there.'

He led her instead directly ahead. Three doorways, each one elaborately arched and framed with reverse impressions of columns. Between them, the walls displayed deeply carved images.

'As you can see,' he said, 'there is a reversal of perspective. That which is closest is carved deepest. There is significance to all this.'

'Where are we?'

'To achieve peace, destruction is delivered. To give the gift of freedom, one promises eternal imprisonment. Adjudication obviates the need for justice. This is a studied, deliberate embrace of diametric opposition. It is a belief in balance, a belief asserted with the conviction of religion. But in this case, the proof of a god's power lies not in the cause but in the effect. Accordingly, in this world and in all others, proof is achieved by action, and therefore all action – including the act of choosing inaction – is inherently moral. No deed stands outside the moral context. At the same time, the most morally perfect act is the one taken in opposition to what has occurred before.'

'What do the rooms look like through those openings?'

'In this civilization,' he continued, 'its citizens were bound to acts of utmost savagery. Vast cities were constructed beneath the world's surface. Each chamber, every building, assembled as the physical expression of the quality of absence. Solid rock matched by empty space. From these places, where they did not dwell, but simply gathered, they set out to achieve balance.'

It seemed he would not lead her through any of the doorways, so she fixed her attention instead on the images. 'There are no faces.'

'The opposite of identity, yes, Kettle.'

'The bodies look strange.'

'Physically unique. In some ways more primitive, but as a consequence less ... specialized, and so less constrained. Profoundly long-lived, more so than any other species. Very difficult to kill, and, it must be said, they needed to be killed. Or so was the conclusion reached after any initial encounter with them. Most of the time. They did fashion the occasional alliance. With the Jaghut, for example. But that was yet another tactic aimed at reasserting balance, and it ultimately failed. As did this entire civilization.'

Kettle swung round to study that distant heap of ... something. 'Those are bodies, aren't they?'

'Bones. Scraps of clothing, the harnesses they wore.'

'Who killed them?'

'You had to understand, Kettle. The one within you must understand. My refutation of the Forkrul Assail belief in balance is absolute. It is not that I am blind to the way in which force is ever countered, the way in which the natural world strains towards balance. But in that striving I see no proof of a god's power; I see no guiding hand behind such forces. And, even if one such existed, I see no obvious connection with the actions of a self-chosen people for whom chaos is the only rational response to order. Chaos needs no allies, for it dwells like a poison in every one of us. The only relevant struggle for balance I acknowledge is that within ourselves. Externalizing it presumes inner perfection, that the internal struggle is over, victory achieved.'

'You killed them.'

'These ones here, yes. As for the rest, no. I was too late arriving and my freedom too brief for that. In any case, but a few enclaves were left by that time. My draconic kin took care of that task, since no other entity
possessed the necessary power. As I said, they were damned hard to kill.'

Kettle shrugged, and she heard him sigh.

'There are places, lass, where Forkrul Assail remain. Imprisoned for the most part, but ever restless. Even more disturbing, in many of those places they are worshipped by misguided mortals.' He hesitated, then said, 'You have no idea, Kettle, of the extremity the Azath tower found itself in. To have chosen a soul such as yours ... it was like reaching into the heart of the enemy camp. I wonder if, in its last moments, it knew regret. Misgivings. Mother knows, I do.'

'What is this soul you are talking about?'

'Perhaps it sought to use the soul's power without fully awakening it. We will never know. But you are loose upon the world now. Shaped to fight as a soldier in the war against chaos. Can that fundamental conflict within you be reconciled? Your soul, lass? It is Forkrul Assail.'

'So you have brought me home?'

His hand betrayed his sudden flinch. 'You were also a mortal human child, once. And there is a mystery in that. Who birthed you? Who took away your life, and why? Was all this in preparation for your corpse to house the Assail soul? If that is the case, then the Azath tower was either deceived by someone capable of communicating with it, or it had in truth nothing at all to do with the creation of you as you now are. But that makes no sense – why would the Azath lie to me?'

'It said you were dangerous.'

He was silent for some time. Then, 'Ah, you are to kill me once I have vanquished the other entombed creatures.'

'The tower is dead,' Kettle said. 'I don't have to do anything it told me. Do I?' She looked up and found him studying her.

'What path will you choose, child?'

She smiled. 'Your path. Unless you're bad. I'll be very angry if you're bad.'

'I am pleased, Kettle. Best that you stay close to me, assuming we succeed in what we must do.'

'I understand. You may have to destroy me.'

'Yes. If I can.'

She gestured with her free hand at the heap of bones. 'I don't think you'll have much trouble.'

'Let us hope it doesn't come to that. Let us hope the soul within you does not entirely awaken.'

'It won't. That's why none of this matters.'

'What makes you so certain, Kettle?'

'The tower told me.'

'It did? What did it say to you? Try to recall its exact words.'

'It never spoke with words. It just showed me things. My body, all wrapped up. People were crying. But I could see through the gauze. I'd woken up. I was seeing everything with two sets of eyes. It was very strange. One set behind the wrappings, the other standing nearby.'

'What else did the Azath show you?'

'Those eyes from the outside. There were five others. We were just standing in the street, watching the family carrying the body. My body. Six of us. We'd walked a long way, because of the dreams. We'd been in the city
for weeks, waiting for the Azath to choose someone. But I wasn't the same as the five others, though we were here for the same reason, and we'd travelled together. They were Nerek witches, and they'd prepared me. The me on the outside, not the me all wrapped up.'

'The you on the outside, Kettle, were you a child?'

'Oh no. I was tall. Not as tall as you. And I had to wear my hood up, so no-one could see how different I was. I'd come from very far away. I'd walked, when I was young, hot sands – the sands that covered the First Empire. Whatever that is.'

'What did the Nerek witches call you? Had you a name?'

'No.'

'A title?'

She shrugged. 'I'd forgotten all this. They called me the Nameless One. Is this important?'

'I think it is, Kettle. Although I am not sure in what way. Much of this realm remains unknown to me. It was very young when I was imprisoned. You are certain this "Nameless One" was an actual title? Not just something the Nerek used because they didn't know your true name?'

'It was a title. They said I'd been prepared from birth. That I was a true child of Eres. And that I was the answer to the Seventh Closure, because I had the blood of kin. "The blood of kin". What did they mean by that?'

'When I am finally free,' he said in a voice revealing strain, 'I will be able to physically touch you, Kettle. My fingers upon your brow. And then I will have your answer.'

'I guess this Eres was my real mother.'

'Yes.'

'And soon you will know who my father is.'

'I will know his blood, yes. At the very least.'

'I wonder if he's still alive.'

'Knowing how Eres plays the game, lass, he might not even be your father yet. She wanders time, Kettle, in a manner no-one else can even understand, much less emulate. And this is very much her world. She is the fire that never dies.' He paused, then said, 'She will choose – or has chosen – with great deliberation. Your father was, is, or will be someone of great importance.'

'So how many souls are in me?'

'Two, sharing the flesh and bone of a child corpse. Lass, we shall have to find a way to get you out of that body, eventually.'

'Why?'

'Because you deserve something better.'

'I want to go back. Will you take me back now?'

'I've given up on the eel itself,' Bugg said, ladling out the soup. 'It's still too tough.'

'None the less, my dear manservant, it smells wonderful.'

'That would be the wine. Courtesy of Chief Investigator Rucket, whose request for a meeting with you was for purposes not entirely professional.'
'And how did you fare on my behalf?'
'I ensured that her interest in you only deepened, master.'
'By way of contrast?'
'Indeed.'
'Well, is that a good thing? I mean, she's rather frightening.'
'You don't know the half of it. Even so, she is exceptionally clever.'
'Oh, I don't like that at all, Bugg. You know, I am tasting something fishy. A hint, anyway. Just how dried up was this eel you found?'

The manservant probed with his ladle and lifted the mentioned object into view. Black, wrinkled and not nearly as limp as it should have been.

Tehol leaned closer and studied it for a moment. 'Bugg...'
'Yes, master?'
'That's the sole of a sandal.'
'It is? Oh. I was wondering why it was flatter at one end than the other.'

Tehol settled back and took another sip. 'Still fishy, though. One might assume the wearer, being in the fish market, stepped on an eel, before the loss of his or her sole.'
'I am mildly disturbed by the thought of what else he or she might have stepped in.'
'There are indeed complexities on the palate, suggesting a varied and lengthy history. Now, how was your day and the subsequent evening?'

'Uneventful. Rucket informs me that Gerun Eberict has killed about three thousand citizens this year.'
'Three thousand? That seems somewhat excessive.'
'I thought so, too, master. More soup?'
'Yes, thank you. So, what is his problem, do you think?'
'Gerun's? A taste for blood, I'd wager.'
'As simple as that? How egregious. We'll have to do something about it, I think.'
'And how was your day and evening, master?'
'Busy. Exhausting, even.'
'You were on the roof?'
'Yes, mostly. Although, as I recall, I came down here once. Can't remember why. Or, rather, I couldn't at the time, so I went back up.'

Bugg tilted his head. 'Someone's approaching our door.'

The sound of boots in the alley, the faint whisper of armour.

'My brother, I'd hazard,' Tehol said, then, turning to face the curtained doorway, he raised his voice. 'Brys, do come in.'

The hanging was pulled aside and Brys entered. 'Well, that is an interesting smell,' he said.
'Sole soup,' Tehol said. 'Would you like some?'

'No, thank you. I have already eaten, it being well after the second bell. I trust you have heard the rumours.'

'The war?'

'Yes.'

'I've heard hardly a thing,' Tehol said.

Brys hesitated, glancing at Bugg, then he sighed. 'A new emperor has emerged to lead the Tiste Edur. Tehol, Hull has sworn his allegiance to him.'

'Now, that is indeed unfortunate.'

'Accordingly, you are at risk.'

'Arrest?'

'No, more likely assassination. All in the name of patriotism.'

Tehol set his bowl down. 'It occurs to me, Brys, that you are more at risk than I am.'

'I am well guarded, brother, whilst you are not.'

'Nonsense! I have Bugg!'

The manservant looked up at Brys with a bland smile.

'Tehol, this is not time for jokes—'

'Bugg resents that!'

'I do?'

'Well, don't you? I would, if I were you—'

'It seems you just were.'

'My apologies for making you speak out of turn, then.'

'Speaking on your behalf, master, I accept.'

'You are filled with relief—'

'Will you two stop it!' Brys shouted, throwing up his hands. He began pacing the small confines of the room. 'The threat is very real. Agents of the queen will not hesitate. You are both in very grave danger.'

'But how will killing me change the fact of Hull forsaking our homeland?'

'It won't, of course. But your history, Tehol, makes you a hated man. The queen's investments suffered thanks to you, and she's not the type to forgive and forget.'

'Well, what do you suggest, Brys?'

'Stop sleeping on your roof, for one. Let me hire a few bodyguards—'

'A few? How many are you thinking?'

'Four, at least.'

'One.'
'One?'

'One. No more than that. You know how I dislike crowds, Brys.'

'Crowds? You've never disliked crowds, Tehol.'

'I do now.'

Brys glowered, then sighed. 'All right. One.'

'And that will make you happy, then? Excellent—'

'No more sleeping on your roof.'

'I'm afraid, brother, that won't be possible.'

'Why not?'

Tehol gestured. 'Look at this place! It's a mess! Besides, Bugg snores. And we're not talking mild snoring, either. Imagine being chained to the floor of a cave, with the tide crashing in, louder, louder, louder—'

'I have in mind three guards, all brothers,' Brys said, 'who can spell each other. One will therefore always be with you, even when you're sleeping on your roof.'

'So long as they don't snore—'

'They won't be asleep, Tehol! They'll be standing guard!'

'All right. Calm down. I am accepting, aren't I? Now, how about some soup, just to tide you over until you break your fast?'

Brys glanced at the pot. 'There's wine in it, isn't there?'

'Indeed. Only the best, at that.'

'Fine. Half a bowl.'

Tehol and Bugg exchanged pleased smiles.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Black glass stands between us
The thin face of otherness
Risen into difference
These sibling worlds
You cannot reach through
Or pierce this shade so distinct
As to make us unrecognizable
Even in reflection
The black glass stands
And that is more than all
And the between us
Gropes but never finds
Focus or even meaning
The between us is ever lost
In that barrier of darkness
When backs are turned
And we do little more than refuse
Facing ourselves.

Preface to *The Nerek*
Absolution Myrkas Preadict

Light and heat rose in waves from the rock, swirled remorselessly along the narrow track. The wraiths had fled to cracks and fissures and huddled there now, like bats awaiting dusk. Seren Pedac paused to await Buruk. She set her pack down, then tugged at the sweat-sodden, quilted padding beneath her armour, feeling it peel away from her back like skin. She was wearing less than half her kit, the rest strapped onto the pack, yet it still dragged at her after the long climb to the summit of the pass.

She could hear nothing from beyond the crest twenty paces behind her, and considered going back to check on her charge. Then, faintly, came a curse, then scrabbling sounds.

The poor man.

They had been hounded by the wraiths the entire way. The ghostly creatures made the very air agitated and restless. Sleep was difficult, and the constant motion flitting in their peripheral vision, the whispered rustling through their camps, left their nerves raw and exhausted.

She glared a moment at the midday sun, then wiped the gritty sweat from her brow and walked a few paces ahead on the trail. They were almost out of Edur territory. Another thousand paces. After that, another day's worth of descent to the river. Without the wagons, they would then be able to hire a river boat to take them the rest of the way down to Trate. Another day for that.

*And then? Will he still hold me to the contract?* It seemed pointless, and so she had assumed he would simply release her, at least for the duration of the war, and she would be free to journey back to Letheras. But Buruk the Pale had said nothing of that. In fact, he had not said much of anything since leaving the Hiroth village.

She turned as he clambered onto the summit's flat stretch. Clothed in dust and streaks of sweat, beneath them a deeply flushed face and neck. Seren walked back towards him. 'We will rest here for a time.'

He coughed, then asked, 'Why?' The word was a vicious growl.

'Because we need it, Buruk.'
'You don't. And why speak for me? I am fine, Acquitor. Just get us to the river.'

Her pack held both their possessions and supplies. She had cut down a sapling and trimmed it to serve as a walking stick for him, and this was all he carried. His once fine clothes were ragged, the leggings torn by sharp rocks. He stood before her, wheezing, bent over and leaning heavily on the stick. 'I mean to rest, Buruk,' she said after a moment. 'You can do as you please.'

'I can't stand being watched!' the merchant suddenly shrieked. 'Always watching! Those damned shades! No more!' With that he stumbled past her on the trail.

Seren returned to her pack and slung it once more over her shoulders. One sentiment she could share with Buruk: the sooner this trip was over, the better. She set out in his wake.

A dozen paces along and she reached his side. Then was past.

By the time Seren arrived at the clearing where the borders had been agreed over a century ago, Buruk the Pale was once more out of sight somewhere back on the trail. She halted, flung down her pack, and walked over to the sheer wall of polished black stone, recalling when she had last touched that strange – and strangely welcoming – surface.

Some mysteries would not unravel, whilst others were peeled back by fraught circumstance or deadly design, to reveal mostly sordid truths.

She set her hands against the warm, glassy stone, and felt something like healing steal into her. Beyond, figures in ceaseless motion, paying no attention to her whatsoever. Preferable to the endless spying of wraiths. And this was as it had always been. Seren settled her forehead against the wall, closing her eyes.

And heard whispering.

A language kin to Tiste Edur. She struggled to translate. Then meaning was found.

'—when he who commands cannot be assailed. Cannot be defeated.'

'And now he feeds on our rage. Our anguish.'

'Of the three, one shall return. Our salvation—'

'Fool. From each death power burgeons anew. Victory is impossible.'

'There is no place for us. We but serve. We but bleed out terror and the annihilation begins—'

'Ours as well.'

'Yes, ours as well.'

'Do you think she will come again? Does anyone think she will come again? She will, I am certain of it. With her bright sword. She is the rising sun and the rising sun ever comes, sending us scurrying, cutting us to pieces with that sharp, deadly light—'

'—annihilation well serves us. Make of us dead shards. To bring an end to this—'

'Someone is with us.'

'Who?'

'A mortal is here with us. Two Mistresses to the same Hold. She is one, and she is here. She is here now and she listens to our words.'

'Steal her mind!'

'Take her soul!'
'Let us out!'

Seren reeled away from the black wall. Staggered, hands to her ears, shaking her head. 'Enough,' she moaned. 'No more, please. No more.' She sank to her knees, was motionless as the voices faded, their screams dwindling. 'Mistress?' she whispered. I am no-one's mistress. Just one more reluctant ... lover of solitude. No place for voices, no place for hard purposes ... fierce fires.

Like Hull, only ashes. The smudged remnants of possibilities. But, unlike the man she had once thought to love, she had not knelt before a new icon to certainty. No choices to measure out like the soporific illusion of some drug, the consigning invitation to addiction. She wanted no new masters over her life. Nor the burden of friendships.

A croaking voice behind her. 'What's wrong with you?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing, Buruk.' She climbed wearily to her feet. 'We have reached the border.'

'I'm not blind, Acquitor.'

'We can move on a way, then make camp.'

'You think me weak, don't you?'

She glanced over at him. 'You are sick with exhaustion, Buruk. So am I. What point all this bravado?'

Sudden pain in his expression, then he turned away. 'I'll show you soon enough.'

'What of my contract?'

He did not face her. 'Done. Once we reach Trate. I absolve you of further responsibility.'

'So be it,' she said, walking to her pack.

They built a small fire with the last of their wood. The wraiths, it seemed, cared nothing for borders, flitting along the edges of the flickering light. A renewed interest, and Seren thought she knew why. The spirits within the stone wall. She was now marked.

Mistress of the Hold. Mistresses. There are two, and they think I am one of those two. A lie, a mistake.

Which Hold?

'You were young,' Buruk suddenly said, his eyes on the fire. 'When I first saw you.'

'And you were happy, Buruk. What of it?'

'Happiness. Ah, now that is a familiar mask. True, I wore it often, back then. Joyful in my spying, my unceasing betrayals, my deceits and the blood that appeared again and again on my hands.'

'What are you talking about?'

'My debts, Acquitor. Oh yes, outwardly I stand as a respected merchant... of middling wealth.'

'And what are you in truth?'

'It is where dreams fall away, Seren Pedac. That crumbling edifice where totters self-worth. You stand, too afraid to move, and watch your hands in motion, mangling every dream, every visage of the face you would desire, the true face of yourself, behind that mask. It is not helpful, speaking of truths.'

She thought for a time, then her eyes narrowed. 'You are being blackmailed.' He voiced no denial, so she continued, 'You are Indebted, aren't you?'

'Debts start small. Barely noticeable. Temporary. And so, in repayment, you are asked to do something. Something vile, a betrayal. And then, they have you. And you are indebted anew, in the maintenance of the
secret, in your gratitude for not being exposed in your crime, which has since grown larger. As it always does, if you are in possession of a conscience.' He was silent a moment, then he sighed and said, 'I do envy those who have no conscience.'

'Can you not get out, Buruk?'

He would not look up from the flames. 'Of course I can,' he said easily.

That tone, so at odds with all else he had said, frightened her. 'Make yourself... un-useful, Buruk.'

'Indeed, that seems the way of it, Acquitor. And I am in a hurry to do just that.' He rose. 'Time to sleep. Downhill to the river, then we can trail our sore feet in the cool water, all the way to Trate.'

She remained awake for a while longer, too tired to think, too numb to feel fear.

Above the fire, sparks and stars swam without distinction.

Dusk the following day, the two travellers reached Kraig's Landing, to find its three ramshackle buildings surrounded by the tents of an encamped regiment. Soldiers were everywhere, and at the dock was tethered an ornate, luxuriously appointed barge above which drifted in the dull wind the king's banner, and directly beneath it on the spar the crest of the Ceda.

'There's a cadre here,' Buruk said as they strode down the trail towards the camp, which they would have to pass through to reach the hostel and dock.

She nodded. 'And the soldiers are here as escort. There can't have been engagements already, can there?'

He shrugged. 'At sea, maybe. The war is begun, I think.'

Seren reached out and halted Buruk. 'There, those three.'

The merchant grunted.

The three figures in question had emerged from the rows of tents, the soldiers nearby keeping their distance but fixing their attention on them as they gathered for a moment, about halfway between the two travellers and the camp.

'The one in blue – do you recognize her, Acquitor?'

She nodded. Nekal Bara, Trate's resident sorceress, whose power was a near rival to the Ceda's own. 'The man on her left, in the black furs, that's Arahathan, commander of the cadre in the Cold Clay Battalion. I don't know the third one.'

'Enedictal,' Buruk said. 'Arahathan's counterpart in the Snakebelt Battalion. We see before us the three most powerful mages of the north. They intend a ritual.'

She set off towards them.

'Acquitor! Don't!'

Ignoring Buruk, Seren unslung her pack and dropped it to the ground. She had caught the attention of the three mages. Visible in the gloom, Nekal Bara's mocking lift of the eyebrows.

Acquitor Seren Pedac. The Errant smiles upon you indeed.'

'You're going to launch an attack,' Seren said. 'You mustn't.'

'We do not take orders from you,' Enedictal said in a growl.

'You're going to strike the villages, aren't you?'

'Only the ones closest to the borders,' Nekal Bara said, 'and those are far enough away to permit us a full
unveiling – beyond those mountains, yes? If the Errant wills it, that's where the Edur armies will have already gathered.'

'We shall obliterate the smug bastards,' Enedictal said. 'And end this stupid war before it's begun.'

'There are children—'

'Too bad.'

Without another word the three mages moved to take positions, twenty paces distant from one another. They faced the slope of the trail, the rearing mountains before them.

'No!' Seren shouted.

Soldiers appeared, surrounding her, expressions dark and angry beneath the rim of their helms. One spoke.

'It's this, woman, or the fields of battle. Where people die. Make no move. Say nothing.'

Buruk the Pale arrived to stand nearby. 'Leave it be, Acquitor.'

She glared at him. 'You don't think he'll retaliate? He'll disperse the attack, Buruk. You know he will.'

'He may not have the time,' the merchant replied. 'Oh, perhaps his own village, but what of the others?'

A flash of light caught her attention and she turned to see that but one mage remained, Nekal Bara. Then Seren saw, two hundred paces distant, the figure of Enedictal. Twisting round, she could make out Arahathan, two hundred paces in the opposite direction. More flashes, and the two sorcerors reappeared again, double the distance from Nekal Bara.

'They're spreading out,' Buruk observed. 'This is going to be a big ritual.'

A soldier said, 'The Ceda himself is working tonight. Through these three here, and the rest of the cadre strung out another league in both directions. Four villages will soon be nothing but ashes.'

'This is a mistake,' Seren said.

Something was building between the motionless sorcerors. Blue and green light, ravelled taut, like lightning wound round an invisible rope linking the mages. The glow building like sea foam, a froth that began crackling, spitting drawn-out sparks that whipped like tendrils.

The sound became a hissing roar. The light grew blinding, the tendrils writhing out from the glowing foam. The twisting rope bucked and snapped between the stationary mages, reaching out past the three who were still visible, out beyond the hills to either side.

She watched the power burgeoning, the bucking frenzied, the tendrils whipping like the limbs of some giant, wave-thrashed anemone.

Darkness had been peeled back by the bristling energy, the shadows dancing wild.

A sudden shout.

The heaving chain sprang loose, the roar of its escape thundering in the ground beneath Seren's feet. Figures staggered as the wave launched skyward, obliterating the night. It crest was blinding green fire, the curving wall in its wake a luminescent ochre, webbed with foam in a stretching latticework.

The wall swallowed the north sky, and still the crest rose, power streaming upward. The grasses near the mages blackened, then spun into white ash on swirling winds.

Beneath the roar, a shriek, then screams. Seren saw a soldier stumbling forward, against the glowing wall at the base of the wave. It took him, stripped armour, clothes, then hair and skin, then, in a gush of blood, it devoured his flesh. Before the hapless figure could even crumple, the bones were plucked away, leaving naught but a single upright boot on the blistered ground in front of the foaming wall. The crimson blush shot upward,
paling as it went. Until it was gone.

Air hissed past her, buffeting and bitter cold.

She sank down, the only response possible to fight that savage tugging, and dug her fingers into the stony ground. Others did the same around her, clawing in panic. Another soldier was dragged away, pulled shrieking into the wave.

The roaring snapped suddenly, like a breath caught in a throat, and Seren saw the base lift away, roll upward like a vast curtain, rising to reveal, once again, the battered slopes leading to the pass, then the pallid mountains and their blunt, ancient summits.

The wave swiftly dwindled as it soared northward, its wild light reflected momentarily in a patchwork cascade across reflective surfaces far below, sweeps of snow near the peaks and ice-polished stone blossoming sickly green and gold, as if awakened to an unexpected sunset.

Then the mountains were black silhouettes once more.

Beyond them, the wave, from horizon to horizon, was descending. Vanishing behind the range.

In the corner of her vision, Seren saw Nekal Bara slump to her knees.

Sudden light, across the rim of the world to the north, billowing like storm seas exploding against rock. The glow shot back into the night sky, this time in fiery arms and enormous, whipping tentacles.

She saw a strange ripple of grey against black on the facing mountainside, swiftly plunging.

Then comprehension struck her. 'Lie flat! Everyone! Down!'

The ripple struck the base of the slope. The few scraggly trees clinging to a nearby hillside toppled in unison, as if pushed over by a giant invisible hand.

The sound struck.

And broke around them, strangely muted.

Dazed, Seren lifted her head. Watched the shale tiles of an outlying building's roof dance away into the darkness. Watched as the north-facing wall tilted, then collapsed, taking the rest of the structure with it. She slowly climbed to her hands and knees.

Nekal Bara stood nearby, her hair and clothes untouched by the wind that raged on all sides.

Muddy rain sifted down through the strangely thick air. The stench of charred wood and the raw smell of cracked stone.

Beyond, the wind had died, and the rain pummelled the ground. Darkness returned, and if fires still burned beyond the mountains, no sign was visible from this distance.

Buruk the Pale staggered to her side, his face splashed with mud. 'He did not block it, Acquitor!' he gasped. 'It is as I said: no time to prepare.'

A soldier shouted, 'Errant take us! Such power!'

There was good reason why Lether had never lost a war. Even the Onyx Wizards of Bluerose had been crushed by the cadres of the Ceda. Archpriests, shamans, witches and rogue sorcerors, none had ever managed to stand for long against such ferocity.

Seren felt sick inside. Sick, and bereft.

This is not war. This is ... what? Errant save us, I have no answer, no way to describe the magnitude of this slaughter. It is mindless. Blasphemous. As if we have forgotten dignity. Theirs, our own. The word itself. No
distinction between innocence and guilt, condemned by mere existence. People transformed against their will into nothing more than symbols, sketchy representations, repositories of all ills, of all frustrations.

Is this what must be done? Take the enemy's flesh and fill it with diseases, corrupting and deadly to the touch, breath of poison? And that which is sick must be exterminated, lest it spread its contamination.

'I doubt,' Buruk said in an empty voice, 'there was time to suffer.'

True. Leave that to us.

There had been no defence. Hannan Mosag, Rhulad, the slave Udinaas and Feather Witch. Hull Beddict. The names skittered away in her mind, and she saw – with a sudden twisting of her insides that left her shocked – the face of Trull Sengar. No. It was Hull I was thinking of. No. Why him? 'But they're dead.'

'They're all dead,' Buruk said beside her. 'I need a drink.'

His hand plucked at her arm.

She did not move. 'There's nowhere to go.'

'Acquitior. The tavern beneath the hostel's built solid enough to withstand a siege. I'd imagine that's where those soldiers just went, to toast their lost comrades. Poor fools. The dead ones, I mean. Come on, Seren. I'm in the mood to spend coin.'

Blinking, she looked round. The mages were gone.

'It's raining, Acquitior. Let's go.'

His hand closed on her arm. She allowed him to drag her away.

'What's happened?'

'You're in shock, Acquitior. No surprise. Here, I've some tea for you, the captain's own. Enjoy the sunshine – it's been rare enough lately.'

The river's swift current pulled the barge along. Ahead, the sun was faintly copper, but the breeze sidling across the water's spinning surface was warm.

She took the cup from his hands.

'We'll be there by dusk,' Buruk said. 'Soon, we should be able to make out its skyline. Or at least the smoke.'

'The smoke,' she said. 'Yes, there will be that.'

'Think on it this way, Seren. You'll soon be free of me.'

'Not if there's not to be a war.'

'No. I intend to release you from your contract in any case.'

She looked over at him, struggled to focus. There had been a night. After the sorcerous assault. In the tavern. Boisterous soldiers. Scouting parties were to head north the next day – today. She was starting to recall details, the gleam of some strange excitement as lurid as the tavern's oil lamps. 'Why would you do that?'

'My need for you is ended, Acquitior.'

'Presumably, the Edur will sue for peace. If anything, Buruk, you will find yourself far busier than ever.' She sipped the tea.

He nodded, slowly, and she sensed from him a kind of resignation.

'Oh,' she said, 'I'd forgotten. You must needs make yourself of no use.'
'Indeed. My days as a spy are over, Acquiror.'

'You will be the better for it, Buruk.'

'Assuredly.'

'Will you stay in Trate?'

'Oh yes. It is my home, after all. I intend never to leave Trate.'

Seren drank her tea. Mint, and something else that thickened her tongue. Flowed turgid and cloying through her thoughts. 'You have poisoned this tea, Buruk.' The words slurred.

'Had to, Seren Pedac. Since last night. I can't have you thinking clearly. Not right now. You'll sleep again. One of the dockhands will waken you tonight – I will make sure of that, and that you're safe.'

'Is this another ... another betrayal?' She felt herself sagging on the bench.

'My last, dear. Remember this, if you can: I didn't want your help.'

'My ... help.'

'Although,' he added from a great distance, 'you have always held my heart.'

Fierce pain behind her eyes. She blinked them open. It was night. A robe covered her, tucked up round her chin. The slow rise and fall beneath her and the faint creaks told her she was still aboard the barge, which was now tied up alongside a stone pier. Groaning, she sat up.

Scuffling sounds beside her, then a tankard was hovering before her face. 'Drink this, lass.'

She did not recognize the voice, but pushed the tankard away.

'No, it's all right,' the man insisted. 'Just ale. Clean, cool ale. To take the ache from your head. He said you'd be hurting, you see. And ale's always done it for me, when I done and drunk too much.'

'I wasn't drunk—'

'No matter, you wasn't sleeping a natural sleep. It ain't no different, you see? Come now, lass, I need to get you up and around. It's my wife, you see, she's poorly. We're past the third bell an' I don't like leaving her too long alone. But he paid me good. Errant knows, more than an honest man makes in a year. Jus' to sit with you, you see. See you're safe an' up and walking.'

She struggled to her feet, clutching at and missing the cloak as it slipped down to her feet.

The dockhand, a bent, wizened old man, set the tankard down and collected it. 'Turn now, lass. I got the clasps. There's a chill this night – you're shivering. Turn now, yes, good, that's it.'

'Thank you.' The weight of the cloak pulled at her neck muscles and shoulders, making the pain in her head throb.

'I had a daughter, once. A noble took her. Debts, you see. Maybe she's alive, maybe she isn't. He went through lasses, that one. Back in Letheras. We couldn't stay there, you see, not after that. Chance t' see her, or a body turning up, like they do. Anyway, she was tall like you, that's all. Here, have some ale.'

She accepted the tankard, drank down three quick mouthfuls.

'There, better now.'

'I have to go. So do you, to your wife.'

'Well enough, lass. Can you walk?'
'Where's my pack?'

'He took it with him, said you could collect it. In the shed behind his house. He was specific 'bout that. The shed. Don't go in the house, he said. Very specific—'

She swung to the ladder. 'Help me.'

Rough hands under her arms, moving down to her behind as she climbed, then her thighs. 'Best I can do, lass,' came a gasp below her as she moved beyond his reach. She clambered onto the pier.

'Thank you, sir,' she said.

The city was quiet, barring a pair of dogs scrapping somewhere behind a warehouse. Seren stumbled on occasion as she hurried down the streets. But, true to the dockhand's word, the ale dulled the pain behind her eyes. Made her thoughts all too clear.

She reached Buruk the Pale's home, an old but well-maintained house halfway down a row on the street just in from the riverside warehouses.

No lights showed behind the shuttered windows.

Seren climbed the steps and drove her boot against the door.

Four kicks and the locks broke. By this time, neighbours had awakened. There were shouts, calls for the guard. Somewhere down the row a bell began ringing.

She followed the collapsing door into the cloakroom beyond. No servants, no sound from within. Into the dark hallway, ascending the stairs to the next level. Another hallway, step by step closing in on the door to Buruk's bedroom. Through the doorway. Inside.

Where he hung beneath a crossbeam, face bloated in the shadows. A toppled chair off to one side, up against the narrow bed.

A scream, filled with rage, tore loose from Seren's throat.

Below, boots on the stairs.

She screamed again, the sound falling away to a hoarse sob.

You have always held my heart.

Smoke rising in broad plumes, only to fall back and unfold like a grey cloak over the lands to the north. Obscuring all, hiding nothing.

Hanradi Khalag's weathered face was set, expressionless, as he stared at the distant devastation. Beside the chief of the Merude, Trull Sengar remained silent, wondering why Hanradi had joined him at this moment, when the mass of warriors were in the midst of breaking camp on the forested slopes all around them.

'Hull Beddict spoke true,' the chief said in his raspy voice. 'They would strike pre-emptively. Beneda, Hiroth and Arapay villages.'

A night of red fires filling the north. At least four villages, and among them Trull's own. Destroyed.

He swung round to study the slopes. Seething with warriors, Edur women and their slaves, elders and children. No going back, now. The Letherii sorcery has obliterated our homes ... but those homes were empty, the villages left to the crows.

And a handful of hapless Nerek.

Nothing but ashes, now.

'Trull Sengar,' Hanradi Khalag said, 'our allies arrived last night. Three thousand. You were seen. It seems
they know you well, if only by reputation. The sons of Tomad Sengar, but you especially. The one who leads them is called the Dominant. A hulk of a man, even for one of his kind. More grey than black in his mane. He is named B’nagga—'

'This does not interest me, Chief,' Trull cut in. 'They have been as sorely used as we have, and that use is far from over. I do not know this B’nagga.'

'As I said, he knows you, and would speak with you.'

Trull turned away.

'You had best accept the truth of things, Trull Sengar—'

'One day I will know your mind, Hanradi Khalag. The self you hide so well. Hannan Mosag bent you to his will. And now you kneel before my brother, the emperor. The usurper. Is this what the unification of the tribes was intended to mean? Is this the future you desired?'

'Usurper. Words like that will see you killed or cast out.'

Trull grunted. 'Rhulad is with the western army—'

'But the wraiths now serve him.'

'Ah, and we are to have spies among us now? An emperor who fears his own. An emperor who would be immune to criticism. Someone must speak in the name of reason.'

'Speak no more of this. Not to me. I reject all you say. You are being foolish, Trull Sengar. Foolish. Your anger is born of envy. No more.' He turned and walked back down the narrow track, leaving Trull alone once again on the precipice rising above the valleys of the pass. It did not occur to him to see if Hanradi had indeed lost his shadow.

A precipice. Where he could look down and watch the thousands swarm among the trees.

Three land armies and four fleets held, divided among them, the entire population of the Tiste Edur. This camp before him was a league wide and two leagues deep. Trull had never seen so many Edur gathered in one place. Hiroth, Arapay, Sollanta, Beneda.

He caught movement below, on the edge of Fear’s command area, squat, fur-clad figures, and felt himself grow cold. Our … allies.

Jheck.

Summoned by the Edur they had killed. Worshippers of the sword.

The night just past, beginning at dusk, had vanished behind a nightmarish display of sorcery. Unimaginable powers unveiled by the Letherii mages, an expression of appalling brutality in its intent. This was clearly going to be a war where no quarter was given, where conquest and annihilation were, for the Letherii, synonymous. Trull wondered if Rhulad would answer in like manner.

Except we have no homes to return to. We are committed to occupation of the south. Of Lether. We cannot raze the cities … can we? He drew a deep breath. He needed to talk to Fear again. But his brother had plunged into his role as commander of this army. His lead elements, half a day ahead, would come within sight of High Fort. The army would cross the Katter River at the Narrow Chute, which was spanned by a stone bridge centuries old, then swing down to join those lead elements.

And there would be a battle.

For Fear, the time for questions was past.

But why can I not manage the same for myself? Certainty, even fatality, eluded Trull. His mind would not rest from its tortured thoughts, his worries of what awaited them.
He made his way down the track. The Jheck were there, a contingent present in Fear's command area. He was not required, he told himself, to speak to them.

Edur warriors readying armour and weapons on all sides. Women chanting protective wards to weave a net of invisibility about the entire encampment. Wraiths darting among the trees, most of them streaming southward, through the pass and into the southlands. Here and there, demonic conjurations towered, hulking and motionless along the many newly worn trails leading to the summit. They were in full armour of bronze scales, green with verdigris, with heavy helms, the cheek guards battered plates that reached down past the jawlines, their faces hidden. Polearms, glaives, double-edged axes and maces, an array of melee weapons. Once, not so long ago, such summoned demons had been rare, the ritual – conducted by women – one of cajoling, false promises and final deception. The creatures were bound, now doomed to fight a war not of their making, where the only release was annihilation. They numbered in the high hundreds in this, Fear's army. The truth of that sickened him.

Helping with the striking of tents, children. Torn from their familiar world, subject to a new shaping. If this gambit failed...

Fear was standing near the remnants of a hearth from which smoke rose in a low wreath about his legs. Flanked by the two K'risnan the emperor had attached to this force. Hanradi Khalag stood off to one side.

A Jheck was approaching, probably the one the Merude chief had spoken of, given the wild iron-streaked, tangled head of hair, the flattened, seamed face displaying countless battle-scars. Various shells dangled from knotted strips hanging on his sleeveless sealskin shirt. Other small trophies depended from a narrow belt beneath the man's round paunch – pieces of Edur armour, jewellery. A bold reminder of past enmity.

What had Hanradi called him? The Dominant. B'nagga.

The Jheck's eyes were yellow, the whites dull grey and embryonic with blue vessels. They looked half mad.

Filed teeth flashed in a fierce smile. 'See who comes, Fear Sengar! The accent was awkward behind the Arapay intonations. 'The one we could not defeat!'

Trull scowled as his brother turned to watch him approach. To the Dominant, he said, 'You'll find no fields of ice to the south, Jheck.'

'Mange and moult, Slayer. No other enemy gives us such terror.' His broadening smile underscored the irony of his words. 'Fear Sengar, your brother is worthy of much pride. Again and again, my hunters sought to best this warrior in individual combat. Veered or sembled, it mattered not. He defeated them all. Never before have we witnessed such skill, such ferocity.'

'Among all who I trained, B'nagga,' Fear said, 'Trull was and remains the finest.'

Trull started, then his scowl deepened with disbelief. 'Enough of this. Fear, has our emperor spoken to us through the wraiths? Does he voice his satisfaction at the failed attempt by the Letherii? Does he spit with rage?'

One of the K'risnan spoke. 'Not a single Edur was lost, Trull Sengar. For that, we have Hull Beddict to thank.'

'Ah yes, the traitor. And what of the Nerek camped in our village?'

The warlock shrugged. 'We could not command them.'

'Relinquish your anger, brother,' Fear said. 'The devastation was wrought by the Letherii, not us.'

'True. And now it is our turn.'

'Yes. The wraiths have reported an army ascending to the pass.'

Ah, no. So soon.
B'nagga laughed. 'Do we ambush them? Shall I send my wolves forward?'

'They are not yet at the bridge,' Fear replied. 'I expect they will seek to contest that crossing should we fail to reach it before them. For the moment, however, they are in a slow-march, and, it seems, not expecting much opposition.'

'That much is clear,' Hanradi said. 'What commander would seek an engagement against an enemy upslope? This is a probe. At first contact they will withdraw. Back to High Fort. Fear, we should bloody them all the way.'

'B'nagga, send half your force forward. Observe the enemy, but remain unseen.'

The K'risnan who had spoken earlier said, 'Fear, there will be a mage cadre attached to the army.'

Fear nodded. 'Withdraw the wraiths barring a dozen or so. I would convey the belief that those few are but residents of the area. The enemy must remain unsuspecting. Hanradi Khalag, our warriors must be made ready to march. You will lead them.'

'We shall be under way before mid-morning.'

Trull watched the Merude chief walk away, then said, 'Those Letherii mages will prove troublesome.'

The K'risnan grunted. 'Trull Sengar, we are their match.'

He looked at the two warlocks. Chiefs' sons. Of Rhulad's age.

The K'risnan's smile was knowing. 'We are linked to Hannan Mosag, and through him to the emperor himself. Trull Sengar, the power we now call upon is more vast, and deadlier, than any the Edur have known before.'

'And that does not concern you? What is the aspect of this power? Do you even know? Does Hannan Mosag know? Rhulad?'

'The power comes to the emperor through the sword,' the K'risnan said.

'That is no answer—'

'Trull!' Fear snapped. 'No more. I have asked that you assemble a unit from our village. Have you done so?'

'Yes, brother. Fifty warriors, half of them unblooded, as you commanded.'

'And have you created squads and chosen your officers?'

Trull nodded.

'Lead them to the bridge. Take advance positions on the other side and wait until Hanradi's forces reach you— it should not be a long wait.'

'And if the Letherii have sent scouts ahead and they arrive first?'

'Gauge their strength and act accordingly. But Trull, no last stands. A skirmish will suffice to hold up the enemy's advance, particularly if they are uncertain as to your strength. Now, gather your warriors and be off.'

'Very well.'

There was no point in arguing any further, he told himself as he made his way to where his company waited. No-one wanted to listen. Independent thought had been relinquished, with appalling eagerness, it seemed to him, and in its place had risen a stolid resolve to question nothing. Worse, Trull found he could not help himself. Even as he saw the anger grow in the faces of those around him—anger that he dare challenge, that he dare think in ways contrary to theirs, and so threaten their certainty—he was unable to stay silent.

Momentum was building all around him, and the stronger it grew, the more he resisted it. In a way, he
suspected, he was becoming as reactionary as they were, driven into extreme opposition, and though he
struggled against this dogmatic obstinacy it was a battle he sensed he was losing.

There was nothing of value in such opposed positions of thought. And no possible conclusion but his own
isolation and, eventually, the loss of trust.

His warriors were waiting, gear packed, armour donned. Trull knew them all by name, and had endeavoured
to achieve a balanced force, not just in skill but in attitude. Accordingly, he knew many of them resented being
under his command, for his dissatisfaction with this war was well known. None the less, he knew they would
follow him.

There were no nobles among them.

Trull joined the warrior he had chosen as his captain. Ahlrada Ahn had trained alongside Trull, specializing
in the Merude cutlass as his preferred weapon. He was left-handed, rare among the Edur, yet used his other
hand to wield a short, wide-bladed knife for close fighting. The bell-hilt of his cutlass sprouted a profusion of
quillons designed to trap opposing sword-blades and spear-shafts, and his ceaseless exercises concentrating on
that tactic had made his left wrist almost twice the bulk of its opposite. Trull had seen more than one of his
practice spears snap at a shoulder-wrenching twist from Ahlrada's sword-arm.

The warrior also hated him, for reasons Trull had yet to fathom. Although now, he amended, Ahlrada had
probably found a new reason.

'Captain.'

The dark eyes would not meet his. They never did. Ahlrada's skin was darker than any other Edur Trull had
seen. There were colourless streaks in his long, unbound hair. Shadow wraiths swarmed round him – another
strange detail unique to the warrior. 'Leader,' he replied.

'Inform the sergeants, we're heading out. Minimum kits – we need to travel quickly.'

'Already done. We were waiting for you.'

Trull walked over to his own gear, shouldered the small leather pack, then selected four spears from his
cache. Whatever was left behind would be collected by the Letherii slaves and carried with the main body as it
made its cautious way south in the wake of Trull's company and Hanradi's forces.

When he turned, he saw that the company were on their feet, all eyes fixed on him. 'We must needs run,
warriors. The south end of the bridge. Once through the pass, each squad sends out a point and makes its own
way off-trail down to the bridge. Thus, you must be both swift and silent.'

A sergeant spoke. 'Leader, if we leave the trail we are slowed.'

'Then we had best get moving.'

'Leader,' the sergeant persisted, 'we will lose speed—'

'I do not trust the trail beyond the pass, Canarth. Now, move out.' In his head he cursed himself. A leader
need not give reasons. The command was sufficient. Nor, he silently added, was a sergeant expected to voice
public challenge. This was not beginning well.

One squad in the lead, followed by Trull, then the remaining squads with Ahlrada taking up the rear, the
company set out for the pass at a steady run. They quickly left the camp behind. Then, through an avenue
provided them, they swept past Hanradi Khalag's forces.

Trull found pleasure, and relief, in the pace they set. The mind could vanish in the steady rhythm, and the
forest slid past with each stride, the trees growing more stunted and thinner on the ground the closer they
approached the summit, while overhead the sun climbed a cloudless sky.

Shortly before mid-morning they halted on the south end of the pass. Trull was pleased to see that none of
his warriors was short of breath, instead drawing long, deep lungfuls to slow their hearts. The exertion and the heat left them, one and all, sheathed in sweat. They drank a little water, then ate a small meal of dried salmon and thin bread wrapped round pine nut paste.

Rested and fed, the warriors formed up into their squads, then, without another word, headed into the sparse forest to either side of the trail.

Trull elected to accompany the squad led by Canarth. They headed into the forest on the trail’s west side, then began the slow, silent descent, staying thirty or so paces from the main path. Another squad was further west, fifteen paces distant, whilst the third trailed midway between them and thirty paces back. An identical pattern had been formed on the eastern side.

Sergeant Canarth made his disapproval plain, constantly edging ahead until he was almost on the heels of the warrior at point. Trull thought to gesture him back but Canarth was ignoring him as if he was not there.

Then, halfway down the slope, the point halted and crouched low, one hand reaching back to stop Canarth. Trull and the others also ceased moving. The forest had thickened during the descent, an army of blackened pine boles blocking line of sight beyond fifteen paces. There was little undergrowth, but the slope was uneven and treacherous with moss-coated boulders and rotting tree-falls. A glance to his right showed the nearest warrior of the flanking squad a half-dozen paces further down, but now also halted, one hand raised, his gaze fixed on Trull.

Ahead, the point was whispering to Canarth. After a moment, the sergeant reversed direction and made his way cautiously back to where Trull and the others waited.

‘There is a scout on the edge of the main trail. Faraed, likely serving with the Letherii army. He has a good line of sight on the trail itself, maybe seventy-five or more paces.’

Trull looked back at the rest of the squad. He singled one warrior out and beckoned him closer. ‘Badar, go back to the third squad. They are to choose a warrior to head upslope a hundred and twenty paces, then cut in to the main path. He is then to make his way down, as if on point. Once you have delivered the message, return to us.’

Badar nodded and slipped away.

‘What of us?’ Canarth asked.

‘We wait, then join the squad to our west. Make our way down below the scout’s position, and lay our own trap.’

‘What of the squads to the east of the trail?’

A good question. He had split his forces with no way of communicating with half his company. A mistake. ‘We had best hope they too have seen the scout. And will have rightly judged that a Faraed is virtually impossible to sneak up on.’

The sergeant simply nodded. He did not need to point out Trull’s error. Nor, it was evident, his own.

We even out. Fair enough..

A short time later Badar returned and gave them a perfunctory nod. Trull gestured the squad to follow and struck out westward to join the outlying warriors.

Once there, he quickly related his plan and the fifteen warriors set off downslope.

They descended sixty paces before Trull waved them towards the main path. The position they reached was directly below a crook in the trail. He had his warriors draw and ready weapons.

Canarth gestured. ‘Across from us, Leader. Rethal’s squad. They have anticipated you.’
Trull nodded. 'Into position. We'll take him when he comes opposite us.'

Heartbeats. The sun’s heat bouncing from the gravel and dust of the trail. Insects buzzing past.

Then, light thumping, the sound swiftly growing. Suddenly upon them.

The Faraed was a blur, plunging round the bend in the trail then flashing past.

Spears darted out shin-high to trip him up.

The scout leapt them.

A curse, then a shaft raced past Trull, the iron head crunching into the Faraed's back, between the shoulder blades. Snapping through the spine. The scout sprawled, then tumbled, limbs flopping, and came to a rest ten paces down the path.

Settling dust. Silence.

Trull made his way down to where the body lay in a twisted heap. The scout, he saw, was a boy. Fourteen, fifteen years of age. His smeared face held an expression of surprise, filling the eyes. The mouth was a grimace of terror. 'We killed a child.'

'An enemy,' Canarth said beside him. 'It is the Letherii you must look to, Leader. They throw children into this war.' He turned to face uptrail. 'Well thrown, Badar. You are now blooded.'

Badar scrambled down and retrieved his spear.

The third squad appeared at the crook. One of them spoke. 'I never even saw him.'

'Our first kill, Leader,' Ahlrada Ahn said. Trull felt sick. 'Drag the body from the trail, Sergeant Canarth. Cover this blood with dust. We must move on.'

The bridge was not a bridge at all. Trull had visited it once before, and left with naught but questions. Constructed, it seemed, from a single massive disc, notched in rows across its rim, which was broad enough to permit eight warriors to stride across it without shoulders touching. The disc was on end, filling the gap of the deep gorge below which roared the Katter River. The base of the wheel was lost in the chute's darkness and the mist rising ceaselessly from the rushing water. To cross to the other side, one had to walk that curved, slick rim. The hub of the enormous wheel was visible, at least three man-lengths down. Thigh-thick rods of polished stone, spear-shaft straight, angled out from a projection on the hub on both sides, appearing to plunge into the rock wall of the gorge's south side.

The squads gathered on the north edge, scanning the treeline opposite. Two of the Edur had already crossed, one returning to report back. No signs of scouts, no evidence of recent camps. The lone Faraed they had killed seemed to have been sent far in advance of the main forces, or had taken upon himself the task of a deep mission. His courage and his intelligence had cost him his life.

Trull approached the very edge of the wheel, where the angle of the stone first emerged from the surrounding rock. As before, he saw a thin, milky film between that carved perfection and the rough rock of the precipice. As he had done once before, long ago, he wiped that foam away with a finger, to reveal the straight line, too narrow to slip a dagger blade into, that separated the construct from the raw stone. A disc in truth, somehow set into the notch of the gorge.

And, even stranger, the disc moved. Incrementally turning in place. At the moment, it was midway along one of the shallow grooves carved in parallel rows across the rim. He knew he could set his feet on that first notch, and halt. And, had he the patience, he would eventually – days, maybe a week, maybe more – find himself stepping off onto the south side of the gorge.

A mystery without an answer. Trull suspected it was never intended as a bridge. Rather, it had been built for some other purpose. It did not make sense to him that it functioned solely as what had immediately occurred to him the first time he had visited. There were, after all, easier ways to measure the passage of time.
Trull straightened, then waved his warriors across.

Ahlrada took the lead.

They reached the other side and fanned out, seeking cover. The ground resumed its downward slope, amidst boulders, pines and straggly oaks. They would cautiously move down in a few moments, to search for defensible positions that permitted a line of sight down the trail.

Trull crouched near Ahlrada, scanning the area ahead, when he heard the warrior grunt, then step away, swearing under his breath.

'What's wrong, Captain?'

'I felt it... move. Here.'

Trull edged over, and saw that Ahlrada's original position had been on a slightly curved panel of stone, set lower than the surrounding rock. It was covered in dust and gravel, but looked too smooth to be natural. He reached down and brushed the panel clear.

And saw arcane symbols carved into the stone, row upon row, the language unknown to him. Deeply delineated grooves formed an incomplete box around the writing, the base and side lines visible. Beneath the base a new row of lettering was just beginning to show.

Trull glanced back at the bridge, then back at the recessed panel. 'It moved?'

'Yes, I am certain of it,' Ahlrada said. 'Not much, but yes.'

'Was there a sound?'

'More felt than heard, Leader. As if something huge and buried was ... shifting.'

Trull stared down at the panel, running his fingers along the lettering. 'Do you recognize the language?'

Ahlrada shrugged and looked away. 'We should head down, Leader.'

'You have seen such writing before.'

'Not in ... stone. In ice. It doesn't matter.'

'Ice?'

'I once lived and hunted with the Den-Ratha, on the north coast. North and east, deep into the ice seas. Before the unification. There was a wall, covered in such writing, a berg that blocked our way. Twenty man-heights high, half a league wide. But it sank into the sea – it was gone the next season.'

Trull knew that Ahlrada had, like Binadas, journeyed far and wide, had fashioned blood-bound kinships with many Edur from rival tribes. And, like Trull himself, had opposed the wars of subjugation conducted by Hannan Mosag. By all counts, he realized, they should be friends. 'What did your Den-Ratha comrades say about it?'

'The Tusked Man wrote them, they said.' He shrugged again. 'It is nothing. A myth.'

'A man with tusks?'

'He has been ... seen. Over generations, sightings every now and then. Skin of green or grey. Tusks white as whalebone. Always to the north, standing on snow or ice. Leader, this is not the time.'

Trull sighed, then said, 'Send the squads down.'

A short time later Canarth reported that he smelled rotting meat.

But it was only a dead owl, lying beside the trail.
There were dark times for the Letherii, so long ago now. The First Empire, from which vast fleets had sailed forth to map the world. The coasts of all six continents had been charted, eight hundred and eleven islands scattered in the vast oceans, ruins and riches discovered, ancient sorceries and fierce, ignorant tribes encountered. Other peoples, not human, all of whom bled easily enough. Barghast, Trell, Tartheno, Fenn, Mare, Jhag, Krinn, Jheck ... Colonies had been established on foreign coasts. Wars and conquests, always conquests. Until ... all was brought down, all was destroyed. The First Empire collapsed in upon itself. Beasts rose in the midst of its cities, a nightmare burgeoning like plague.

The Emperor who was One was now Seven, and the Seven were scattered, lost in madness. The great cities burned. And people died in the millions.

The nightmare had a name, and that name was T’lan Imass.

Two words, inspiring hatred and terror. But, beyond those two words, there was nothing. All memory of who or what the T’lan Imass had been was lost in the chaos that followed.

Few Letherii remained who were aware of even that much. True, they knew the name ‘First Empire’. And they knew of the fall of that glorious civilization of so long ago, a civilization that was their legacy. And little else, barring the prophecy of rebirth.

Udinaas could no longer make that claim of blissful ignorance for himself. Within the world of ghosts and shades, the past lived on, breathed like a thing alive and ever restive. And voices haunted him, long dead voices. The Tiste Andii shade, Wither, was indifferent to the Letherii slave’s own desires, his pleading for silence, for an end to the grisly cacophony of regrets which seemed to be all that held ghosts together.

Udinaas knew enough horror, here among the living. And the distilling of old truths was, as far as he was concerned, not worth it.

T’lan Imass.

T’lan Imass...

What did he care about some ancient nemesis?

Because the dust of over four thousand of them was beneath their feet at this moment. A truth riding Wither’s raspy laughter.

‘And that dust has eyes, slave. Should you fear? Probably not. They’re not interested. Much. Not enough to rise up and slaughter you all, which they might not succeed in doing anyway. But, I tell you this, Udinaas, they would give it a good try.’

‘If they are dust,’ Udinaas muttered, ‘they cannot slaughter anyone.’

It was night. He sat with his back to a sloping rock face, on a ledge perched above the massive Edur encampment. The emperor had sent him off a short while ago. The hulking, gold-smeared bastard was in a foul mood. Wearied from dragging his bulk around, arguments with Hannan Mosag, the endless logistics of moving an army tens of thousands strong, families in tow. Not all was glory.

‘The dust can rise, Udinaas. Can take shape. Warriors of bone and withered flesh, with swords of stone. Where are these ones from? Which warleader sent them here? They do not answer our questions. They never do. There are no bonecasters among them. They are, like us, lost.’

Udinaas was tired of listening. The wraith was worse than a burrowing tick, buried deep in his brain. He had begun to doubt its existence. More likely the product of madness, a persona invented in his own mind. An inventor of secrets, seeding armies of ghosts to explain the countless voices whispering in his skull. Of course, it would insist otherwise. It might even flit across his vision, creeping disembodied, the sourceless, inexplicably moving shadow where none belonged. But the slave knew his eyes could be deceived. All part of the same corrupted perception.
The wraith hides in the blood of the Wyval. The Wyval hides in the shadow of the wraith. A game of mutual negation. The emperor sensed nothing. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan sensed nothing. Feather Witch, Mayen, Uruth, the host of bound wraiths, the hunting dogs, the birds and the buzzing insects – all sensed nothing.

And that was absurd.

As far as Udinaas was concerned, in any case – the judgement conjured by some rational, sceptical part of his brain, that knot of consciousness the wraith endlessly sought to unravel – Wither was not real.

Wyval blood. Sister of Dawn, the sword-wielding mistress known to the Edur as Menandore – her and the hungry place between her legs. Infection and something like rape. He thought he understood the connection now. He was indeed infected, and true to Feather Witch’s prediction, that un-human blood was driving him mad. There had been no blazing white bitch who stole his seed. Fevered delusions, visions of self-aggrandizement, followed by the paranoid suspicion that the promised glory had been stolen from him.

Thus explaining his sordid state right now, slave to an insane Tiste Edur. A slave, huddled beneath every conceivable heel. Cowering and useless once all the internal posturing and self-justifications were cast away.

Feather Witch. He had loved her and he would never have her and that was that. The underscored truth laid bare, grisly exposure from which he withheld any direct, honest examination.

Madmen built houses of solid stone. Then circled looking for a way inside. Inside, where cosy perfection waited. People and schemes and outright lies barred his every effort, and that was the heart of the conspiracy. From outside, after all, the house looked real. Therefore it was real. Just a little more clawing at the stone door, a little more battering, one more pounding collision will burst that barrier.

And on and on and round and round. The worn ruts of madness.

He heard scrabbling on the stone below, and a moment later Feather Witch clambered into view. She pulled herself up beside him, her motions jerky, as if fevered.

‘Is it my turn to run?’ he asked.

‘Take me there, Indebted. That dream realm. Where I found you before.’

‘You were right all along,’ Udinaas said. ‘It doesn’t exist.’

‘I need to go there. I need to see for myself.’

‘No. I don’t know how.’

‘Idiot. I can open the path. I’m good at opening paths.’

‘Then what?’

‘Then you choose. Udinaas, take me to the ghosts.’

‘This is not a good place to do that—’

She had one hand clenched around something, and she now reached out and clutched his arm with that hand, and he felt the impression of a tile pressed between them.

And there was fire.

Blinding, raging on all sides.

Udinaas felt a weight push him from behind and he stumbled forward. Through the flames. In the world he had just left, he would now be falling down the cliffside, briefly, then striking the rocky slope and tumbling towards the treeline. But his moccasins skidded across flat, dusty ground.

Twisting, down onto one knee. Feather Witch staggered into view, like him passing unharmed through the
wall of fire. He wheeled on her. 'What have you done?'

A hand closed round the back of his neck, lifted him clear of the ground, then flung him down onto his back. The cold, ragged edge of a stone blade pressed against the side of his neck. He heard Feather Witch scream.

Blinking, in a cloud of dust.

A man stood above him. Short but a mass of muscles. Broad shoulders and overlong arms, the honey-coloured skin almost hairless. Long black hair hanging loose, surrounding a wide, heavily featured face. Dark eyes glittered from beneath a shelf-like brow. Furs hung in a roughly sewn cloak, a patchwork of tones and textures, the visible underside pale and wrinkled.

'Peth tol ool havra d ara.' The words were thick, the vocal range oddly truncated, as if the throat from which those sounds issued lacked the flexibility of a normal man's.

'I don't understand you,' Udinaas said. He sensed others gathered round, and could hear Feather Witch cursing as she too was thrown to the ground.

'Arad havra'd ara. En'aralack havra d'drah.'

Countless scars. Evidence of a broken forearm, the bone unevenly mended and now knotted beneath muscle and skin. The man's left cheekbone was dimpled inward, his broad nose flattened and pressed to one side. None of the damage looked recent. 'I do not speak your language.'

The sword-edge lifted away from the slave's neck. The warrior stepped back and gestured.

Udinaas climbed to his feet.

More fur-clad figures.

A natural basin, steeply walled on three sides. Vertical cracks in the stone walls, some large enough to provide shelter. Where these people lived.

On the final side of the basin, to the Letherii's left, the land opened out. And in the distance – the slave's eyes widened – a shattered city. As if it had been pulled from the ground, roots and all, then broken into pieces. Timber framework beneath tilted, heaved cobble streets. Squat buildings pitched at random angles. Toppled columns, buildings torn in half with the rooms and floors inside revealed, many of those rooms still furnished. Vast chunks of rotting ice were visible in the midst of the broken cityscape.

'What place is this?' Feather Witch asked.

He turned to see her following his gaze from a few paces away.

'Udinaas, where have you brought us? Who are these savages?'

'Vis vol'raele absi'arad.'

He glanced at the warrior who'd spoken, then shrugged and returned his attention to the distant city. 'I want to go and look.'

'They won't let you.'

There was only one way to find out. Udinaas set out for the plain.

The warriors simply watched.

After a moment, Feather Witch followed, and came to his side. 'It looks as if it has just been... left here. Dropped.'

'It is a Meckros city,' he said. 'The wood at the bases, it is the kind that never grows waterlogged. Never rots. And see there' – he pointed – 'those are the remnants of docks. Landings. That's a ship's rail, dangling from
those lines. I've never seen a Meckros city, but I've heard enough descriptions, and this is one. Plucked from the sea. That ice came with it.'

'There are mounds, freshly raised,' she said. 'Do you see them?'

Raw, dark earth rising from the flats around the ruins, each barrow ringed in boulders. 'The savages buried the Meckros dead,' he said.

'There are hundreds …'

'And every one big enough to hold hundreds of corpses.'

'They feared disease,' she said.

'Or, despite their appearance, they are a compassionate people.'

'Don't be a fool, Indebted. The task would have taken months.'

He hesitated, then said, 'That was but one clan, Feather Witch, back there. There are almost four thousand living in this region.'

She halted, grasped his arm and pulled him round. 'Explain this to me!' she hissed.

He twisted his arm loose and continued walking. 'These ghosts hold strong memories. Of their lives, of their flesh. Strong enough to manifest as real, physical creatures. They're called T'lan Imass—'

Her breath caught. 'The Beast Hold.'

He glanced at her. 'What?'


'Eres'al. That's the Nerek goddess. The false goddess, or so claimed our scholars and mages, as justification for conquering the Nerek. I am shocked to discover the lie. In any case, aren't the images on the tiles those of beasts? For the Beast Hold, I mean.'

'Only among the poorer versions. The skins of beasts, draped round dark, squat savages. That is what you will see on the oldest, purest tiles. Do not pretend at ignorance, Udinaas. You brought us here, after all.'

They were approaching the nearest barrows, and could see, studding the raw earth, countless objects. Broken pottery, jewellery, iron weapons, gold, silver, small wooden idols, scraps of cloth. The remnant possessions of the people buried beneath.

Feather Witch made a sound that might have been a laugh. 'They left the treasure on the surfaces, instead of burying it with the bodies. What a strange thing to do.'

'Maybe so looters won't bother digging and disturbing the corpses.'

'Oh, plenty of looters around here.'

'I don't know this realm well enough to say either way,' Udinaas said, shrugging.

The look she cast him was uneasy.

'What are those things?'

Udinaas shook his head. 'This city was struck by ice, even as it was torn from our world. Clearly, that ice held its own ancient secrets.'

'Why did you bring us here?'

He rounded on her, struggled to contain his anger, and managed to release it in a long sigh. Then he said, 'Feather Witch, what was the tile you held in your hand?'

'One of the Fulcra. Fire.' She faltered, then resumed. 'When I saw you, that first time, I lied when I said I saw nothing else. No-one.'

'You saw her, didn't you?'

'Sister Dawn ... the flames—'

'And you saw what she did to me.'

'Yes.' A whisper.

Udinaas turned away. 'Not imagined, then,' he muttered. 'Not conjured by my imagination. Not... madness ...'

'It is not fair. You, you're nothing. An Indebted. A slave. That Wyval was meant for me. Me, Udinaas!'

He flinched from her rage, even as understanding struck him. Forcing a bitter laugh. 'You summoned it, didn't you? The Wyval. You wanted its blood, and it had you, and so its poison should have infected you. But it didn't. Instead, it chose me. If I could, Feather Witch, I'd give it to you. With pleasure – no, that is not true, much as I'd like it to be. Be thankful that blood does not flow in your veins. It is in truth the curse you said it was.'

'Better to be cursed than—' She stopped, looked away.

He studied her pale face, and around it the blonde, crinkled hair shivering in the vague, near-lifeless wind. 'Than what, Feather Witch? A slave born of slaves. Doomed to listen to endless dreams of freedom – a word you do not understand, probably will never understand. The tiles were to be your way out, weren't they? Not taken in service to your fellow Letherii. But for yourself. You caught a whisper of freedom, didn't you, deep within those tiles? Or, something you thought was freedom. For what it is worth, Feather Witch, a curse is not freedom. Every path is a trap, a snare, to entangle you in the games of forces beyond all understanding. Those forces probably prefer slaves when they use mortals, since slaves understand intrinsically the nature of the relationship imposed.'

She glared at him. 'Then why you?'

'And not you?' He looked away. 'Because I wasn't dreaming of freedom. Perhaps. Before I was a slave, I was Indebted – as you remind me at every opportunity. Debt fashions its own kind of slavery, Feather Witch, within a system designed to ensure few ever escape once those chains have closed round them.'

She lifted her hands and stared at them. 'Are we truly here? It all seems so real.'

'I doubt it,' Udinaas replied.

'We can't stay?'

'In the world of the tiles? You tell me, Feather Witch.'

'This isn't the realm of your dreaming, is it?'

He grimaced to hide his amusement at the unintended meaning behind her question. 'No. I did warn you.'

'I have been waiting for you to say that. Only not in such a tone of regret.'
'Expecting anger?'

She nodded.

'I had plenty of that,' he admitted. 'But it went away.'

'How? How do you make it go away?'

He met her eyes, then simply shook his head. A casual turning away, gaze once more upon the ruins. 'This destruction, this slaughter. A terrible thing to do.'

'Maybe they deserved it. Maybe they did something—'

'Feather Witch, the question of what is deserved should rarely, if ever, be asked. Asking it leads to deadly judgement, and acts of unmitigated evil. Atrocity revisited in the name of justice breeds its own atrocity. We Letherii are cursed enough with righteousness, without inviting yet more.'

'You live soft, Udinaas, in a very hard world.'

'I told you I was not without anger.'

'Which you bleed away, somehow, before it can hurt anyone else.'

'So I do all the bleeding, do I?'

She nodded. 'I'm afraid you do, Udinaas.'

He sighed and turned. 'Let's go back.'

Side by side, they made their way towards the waiting savages and their village of caves.

'Would that we could understand them,' Feather Witch said.

'Their shaman is dead.'

'Damn you, Udinaas!'

Into the basin, where something had changed. Four women had appeared, and with them was a young boy. Who was human.

The warrior who had spoken earlier now addressed the boy, and he replied in the same language, then looked over at Udinaas and Feather Witch. He pointed, then, with a frown, said, 'Letherii.'

'Do you understand me?' Udinaas asked.

'Some.'

'You are Meckros?'

'Some. Letherii Indebted. Indebted. Mother and father. They fled to live with Meckros. Live free, freedom. In freedom.'

Udinaas gestured towards the ruined city. 'Your home?'

'Some.' He took the hand of one of the women attending him. 'Here.'

'What is your name?'

'Rud Halle.'

Udinaas glanced at Feather Witch. *Rud* meant *found* in the Meckros trade tongue. But, of course, he realized, she would not know that. 'Found Elalle,' he said in the traders' language, 'can you understand me better?'
The boy's face brightened. 'Yes! Good, yes! You are a sailor, like my father was. Yes.'

'These people rescued you from the city?'

'Yes. They are Bentract. Or were, whatever that means – do you know?'

He shook his head. 'Found, were there any other survivors?'

'No. All dead. Or dying, then dead.'

'And how did you survive?'

'I was playing. Then there were terrible noises, and screams, and the street lifted then broke, and my house was gone. I slid towards a big crack that was full of ice fangs. I was going to die. Like everyone else. Then I hit two legs. Standing, she was standing, as if the street was still level.'

'She?'

'This is traders' tongue, isn't it?' Feather Witch said. 'I'm starting to understand it – it's what you and Hulad use when together.'

'She was white fire,' the boy said. 'Tall, very very tall, and she reached down and picked me up.' He made a gesture to mime a hand gripping the collar of his weathered shirt. 'And she said: Oh no he won't. Then we were walking. In the air. Floating above everything until we all arrived here. And she was swearing. Swearing and swearing.'

'Did she say anything else, apart from swearing?'

'She said she worked hard on this beget, and that damned legless bastard wasn't going to ruin her plans. Not a chance, no, not a chance, and he'll pay for this. What's beget mean?'

'I thought so,' Feather Witch muttered in Letherii.

No.

'Remarkable eyes,' Feather Witch continued. 'Must be hers. Yours are much darker. Duller. But that mouth ...'

No. 'Found,' Udinaas managed, 'how old are you?'

'I forget.'

'How old were you before the ice broke the city?'

'Seven.'

Triumphant, Udinaas spun to face Feather Witch.

'Seven,' the boy said again. 'Seven weeks. Mother kept saying I was growing too fast, so I must be tall for my age.'

Feather Witch's smile was strangely broken.

The Bentract warrior spoke again.

The boy nodded, and said, 'Ulshun Pral says he has a question he wants to ask you.'

A numbed reply. 'Go ahead.'

'Rae'd. Veb entara tog'rudd n'lan n'vis thal? List vah olar n'lan? Ste shabyn?'

'The women want to know if I will eat them when I get older. They want to know what dragons eat. They
want to know if they should be afraid. I don't know what all that means.'

'How can they be eaten? They're—' Udinaas stopped. *Errant take me, they don't know they're dead! 'Tell them not to worry, Found.'

'Ki'bri arasteshabyn bri por'tol tun logdara kul absi.'

'Ulshun Pral says they promised her to take care of me until she returns.'

'Entara tog'rudd av?'

The boy shook his head and replied in the warrior's language.

'What did he ask?' Udinaas demanded.

'Ulshun Pral wanted to know if you're my father. I told him my father's dead. I told him, no, you aren't. My father was Araq Elalle. He died.'

In Letherii, Feather Witch said, 'Tell him, Udinaas.'

'No. There's nothing to tell.'

'You would leave him to that ... woman?'

He spun to face her. 'And what would you have me do? Take him with us? We're not even here!'

'T'un havra'ad eventara. T'un veb vol'raele bri rea han d En'ev?'

The boy said, 'Ulshun Pral is understanding you now. Some. He says there are holes and would you like to go there?'

'Holes?' Udinaas asked.

Feather Witch snorted. 'Gates. He means gates. I have been sensing them. There are gates, Udinaas. Powerful ones.'

'All right,' Udinaas said to Found.

'I don't like that place,' the boy said. 'But I will come with you. It's not far.'

They strode towards the mouth of one of the larger caves. Passed into the cool darkness, the rough floor sloping upward for twenty or so paces, then beginning to dip again. Into caverns with the walls crowded with painted images in red and yellow ochre, black outlines portraying ancient beasts standing or running, some falling with spears protruding from them. Further in, a smaller cavern with black stick-like efforts on the walls and ceiling, a struggling attempt by the T'lan Imass to paint their own forms. Blooms of red paint outlining ghostly hand-prints. Then the path narrowed and began a gradual ascent once more. Ahead, a vertical fissure from which light spilled inward, a light filled with flowing colours, as if some unearthly flame burned beyond.

They emerged onto an uneven but mostly level sweep of blackened bedrock. Small boulders set end to end formed an avenue of approach from the cave mouth that led them on an inward spiral towards the centre of the clearing. Beyond, the sky shimmered with swirling colours, like shattered rainbows. A cairn of flat stones dominated the centre of the spiral, in the rough, awkward form of a figure standing on two legs made of stacked stones, a single broad one forming the hips, the torso made of three more, the arms each a single projecting, rectangular stone out to the side, the head a single, oblong rock sheathed in lichen. The crude figure stood before a squat tower-like structure with at least twelve sides. The facings were smooth, burnished like the facets of natural crystal. Yet light in countless colours flared beneath each of those surfaces, each plane spiralling inward to a dark hole.

Udinaas could feel a pressure in the air, as of taut forces held in balance. The scene seemed perilously fragile.
'Vi han onralmashalle. S'ril k'ul havra En'ev. N'vist'. Lan'te.'

'Ulshun says his people came here with a bonecaster. It was a realm of storms. And beasts, countless beasts coming from those holes. They did not know what they were, but there was much fighting.'

The T'lan Imass warrior spoke again, at length.

'Their bonecaster realized that the breaches must be sealed, and so she drew upon the power of stone and earth, then rose into her new, eternal body to stand before the wounds. And hold all with stillness. She stands there now and she shall stand there for all time.'

'Yet her sacrifice has stranded the T'lan Imass here, hasn't it?' Udinaas asked.

'Yes. But Ulshun and his people are content.'

'Vi truh larpahal. Ranag, bhed, tenag tollarpahal. Kul havra thelar. Kul.'

'This land is a path, what we would call a road,' Found said, frowning as he struggled to make sense of Ulshun's words. 'Herds migrate, back and forth. They seem to come from nowhere, but they always come.'

*Because, like the T'lan Imass themselves, they are ghost memories.*

'The road leads here?' Feather Witch asked in halting traders' tongue.

'Yes,' Found said.

'And comes from where?'

'Epal en. Vol'sav, thelan.'

The boy sighed, crossed his arms in frustration. 'Ulshun says we are in an ... overflow? Where the road comes from has bled out to claim the road itself. And surround this place. Beyond, there is ... nothing. Oblivion. Unrealized.'

'So we are within a realm?' Feather Witch asked. 'Which Hold claims this place?'

'A evbrox'l list Tev. Starvald Demelain Tev.'

'Ulshun is pleased you understand Holds. He is bright-gem-eye. Pleased, and surprised. He calls this Hold Starvald Demelain.'

'I do not know that name,' she said, scowling.

The T'lan Imass spoke again, and in the words Udinaas sensed a list. Then more lists, and in hearing the second list, he began to recognize names.

The boy shrugged. 'T'iam, Kalse, Silannah, Ampelas, Okaros, Karosis, Sorrit, Atrahal, Eloth, Anthras, Kessobahn, Alkend, Karatallid, Korbas ... Olar. Eleint. Draconean. Dragons. The Pure Dragons. The place where the road comes from is closed. By the mixed bloods who gathered long ago. Draconus, K'ru1, Anomandaris, Osserc, Silchas Ruin, Scabandari, Sheltatha Lore, Sukul Ankhadu and Menandore. It was, he says, Menandore who saved me.' The boy's eyes suddenly widened. 'She didn't look like a dragon!' Ulshun spoke.

Found nodded. 'All right. He says you should be able to pass through from here. He looks forward to seeing you again. They will prepare a feast for you. Tenag calf. You are coming back, aren't you?'

'If we can,' Feather Witch said, then switched to Letherii. 'Aren't we, Udinaas?'

He scowled. 'How would I know?'

'Be gracious.'
'To you or them?'

'Both. But especially to your son.'

He didn't want to hear any of this, and chose to study the faceted tower instead. Not a single path, then, but multiple doorways. At least twelve. Twelve other worlds, then? What would they be like? What kind of creatures populated them? Demons. And perhaps that was all the word 'demon' meant. Some creature torn from its own realm. Bound like a slave by a new master who cared nothing for its life, its well-being, who would simply use it like any other tool. Until made useless, whereupon it would be discarded.

But I am tired of sympathy. Of feeling it, at least. I'd welcome receiving it, if only to salve all this self-pity. Be gracious, she said. A little rich, coming from her. He looked back down at the boy. My son. No, just my seed. She took nothing else, needed nothing else. It was the Wyval blood that drew her, it must have been. Nothing else. Not my son. My seed.

Growing too fast. Was that the trait of dragons? No wonder the T'lan Imass women were frightened. He sighed, then said, 'Found, thank you. And our thanks as well to Ulshun Pral. We look forward to a feast of Tenag calf.' He faced Feather Witch. 'Can you choose the proper path?'

'Our flesh will draw us back,' she replied. 'Come, we have no idea how much time has passed in our world.' She took him by the hand and led him past the stone figure. 'Dream worlds. Imagine what we might see, were we able to choose...'

'They're not dream worlds, Feather Witch. They're real. In those places, we are the ghosts.'

She snorted, but said nothing.

Udinaas turned for a final glance back. The boy, Found, got of a slave and a draconic-blooded woman, raised by neither. And at his side this rudely fashioned savage who believed he still lived. Believed he was flesh and blood, a hunter and leader with appetites, desires, a future to stride into. Udinaas could not decide which of the two was the more pathetic. Seeing them, as he did now, they both broke his heart, and there seemed no way to distinguish between the two. As if grief had flavours.

He swung round. 'All right, take us back.'

Her hand tightened on his, and she drew him forward. He watched her stride into the wall of flaring light. Then followed.

Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, called Twilight by those soldiers under her command who possessed in their ancestry the blood of the long-vanished indigenous fishers of Fent Reach – for that was what her name meant – stood on the massive wall skirting the North Coast Tower, and looked out upon the waters of Nepah Sea. Behind her, a broad, raised road exited from the base of the watchtower and cut a straight path south through two leagues of old forest, then a third of a league of farmland, to end at the crossroads directly before the Inland Gate of the fortified city of Fent Reach.

That was a road she was about to take. In haste.

Beside her, the local Finadd, a willow-thin, haunted man whose skin seemed almost bloodless, cleared his throat for the third time in the last dozen heartbeats.

'All right, Finadd,' Twilight said.

The man sighed, a sound of unabashed relief. 'I will assemble the squads, Atri-Preda.'

'In a moment. You've still a choice to make.'

'Atri-Preda?'

'By your estimate, how many Edur ships are we looking at?'

The Finadd squinted northward. 'Eight, nine hundred of their raiders, I would judge. Merude, Den-Ratha,
Beneda. Those oversized transports – I've not seen those before. Five hundred?'

'Those transports are modelled on our own,' Twilight said. 'And ours hold five hundred soldiers each, one full supply ship in every five. Assuming the same ratio here. Four hundred transports packed with Edur warriors. That's two hundred thousand. Those raiders carry eighty to a hundred. Assume a hundred. Thus, ninety thousand. The force about to land on the strand below is, therefore, almost three hundred thousand.'

'Yes, Atri-Preda.'

'Five thousand Edur landed outside First Maiden Fort this morning. The skeleton garrison saddled every horse they had left and are riding hard for Fent Reach. Where I have my garrison.'

'We can conclude,' the Finadd said, 'that this represents the main force of the Edur fleet, the main force, indeed, of the entire people and their suicidal invasion.'

She glanced at him. 'No, we cannot conclude any such thing. We have never known the population of Edur lands.'

'Atri-Preda, we can hold Fent Reach for weeks. In that time, a relieving army will have arrived and we can crush the grey-skinned bastards.'

'My mage cadre in the city,' she said after a moment, 'amounts to three dubious sorcerors, one of them never sober and the other two seemingly intent on killing each other over some past slight. Finadd, do you see the darkness of the sea beneath those ships? The residents of Trate know well that dark water, and what it holds.'

'What are you saying, Atri-Preda?'

'By all means ride back with us with your soldiers, Finadd. Or stay and arrange your official surrender with the first elements to land.'

The man's mouth slowly opened.

Twilight turned away and walked to the stairs leading down to the courtyard. 'I am surrendering Fent Reach, Finadd.'

'But Atri-Preda! We could withdraw back to Trate! All of us!'

She stopped three steps down. 'A third fleet has appeared, Finadd. In Katter Sea. We have already been cut off.'

'Errant take us!'

Twilight resumed her descent. Under her breath, she muttered, 'If only he could ...'

All the questions were over. The invasion had begun.

My city is about to be conquered. Again.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The old drainage trench had once been a stream, long before the huts were knocked down and the overlords began building their houses of stone. Rubble and foul silts formed the banks, crawling with vermin. But there in my chest some dark fire flamed in quiet rage as I walked the track seeking the lost voice, the voice of that freed watery flow, the pebbles beneath the streaming tongue. Oh I knew so well those smooth stones, the child’s treasure of comforting form and the way, when dried, a single drop of tear or rain could make the colour blossom once more the found recollection of its home – this child’s treasure and the child was me and the treasure was mine, and mine own child this very morning I discovered, kneeling smeared on the rotting bank playing with shards of broken pots that knew only shades of grey no matter how deep and how streaming these tears.


Dreams could pass between the blinks of a man’s eyes, answered by wild casting about, disorientation, and an unstoppered flood of discordant emotions. Udinaas found he had slid down, was perched precariously on the ledge, his limbs stiff and aching. The sun had fallen lower, but not by much. Behind him, rising from a crumpled heap, was Feather Witch, the two halves of a broken tile falling from one hand to clatter on the stone a moment before sliding off into the brush and rocks below. Her hair disguised her face, hid the emotions writ there.

Udinaas wanted to scream, let loose his grief, and the sourceless anger beneath it. But what was new in being used? What was new in having nothing to reach for, nothing to strive towards? He pulled himself up from the edge of crumbling stone, and looked about.

The army was on the move. Something had changed. He saw haste below. 'We must return,’ he said.

'To what?’ Harsh, bitter.

'To what we were before.’

'Slaves, Udinaas.’

'Yes.’

'I've tasted it now. I've tasted it!’

He glanced over at her, watched as she sat straighter, dragging the hair from her eyes, and fixed him with a fierce glare. 'You cannot live like this.'

'I can't?’

She looked away. Not wanting to see, he guessed. Not wanting to understand.

'We're marching to Trate, Feather Witch.’

'To conquer. To ... enslave.’

'Details,’ he muttered, climbing cautiously to his feet. He offered her a hand. 'Mayen wants you.’

'She beats me, now.’

'I know. You've failed to hide the bruises.’

'She tears my clothes off. Uses me. In ways that hurt. I hurt all the time.’
'Well,' Udinaas said, 'he doesn't do that to her. Not that there's much ... tenderness. He's too young for that, I suppose. Nor has she the power to take charge. Teach him. She's ... frustrated.'

'Enough of your understanding this, understanding that. Enough, Indebted! I don't care about her point of view, I'm not interested in stepping into her shadow, in trying to see the world how she sees it. None of that matters, when she twists, when she bites, when she pushes ... just stop talking, Udinaas. Stop. No more.'

'Take my hand, Feather Witch. It's time.'

'I'd rather bite it off.'

I know. He said nothing.

'So he doesn't hurt her, does he?'

'Not physically,' he replied.

'Yes. What he does to her ...' she looked up, searching his eyes, 'I do to you.'

'And you'd rather bite.'

She made no reply. Something flickered in her gaze, then she turned away even as she took his hand.

He drew her onto her feet.

She would not look at him. 'I'll go down first. Wait a bit.'

'All right.'

An army kicked awake, swarming the forest floor. To the north, the ashes of home. To the south, Trate. There would be ... vengeance.

Details.

A flicker of movement downslope, then ... nothing.

Trull Sengar continued scanning for a moment longer, then he settled back down behind the tree-fall. 'We have been discovered,' he said.

Ahlrada Ahn grunted. 'Now what?'

Trull looked to the left and the right. He could barely make out the nearest warriors, motionless and under cover. 'That depends,' he muttered. 'If they now come in force.'

They waited, as the afternoon waned.

Somewhere in the forest below was a Letherii brigade, and within it a mage cadre that had detected the presence of Tiste Edur positioned to defend the bridge. Among the officers, surprise, perhaps consternation. The mages would be at work attempting to discern precise numbers, but that would prove difficult. Something in Edur blood defied them, remained elusive to their sorcerous efforts. A decision would have to be made, and much depended on the personality of the commander. Proceed in a cautious and measured way until direct contact was established, whereupon a succession of probes would determine the strength of the enemy. There were risks, however, to that. Drawing close enough to gauge the sharpness of the enemy's fangs invited a bite that might not let go, leading to a pitched engagement where all the advantage lay with the Tiste Edur. Uphill battles were always costly. And often withdrawal proved bloody and difficult. Worse, there was a good chance of an all-out rout, which would lead to slaughter.

Or the commander could order the mage cadre to unleash a sorcerous attack and so lay waste the forest reaches above them. Such an attack, of course, served to expose the mages' position to those Edur warlocks who might be present. And to the wraiths and demons attending them. If the attack was blunted, the cadre was in trouble.
Finally, the commander could choose to pull back. Yield the bridge, and return to the solid defences of High Fort, inviting a more traditional battle – the kind the Letherii had fought for centuries, against enemy forces of all sorts, and almost invariably with great success.

Was the commander overconfident and precipitous? If so, then Trull Sengar and his fifty warriors would either be slaughtered or forced back to the other side of the bridge, either result proving tactically disastrous for Hanradi Khalag and his advancing warriors. A contested crossing of the bridge would force Fear and Hanradi into unveiling the full extent of the sorcerous power accompanying the army – power intended to shatter the defenders of High Fort. Conversely, a cautious or timid commander would elect to retreat, and that would ensure an Edur success.

Trull edged his way back up to peer over the tree-fall. No movement below. The air seemed preternaturally still.

'If they don't close soon,' Ahlrada said in a low voice, 'they will have lost the advantage.'

Trull nodded. Sufficient concerns to occupy his mind, to steal his fullest attention. He did not have the luxury of thinking of other things. This, he decided, was preferable. A relief. And I can stay here, in this tense cast of my mind’s thoughts, from now on. It will take me through this war. It has to. Please, take me through this war.

The shadows were long on the slope below, cutting cross-ways, the shafts of dusty sunlight ebbing into golden mist through which insects flitted.

A whisper of sound – behind them, then on all sides.

Wraiths, streaming down, slipping past into the spreading gloom below.

'They've arrived,' Ahlrada said.

Trull slid back down and rolled onto his back. Padding between brush and trees upslope, silver-backed wolves. A half-dozen, then a score, lambent eyes flashing from lowered heads.

One beast approached Trull. It suddenly blurred, the air filling with a pungent, spicy scent, and a moment later Trull found himself looking into the amber eyes of B'nagga.

The Jheck grinned. 'A thousand paces below, Trull Sengar. They are in full retreat.'

'You made good time,' Ahlrada said.

'The mages had tied a thread to him. They knew you were coming. No doubt that slowed them even more.'

'So,' Ahlrada said, 'are we to contest their retreat?'

'It was a thought. But no, the wraiths will do naught but hound them. Keep them on edge and moving at double-march. By the time they reach High Fort they will be footsore and bleary-eyed. We won't be giving them much time to rest.' He settled into a crouch. 'I have news. First Maiden Fort has fallen. No battle – the garrison had already fled back to Fent Reach.'

'As anticipated,' Trull said.

'Yes. If the Letherii choose to make a stand at Fent Reach, it will be a short siege. Even now, our ships have made landing and the warriors march on the city.'

'No contact with any Letherii fleets?' Trull was surprised. Those transports were vulnerable.

'None. The emperor's forces are poised above Trate, undetected as yet. Within the next few days, my friends,
there will be four major battles. And, sword willing, the northern frontier shall fall.'

*At the very least, we'll have their fullest attention.*

Blind drunk. A description Seren Pedac sought to explore, with all the fumbling murky intent of a mind poisoned into stupidity. But, somehow, she was failing. Instead of blind, she was painfully aware of the figures on all sides of her small table, the seething press and the loose rubble sound of countless voices. Stupidity had yet to arrive and possibly never would, as stolid sobriety held on, dogged and immovable and indifferent to the seemingly endless cups of wine she drank down.

Fevered excitement, scores of voices uttering their I-told-you-so variations to herds of nodding heads. Proclamations and predictions, the gleaming words of greed eager to be unleashed on the booty of battlefields crowded with dead Edur. Give 'em First Maiden Fort, aye. Why not? Pull the bastards in and in. You saw what the cadre did that night? They'll do it again, this time against the ash-faced bastards themselves. I've got a perch halfway up the lighthouse, paid a fortune for it, I'll see it all.

*It'll all be over at Fent Reach. They'll get their noses bloodied and that's when the cadre will hit the fleet in Katter Sea. I got an interest in a stretch on Bight Coast, salvage rights. Heading up there as soon as it's over.*

They let themselves get surrounded, I tell you. Twilight's just waiting for the siege to settle in. What's that? You saying she surrendered? Errant take us, man, what kind of lies you throwing about in here? You a damned traitor, you a damned Hull Beddict! Shut that mouth of yours or I'll do it for you—

*I'll help, Cribal, that's a promise. Sewing lips tight is easy as mending sails an' I been doing that for years—*

*Where'd he go?*

*Ah, never mind him, Cribal—*

*Traitors need to be taught a lesson, Feluda. Come on, I see 'im making for the door—*

*Sittin' alone don't do no woman no good, sweetheart. Let a decent man take you away from all this ...*

Seren Pedac frowned, looked up at the figure looming over her table. Her mind replied, *AH right, even as she scowled and turned away.*

'Nothing worth its spit is being said here, lass. You want to drink. Fine, jus' sit and drink. All I was offerin' was a quieter place to do it, is all.'

'Go away.'

Instead, the man sat down. 'Been watchin' you all evening. Jus' another Letherii? Ask ed myself that once and once only. No, I think, not this one. So I ask, and someone says, "That's the Acquitor, Seren Pedac. Was up at the treaty that went sour. Was under contract with Buruk the Pale, the one that hung himself and damned if it wasn't her that found him all fish-eyed and fouled." And I think, that ain't an easy thing. No wonder she's sittin' there tryin' t'get drunk an' it's not working.'

She fixed her gaze on him, seeing him clearly for the first time. Seamed face, clean-shaven, hair shoulder-length and the hue of polished iron. His voice sounded again in her head, confirming what she saw. 'You're no Letherii.'

A broad smile, even, white teeth. 'You got that right, and, no offence, but glad of it.'

'You're not Faraed. Nerek. Tarthenal. Not Fent, either, not even Meckros—'  

'What I am you never heard of, believe me, lass. A long way from home.'

'What do you want?'

'Was making an offer, but it needed to be done in quiet. Private—'
'I'm sure—'

'Not like that, though I'd consider my fortunes on the upswing if it was to happen the way you think I meant. No.' He leaned forward, gesturing her closer as well.

Her smile ironic, she tilted over the table until their noses were almost touching. 'I can't wait.'

He withdrew a fraction. 'Lass, you're a breathin' vineyard. All right, then, listen. We got ourselves a boat—'

'We?'

'A boat, and we're leaving this pock-on-Hood's-ass of a kingdom.'

'Where to? Korshenn? Pilott, Truce? Kolanse?'

'What would be the point of that? The first three you named are all paying tribute to Lether, and Kolanse is a mess from all we hear. Acquitor, the world's a lot bigger than you might think—'

'Is it? Actually, it's smaller than I think.'

'Same rubbish, different hole, eh? Maybe you're right. But maybe not.'

'Who are you?'

'Just someone a long way from home, like I said. We clawed our way out of Assail, only to find ourselves here, and just by arriving in our damned sieve of a boat, we owed money. Just by steppin' onto the dock, we owed more. It's been seven months, and we're so far in debt Prince K'azz himself couldn't clear our way back out. Livin' off scraps and doin' ugly work and it's rotting us all—'

'You were a soldier.'

'Still am, lass.'

'So join a brigade—'

He rubbed at his face, closed his eyes for a moment, then seemed to reach a decision. He fixed her with his cool, blue eyes. 'It's shouting to the Abyss, lass, and not one Letherii's listening. You people are in trouble. Serious trouble. Fent Reach surrendered. Now, Twilight's a smart, able commander, so what made her do that? Think, Acquitor.'

'She saw it was hopeless. She saw she couldn't hold the city, and there was no way to retreat.'

He nodded. 'You weren't here when the harvest ships returned. You didn't see what delivered 'em. We did. Lass, if dhenrabi worship a god then that was it, right there in the harbour.'

'Who are dhenrabi?'

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'Who are dhenrabi?'

'He shook his head. 'We got room for people worth their salt. And you won't be the only woman, so it's not like that.'

'So why me at all, then?'

'Because you ain't blind, Seren Pedac.'

Smiling, she leaned back, then looked away. Not drunk, either. 'Who are you?'

'It won't mean a thing—'

'Tell me anyway.'

'Iron Bars, Second Blade, Fourth Company, Crimson Guard. Was in the service of Commander Cal-Brinn before we was all scattered between here and Hood's gates.'
'Meaningless and long. I'm impressed, Iron Bars.'

'Lass, you got more sharp teeth than an enkar'al with a mouthful of rhizan. Probably why I like you so much.'

_All right._ 'I'm not interested in your offer, Iron Bars.'

'Try thinking on it. There's time for that, provided you get out of Trate as soon as you can.'

She looked at him. 'That doesn't make any sense.'

'You'd be right, if our boat was in the harbour here. But it isn't. It's in Letheras. We signed on as crew, through an agent.' He shrugged. 'As soon as we get out to sea...'

'You'll kill the captain and mates and turn pirate.'

'We won't kill anybody if there's a way round it, and we're not pirates. We just want to get home. We need to get home.' He studied her for a moment, then rose. 'If it works out right, we'll look you up in Letheras.'

_All right._ 'You'd be wasting your time.'

He shrugged. 'Between here and then, Acquitor, a whole lot is going to change. Get out of this city, lass. As soon as you sober up, go. Just go.'

Then he was gone.

_They caught him, dragged him into the alley and they're sewing up his mouth – c'mon, let's watch—_

_Just his mouth? He's a damned traitor. No reason to go easy on the bastard. Sew him up everywhere, see how he likes that—_

_Wish it was Hull Beddict, that's what I wish—_

_They'll do a lot worse on 'im, mark my words. You just wait and see..._

Her blue silks snapping in the wind, Nekal Bara stood atop the lighthouse tower and faced out to sea. Nothing was going as planned. Their pre-emptive attack had destroyed empty villages; the entire Tiste Edur people were on the move. _And they're about to arrive on our very doorstep._

The fleet that had appeared in Katter Sea, poised to interpose its forces to prevent the retreat of Twilight's garrison at Fent Reach, had, upon the city's surrender, simply moved on. Preternaturally swift, the blood-red sails of five hundred raiders now approached Trate Bay. And in the waters beneath those sleek hulls ... a thing. Ancient, terrible, eager with hunger. It knew this path. It had been here before.

Since that time, and at the Ceda's command, she had delved deep in her search to discover the nature of the creature the Tiste Edur had bound to their service. The harbour and the bay beyond had once been dry land, a massive limestone shelf beneath which raced vast underground rivers. Erosion had collapsed the shelf in places, creating roughly circular, deep wells. Sometimes the water below continued to flow as part of the rivers. But in some, the percolating effect of the limestone was blocked by concretions over time, and the water was black and still.

One such well had become, long ago, a place of worship. Treasures were flung into its depths. Gold, jade, silver and living sacrifices. Drowning voices had screamed in the chill water, cold flesh and bone had settled on the pale floor.

And a spirit was fashioned. Fed on blood and despair, beseeching propitiation, the unwilling surrender of mortal lives. There were mysteries to this, she well knew. Had the spirit existed before the worship began, and was simply drawn to the gifts offered? Or was it conjured into existence by the very will of those ancient worshippers? Either way, the result was the same. A creature came into being, and was taught the nature of hunger, of desire. Made into an addict of blood and grief and terror.

The worshippers vanished. Died out or departed, or driven to such extreme sacrifices as to destroy
themselves. There was no telling how deep the bed of bones at the bottom of that well, but, by the end, it must have been appalling in its vastness.

The spirit was doomed, and should have eventually died. Had not the seas risen to swallow the land, had not its world's walls suddenly vanished, releasing it to all that lay beyond.

Shorelines were places of worship the world over. The earliest records surviving from the First Empire made note of that again and again among peoples encountered during the explorations. The verge between sea and land marked the manifestation of the symbolic transition between the known and the unknown. Between life and death, spirit and mind, between an unlimited host of elements and forces contrary yet locked together. Lives were given to the seas, treasures were flung into their depths. And, upon the waters themselves, ships and their crews were dragged into the deep time and again.

For all that, the spirit had known ... competition. And, Nekal Bara suspected, had fared poorly. Weakened, suffering, it had returned to its hole, there beneath the deluge. Returned to die.

There was no way of knowing how the Tiste Edur warlocks had found it, or came to understand its nature and the potential within it. But they had bound it, fed it blood until its strength returned, and it had grown, and with that growth, a burgeoning hunger.

And now, I must find a way to kill it.

She could sense its approach, drawing ever nearer beneath the Edur raiders. Along the harbour front below, soldiers were crowding the fortifications. Crews readied at the trebuchets and ballistae. Fires were stoked and racks of hull-breaching quarrels were wheeled out.

Arahathan in his black furs had positioned himself at the far end of the main pier and, like her, stood facing the fast-approaching Edur fleet. He would seek to block the spirit's attack, engage it fully for as long as it took for Nekal Bara to magically draw close to the entity and strike at its heart.

She wished Enedictal had remained in the city, rather than returning to his battalion at Awl. Indeed, she wished the Snakebelts had marched to join them here. Once the spirit was engaged, Enedictal could have then shattered the Edur fleet. She had no idea how much damage she and Arahathan would sustain while killing the spirit – it was possible they would have nothing left with which to destroy the fleet. It might come down to hand to hand fighting along the harbour front.

And that is the absurdity of magic in war – we do little more than negate each other. Unless one cadre finds itself outnumbered...

She had six minor sorcerors under her command, interspersed among the companies of the Cold Clay Battalion arrayed below. They would have to be sufficient against the Edur warlocks accompanying the fleet.

Nekal Bara was worried, but not unduly so.

The red sails fluttered. She could just make out the crews, scampering on the foredecks and in the rigging. The fleet was heaving to. Beneath the lead ships, a dark tide surged forward, spreading its midnight bruise into the harbour.

She felt a sudden fear. It was ... huge.

A glance down. To the lone, black-swathed figure at the very end of the main pier. The arms spreading wide.

The spirit heaved up in a swelling wave, gaining speed as it rushed towards the harbour front. On the docks, soldiers behind shields, a wavering of spear-heads. Someone loosed a ball of flaming pitch from one of the trebuchets. Fascinated, Nekal Bara watched its arcing flight, its smoke-trailing descent, down towards the rising wave.

It vanished in a smear of steam.

She heard Arahathan's roar, saw a line of water shiver, then boil just beyond the docks, lifting skyward a wall
of steam even as the spirit's bulk seemed to lunge a moment before striking it.

The concussion sent the lighthouse wavering beneath her feet and she threw her arms out for balance. Two-thirds of the way down, along a narrow iron balcony, onlookers were flung into the air, to pitch screaming down to the rocks below. The balcony twisted like thin wire in the hands of a blacksmith, the fittings exploding in puffs of dust. A terrible groaning rose up through the tower as it rocked back and forth.

Steam and dark water raged in battle, clambering ever higher directly before Arahathan. The sorceror was swallowed by shadow.

The lighthouse was toppling.

Nekal Bara faced the harbour, held her arms out, then flung herself from the edge.

Vanishing within a tumbling shaft of magic. Slanting downward in coruscating threads of blue fire that swarmed around a blinding, white core.

Like a god's spear, the shaft pierced the flank of the spirit. Tore a path of incandescence into the dark, surging water.

Errant – he's failing! Falling! She sensed, then saw, Arahathan. Red flesh curling away from his bones, blackening, snatched away as if by a fierce whirling wind. She saw his teeth, the lips gone, the grimace suddenly a maddening smile. Eyes wrinkled, then darkening, then collapsing inward.

She sensed, in that last moment, his surprise, his disbelief—

Into the spirit's flesh, down through layer upon layer of thick, coagulated blood, matted hair, slivered pieces of bone. Encrusted jewellery, mangled coins. Layers of withered newborn corpses, each one wrapped in leather, each one with its forehead stove in, above a face twisted with pain and baffled suffering. Layers. Oh, Mistress, what have we mortals done? Done, and done, and done?

Stone tools, pearls, bits of shell—

Through—

To find that she had been wrong. Terribly wrong.

The spirit – naught but a shell, held together by the memory within bone, teeth and hair, by that memory and nothing more.

Within—

Nekal Bara saw that she was about to die. Against all that rose to greet her, she had no defence. None. Could not – could never – Ceda! Kuru Qan! Hear me! See—

Seren Pedac staggered out into the street. Pushed, spun round, knocked to her knees by fleeing figures.

She had woken in a dark cellar, surrounded by empty, broken kegs. She had been robbed, most of her armour stripped away. Sword and knife gone. The ache between her legs told her that worse had happened. Lips puffed and cut by kisses she had never felt, her hair tangled and matted with blood, she crawled across greasy cobbles to curl up against a stained brick wall. Stared out numbly on the panicked scene.

Smoke had stolen the sky. Brown, murky light, the distant sound of battle – at the harbour front to her left, and along the north and east walls ahead and to her right. In the street before her, citizens raced in seemingly random directions. Across from her, two men were locked in mortal combat, and she watched as one managed to pin the other, then began pounding the man's head against the cobbles. The hard impacts gave way to soft crunches, and the victor rolled away from the spasming victim, scrambled upright, then limped away.

Doors were being kicked down. Women screamed as their hiding places were discovered.

There were no Tiste Edur in sight.
From her right, three men shambling like marauders. One carried a bloodstained club, another a single-handed sickle. The third man was dragging a dead or unconscious girl-child by one foot.

They saw her. The one with the club smiled. 'We was coming to c'lect you, Acquitor. Woke up wanting more, did ya?'

She did not recognize any of them, but there was terrible familiarity in their eyes as they looked upon her.

'The city's fallen,' the man continued, drawing closer. 'But we got a way out, an' we're taking you with us.'

The one with the sickle laughed. 'We've decided to keep you to ourselves, lass. Don't worry, we'll keep you safe.'

Seren curled tighter against the wall.

'Hold there!'

A new voice. The three men looked up.

Iron-haired, blue-eyed – she recognized the newcomer. Maybe. She wasn't sure. She'd never seen armour like that before: she would have remembered the blood-red surcoat. A plain sword at the stranger's left hip, which he was not reaching towards.

'It's that foreign bastard,' the man with the club said. 'Find your own.'

'I just have,' he replied. 'Been looking for her the last two days—'

'She's ours,' said the sickle-wielder.

'No closer,' the third man growled, raising the child in one hand as if he meant to use the body for a weapon.

Which, Seren now saw, he had done already.

Oh, please be dead, child. Please have been dead all along...

'The city's fallen,' the man continued, drawing closer. 'But we got a way out, an' we're taking you with us.'

She didn't understand.

The man with the club was on the ground. The other had his own sickle sticking from his chest and he stood staring down at it. Then he toppled.

A snap. Flood and spray of blood.

The stranger stepped back, tucking the girl-child's body under his right arm, the hand of his left holding, like a leather-wrapped handle from a pail, the third man's lower jaw.

Horrible grunting sounds from the staggering figure to her right. Bulging eyes, a spattered gust of breath.

The stranger tossed the mandible away with its attendant lower palate and tongue. He set the child down, then stepped closer to the last man. 'I don't like what you did. I don't like anything you've done, but most of all,
I don't like what you did to this woman here, and that child. So, I am going to make you hurt. A lot.'

The man spun as if to flee. Then he slammed onto the cobbles, landing on his chest, his feet taken out from under him – but Seren didn't see how it had happened.

With serene patience, the stranger crouched over him. Two blurred punches to either side of the man's spine, almost at neck level, and she heard breastbones snap. Blood was pooling around the man's head.

The stranger shifted to reach down between the man's legs.

'Stop.'

He looked over, brows lifting.


'Are you sure?'

From the buildings opposite, faces framed by windows. Eyes fixed, staring down.

'Enough,' she said, the word a croak.

'All right.'

He leaned back. One punch to the back of the man's head. It folded inward. And all was still.

Iron Bars straightened. 'All right?'

'Ah right, yes.

The Crimson Guardsman came closer. 'My fault,' he said. 'I had to sleep, thought you'd be safe for a bit. I was wrong. I'm sorry.'

'The child?'

A pained look. 'Run down by horses, I think. Some time past.'

'What's happening?'

Trate's falling. The Edur fleet held off. Until Nekal Bara and Arahathan were finished. Then closed. The defences were swarmed by shadow wraiths. Then the warriors landed. It was bad, Acquitor.' He glanced over a shoulder, said, 'At about that time, an army came down from inland. Swept the undermanned fortifications and, not a hundred heartbeats ago, finally succeeded in knocking down the North Gate. The Edur are taking their time, killing every soldier they find. No quarter. So far, they've not touched non-combatants. But that's no guarantee of anything, is it?'

He helped her to stand, and she flinched at the touch of his hands – those weapons, stained with murder.

If he noticed he gave nothing away. 'My Blade's waiting. Corlo's managed to find a warren in this damned Hood-pit – first time in the two years we been stuck here. What the Edur brought, he says. That's why.'

She realized they were walking now. Taking winding alleys and avoiding the main thoroughfares. The sound of slaughter was on all sides. Iron Bars suddenly hesitated, cocked his head. 'Damn, we've been cut off.'

Dragged into the slaughter. Bemused witness to the killing of hapless, disorganized soldiers. Wondering if the moneylenders would be next. Udinaas was left staggering in the wake of the emperor of the Tiste Edur and twelve frenzied warriors as they waded through flesh, cutting lives down as if clearing a path through reeds.

Rhulad was displaying skill that did not belong to him. His arms were a blur, his every move heedless and fearless. And he was gibbering, the manic sound punctuated every now and then by a scream that was as much terror as it was rage. Not a warrior triumphant. Neither berserk nor swathed in drenched glory. A killer ... killing.
An Edur warrior near him fell to a Letherii soldier's desperate sword-thrust, and the emperor shrieked, lunged forward. The mottled sword swung, and blood splashed like water. His laughter pulled at his breath, making him gasp. Edur faces flashed furtively towards their savage ruler.

Down the street, carving through a rearguard of some sort. Udinaas stumbled over corpses, writhing, weeping figures. Blind with dying, men called for their mothers, and to these the slave reached down and touched a shoulder, or laid fingertips to slick foreheads, and murmured, 'I'm here, my boy. It's all right. You can go now.'

The apologetic priest, chain-snapped forward step by step, whispering hollow blessings, soft lies, forgiving even as he prayed for someone – something – to forgive him in turn. But no-one touched him, no fingertips brushed his brow.

For the burned villages. Retribution. Where were the moneylenders? This war belonged to them, after all.

Another hundred paces. Three more Edur were down. Rhulad and eight brethren. Fighting on. Where was the rest of the army?

Somewhere else.

If one could always choose the right questions, then every answer could be as obvious. A clever revelation, he was on to something here ...

Another Edur screamed, skidded and fell over, face smacking the street.

Rhulad killed two more soldiers, and suddenly no-one stood in their path.

Halting in strange consternation, trapped in the centre of an intersection, drifts of smoke sliding past.

From the right, a sudden arrival.

Two Edur reeled back, mortally wounded.

The attacker reached out with his left hand, and a third Edur warrior's head snapped round with a loud crack.

Clash of blades, more blood, another Edur toppling, then the attacker was through and wheeling about.

Rhulad leapt to meet him. Swords – one heavy and mottled, the other modest, plain – collided, and somehow were bound together with a twist and pronation of the stranger's wrist, whilst his free hand blurred out and over the weapons, palm connecting with Rhulad's forehead.

Breaking the emperor's neck with a loud snap.

Mottled sword slid down the attacker's blade and he was already stepping past, his weapon's point already sliding out from the chest of another Edur.

Another heartbeat, and the last two Tiste Edur warriors were down, their bodies eagerly dispensing blood like payment onto the cobbles.

The stranger looked about, saw Udinaas, nodded, then waved to an alley-mouth, from which a woman emerged.

She took a half-dozen strides before Udinaas recognized her.

Badly used.

But no more of that. Not while this man lives.

Seren Pedac took no notice of him, nor of the dead Edur. The stranger grasped her hand.

Udinaas watched them head off down the street, disappear round a corner.
Somewhere behind him, the shouts of Edur warriors, the sound of running feet.

The slave found he was standing beside Rhulad's body, staring down at it, the bizarre angle of the head on its twisted neck, the hands closed tight about the sword.

Waiting for the mouth to open with mad laughter.

'Damned strangest armour I've ever seen.'

Seren blinked. 'What?'

'But he was good, with that sword. Fast. In another five years he'd have had the experience to have made him deadly. Enough to give anyone trouble. Shimmer, Blues, maybe even Skinner. But that armour! A damned fortune, right there for the taking. If we'd the time.'

'What?'

'That Tiste Edur, lass.'

'Tiste Edur?'

'Never mind. There they are.'

Ahead, crouched at the dead end of an alley, six figures. Two women, four men. All in crimson surcoats. Weapons out. Blood on the blades. One, more lightly armoured than the others and holding what looked to be some sort of diadem in his left hand, stepped forward.

And said something in a language Seren had never heard before.

Iron Bars replied in an impatient growl. He drew Seren closer as the man who'd spoken began gesturing. The air seemed to shimmer all round them.

'Corlo's opening the warren, lass. We're going through, and if we're lucky we won't run into anything in there. No telling how far we can get. Far enough, I hope.'

'Where?' she asked. 'Where are we going?'

A murky wall of blackness yawned where the alley's blank wall had been.

'Letheras, Acquitor. We got a ship awaiting us, remember?'

Strangest armour I've ever seen.

A damned fortune.

'Is he dead?'

'Who?'

'Is he dead? Did you kill him? That Tiste Edur!'

'No choice, lass. He was slowing us up and more were coming.'

Oh, no.

Vomit spilling out onto the sand.

At least, Withal mused, the shrieks had stopped. He waited, seated on grass just above the beach, while the young Edur, on his hands and knees, head hanging down, shuddered and convulsed, coughed and spat.

Off to one side, two of the Nachts, Rind and Pule, were fighting over a piece of driftwood that was falling apart with their efforts. Their games of destruction had become obsessive of late, leading the Meckros
weponsmithe to wonder if they were in fact miming a truth on his behalf. Or the isolation was driving them insane.

Another kind of truth, that one.

He despised religion. Set no gods in his path. Ascendants were worse than rabid beasts. It was enough that mortals were capable of appalling evil; he wanted nothing to do with their immortal, immeasurably more powerful counterparts.

And this broken god in his squalid tent, his eternal pain and the numbing smoke of the seeds he scattered onto the brazier before him, it was all of a piece to Withal. Suffering made manifest, consumed by the desire to spread the misery of its own existence into the world, into all the worlds. Misery and false escape, pain and mindless surrender. All of apiece.

On this small island, amidst this empty sea, Withal was lost. Within himself, among a host of faces that were all his own, he was losing the capacity to recognize any of them. Thought and self was reduced, formless and untethered. Wandering amidst a stranger's memories, whilst the world beyond unravelled.

Nest building.

Frenzied destruction.

Fanged mouth agape in silent, convulsive laughter.

Three jesters repeating the same performance again and again. What did it mean? What obvious lesson was being shown him that he was too blind, too thick, to understand?

The Edur lad was done, nothing left in his stomach. He lifted his head, eyes stripped naked to the bones of pain and horror. 'No,' he whispered.

Withal looked away, squinted along the strand.

'No more ... please.'

'Never much in the way of sunsets here,' Withal mused. 'Or sunrises, for that matter.'

'You don't know what it's like!'

The Edur's scream trailed away. 'The nests are getting more elaborate,' Withal said. 'I think he's striving for a particular shape. Sloped walls, a triangular entrance. Then Mape wrecks it. What am I to take from all that?'

'He can keep his damned sword. I'm not going. Over there. I'm not going over there and don't try to make me.'

'I have nothing to do. Nothing.'

Rhulad crawled towards him. 'You made that sword!' he said in an accusatory rasp.

'Fire, hammer, anvil and quenching. I've made more swords than I can count. Just iron and sweat. They were broken blades, I think. Those black shards. From some kind of narrow-bladed, overlong knife. Two of them, black and brittle. Just pieces, really. I wonder where he collected them from?'

'Everything breaks,' Rhulad said.

Withal glanced over. 'Aye, lad. Everything breaks.'

'You could do it.'

'Do what?'

'Break that sword.'
'No. I can't.'

'Everything breaks!'

'Including people, lad.'

'That's not good enough.'

Withal shrugged. 'I don't remember much of anything any more. I think he's stealing my mind. He says he's my god. All I need to do is worship him, he says. And everything will come clear. So tell me, Rhulad Sengar, is it all clear to you?'

'This evil – it's of your making!'

'Is it? Maybe you're right. I accepted his bargain. But he lied, you see. He said he'd set me free, once I made the sword. He lies, Rhulad. That much I know. I know that now. This god lies.'

'I have power. I am emperor. I've taken a wife. We are at war and Lether shall fall.'

Withal gestured inland. 'And he's waiting for you.'

'They're frightened of me.'

'Fear breeds its own loyalty, lad. They'll follow. They're waiting too, right now.'

Rhulad clawed at his face, shuddered. 'He killed me. That man – not a Letherii, not a Letherii at all. He killed us. Seven of my brothers. And me. He was so ... fast. It seemed he barely moved, and my kin were falling, dying.'

'Next time will be harder. You'll be harder. It won't be as easy to find someone to kill you, next time. And the time after that. Do you understand that, lad? It's the essence of that mangled god who's waiting for you.'

'Who is he?'

'The god? A miserable little shit, Rhulad. Who has your soul in his hands.'

'Father Shadow has abandoned us.'

'Father Shadow is dead. Or as good as.'

'How do you know?'

'Because if he wasn't, he'd have never let the Crippled God steal you. You and your people. He'd have come marching ashore ...' Withal fell silent.

And that, he realized, was what he was coming to. A blood-soaked truth.

He hated religion, hated the gods. And he was alone.

'I will kill him. With the sword.'

'Fool. There's nothing on this island that he doesn't hear, doesn't see, doesn't know.'

Except, maybe, what's in my mind now. And, even if he knew, how could he stop me? No, he doesn't know. I must believe that. After all, if he did, he'd kill me. Right now, he'd kill me.

Rhulad climbed to his feet. 'I'm ready for him.'

'Are you?'

'Yes.'

Withal sighed. He glanced over at the two Nachts. Their contested driftwood was a scattering of splinters
lying between them. Both creatures were staring down at it, bemused, poking fingers through the mess. The Meckros rose. 'All right then, lad, let's go.'

She was behind the black glass, within a tunnel of translucent obsidian, and there were no ghosts.

'Kurald Galain,' Corlo said in a whisper, casting a glance back at them over one shoulder. 'Unexpected. It's a rotten conquest. That, or the Edur don't even know it, don't even know what they're using.'

The air stank of death. Withered flesh, the breath of a crypt. The black stone beneath their feet was greasy and uncertain. Overhead, the ceiling was uneven, barely a hand's width higher than Iron Bars, who was the tallest among the group.

'It's a damned rats' maze,' the mage continued, pausing at a branching.

'Just take us south,' Iron Bars said in a low growl.

'Fine, but which way is that?'

The soldiers crowded round, muttering and cursing in their strange language.

Corlo faced Seren, his expression strangely taut. 'Any suggestions, Acquitor?'

'What?'

The mage said something in their native tongue to Iron Bars, who scowled and replied, 'That's enough, all of you. In Letherii. Since when was rudeness in the creed of the Crimson Guard? Acquitor, this is the Hold of Darkness—'

'There is no Hold of Darkness.'

'Well, I'm trying to say it in a way that makes sense to you.'

'All right.'

Corlo said, 'But, you see, Acquitor, it shouldn't be.'

She simply looked at him in the gloom.

The mage rubbed the back of his neck, and she saw the hand come away glistening with sweat. 'These are Tiste Edur, right? Not Tiste Andii. The Hold of Darkness, that's Tiste Andii. The Edur, they were from the, uh, Hold of Shadow. So, it was natural, you see, to expect that the warren would be Kurald Emurlahn. But it isn't. It's Kurald Galain, only it's breached. Over-run. Thick with spirits – Tiste Andii spirits—'

'They're not here,' she said. 'I've seen them. Those spirits. They're not here.'

'They are, Acquitor. I'm just keeping them away. For now ...'

'But it's proving difficult.'

The mage nodded reluctantly.

'And you're lost.'

Another nod.

She tried to think, cut through the numbness – which seemed to be the only thing keeping away the pain of her battered flesh. 'You said the spirits are not Edur.'

'That's right. Tiste Andii.'

'What is the relationship between the two? Are they allied?'
Corlo's eyes narrowed. 'Allied?'

'Those wraiths,' Iron Bars said.

The mage's gaze darted to his commander, then back again to Seren Pedac. 'Those wraiths are bound. Compelled to fight alongside the Edur. Are they Andii spirits? Hood's breath, this is starting to make sense. What else would they be? Not Edur spirits, since no binding magic would be needed, would it?'

Iron Bars stepped in front of Seren. 'What are you suggesting?'

She remembered back to her only contact with the spirits, their hunger. 'Mage Corlo, you say you're keeping them away. Are they trying to attack us?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Let one through. Maybe we can talk to it, maybe we can get help.'

'Why would it be interested in helping us?'

'Make a bargain.'

'With what?'

She shrugged. 'Think of something.'

He muttered a string of foreign words that she guessed were curses.

'Let one through,' Iron Bars said.

More curses, then Corlo walked a few steps ahead to clear some space. 'Ready weapons,' he said. 'In case it ain't interested in talking.'

A moment later, the gloom in front of the mage wavered, and something black spread outward like spilled ink. A figure emerged, halting, uncertain.

A woman, tall as an Edur but midnight-skinned, a reddish glint to her long, unbound hair. Green eyes, tilted and large, a face softer and rounder than Seren would have expected given her height and long limbs. She was wearing a leather harness and leggings, and on her shoulders rode the skin of some white-furred beast. She was unarmed.

Her eyes hardened. She spoke, and in her words Seren heard a resemblance to Edur.

'I hate it when that happens,' Corlo said.

Seren tried Edur. 'Hello. We apologize for intruding on your world. We do not intend to stay long.'

The woman's expression did not change. 'The Betrayers never do.'

'I may speak in the language of the Edur, but they are no allies of ours. Perhaps in that, we share something.'

'I was among the first to die in the war,' the woman said, 'and so not at the hands of an Edur. They cannot take me, cannot force me to fight for them. I and those like me are beyond their grasp.'

'Yet your spirit remains trapped,' Seren said. 'Here, in this place.'

'What do you want?'

Seren turned to Iron Bars. 'She asks what we want of her.'

'Corlo?'

The mage shrugged, then said, 'We need to escape the influence of the Edur. We need to get beyond their
reach. Then to return to our world.'

Seren relayed Corlo's statements to the woman.

'You are mortal,' she replied. 'You can pass through when we cannot.'

'Can you guide us?'

'And what is to be my reward for this service?'

'What do you seek?'

She considered, then shook her head. 'No. An unfair bargain. My service is not worth the payment I would ask. You require a guide to lead you to the border's edge. I will not deceive. It is not far. You would find it yourselves before too long.'

Seren translated the exchange for the Crimson Guardsmen, then added, 'This is odd ...'

Iron Bars smiled. 'An honest broker?'

She nodded wryly. 'I am Letherii, after all. Honesty makes me suspicious.'

'Ask her what she would have us do for her,' Iron Bars said.

Seren Pedac did, and the woman held up her right hand, and in it was a small object, encrusted and corroded and unrecognizable. 'The K'Chain Che'Malle counter-attack drove a number of us down to the shoreline, then into the waves. I am a poor fighter. I died on that sea's foaming edge, and my corpse rolled out, drawn by the tide, along the muddy sands, where the mud swallowed it.' She looked down at the object in her palm. 'This was a ring I wore. Returned to me by a wraith – many wraiths have done this for those of us beyond the reach of the Edur. I would ask that you return me to my bones, to what little of me remains. So that I can find oblivion. But this is too vast a gift, for offering you so little—'

'How would we go about doing as you ask?'

'I would join with the substance of this ring. You would see me no more. And you would need to travel to the shoreline, then cast this into the sea.'

'That does not seem difficult.'

'Perhaps it isn't. The inequity lies in the exchange of values.'

Seren shook her head. 'We see no inequity. Our desire is of equal value as far as we are concerned. We accept your bargain.'

'How do I know you will not betray me?'

The Letherii turned to Iron Bars. 'She doesn't trust us.'

The man strode to halt directly before the Tiste Andii woman. 'Acquitor, tell her I am an Avowed, of the Crimson Guard. If she would, she can seek the meaning of that. By laying her hand on my chest. Tell her I shall honour our pact.'

'I've not told you what it is yet. She wants us to throw the thing she's holding into the sea.'

"That's it?"

'Doing so will end her existence. Which seems to be what she wants.'

'Tell her to seek the cast of my soul.'

'Very well.'
The suspicious look in the woman's eyes grew more pronounced, but she stepped forward and set her left hand on the man's chest.

The hand flinched away and the woman staggered back a step, shock, then horror, writ on her face. 'How – how could you do – why?'

Seren said, 'Not the response you sought, I think, Iron Bars. She is ... appalled.'

'That is of no concern,' the man replied. 'Does she accept my word?'

The woman straightened, then, to Seren's question, she nodded and said, 'I cannot do otherwise. But ... I had forgotten ... this feeling.'

'What feeling?'

'Sorrow.'

'Iron Bars,' Seren said, 'whatever this "Avowed" means, she is overwhelmed with ... pity.'

'Yes well,' he said, turning away, 'we all make mistakes.'

The woman said, 'I will lead you now.'

'What is your name?'

'Sandalath Drukorlat.'

'Thank you, Sandalath. It grieves me to know that our gift to you is oblivion.'

She shrugged. 'Those who I once loved and who loved me believe I am gone in truth. There is no need for grief.'

No need for grief. Where, then, does the pity lie?

'Mape lay on the knoll like something dead, but the Nacht's head slowly turned as Withal and Rhulad strode into view. She had stolen a hammer from the smithy some time back, to better facilitate her destruction of Pule's nests, and now carried it with her everywhere. Withal watched askance as the gnarled, black-skinned creature lifted the hammer into view, eyes still fixed on him and the Tiste Edur, as if contemplating murder.

Of the three Nachts, Mape made him the most nervous. Too much intelligence glittered in her small black eyes, too often she watched with something like a smile on her apish face. And the strength the creatures had displayed was sufficient to make any man worried. He knew Mape could tear his arms from his shoulders, were she so inclined.

Perhaps the Crippled God had bound them, as demons could be bound, and it was this and this alone that kept the beasts from Withal's throat. An unpleasant notion.

'What's to stop me,' Rhulad asked in a growl, 'from driving the sword right through his scrawny chest?'

'Do not ask that question of me, Edur. Only the Crippled God can answer it. But I don't think it could ever be that easy. He's a clever bastard, and there in that tent his power is probably absolute.'

'The vastness of his realm,' Rhulad said, sneering.

Yes. Now why do those words, said in that way, interest me?

The ragged canvas shelter was directly ahead, smoke drifting from the side that had been drawn open. As they approached, the air grew hotter, drier, the grasses withered and bleached underfoot. The earth seemed strangely blighted.
They came opposite the entrance. Within, the god's huddled form in the gloom. Tendrils of smoke rising from the brazier.

A cough, then, 'Such anger. Unreasonable, I think, given the efficacy of my gift.'

'I don't want to go back,' Rhulad said. 'Leave me here. Choose someone else.'

'Unwitting servants to our cause appear ... from unexpected sources. Imagine, an Avowed of the Crimson Guard. Be glad it was not Skinner, or indeed Cowl. They would have taken more notice of you, and that would not have been a good thing. We're not yet ready for that.' A hacking cough. 'Not yet ready.'

'I'm not going back.'

'You detest the flesh given you. I understand. But, Rhulad Sengar, the gold is your payment. For the power you seek.'

'I want nothing more of that power.'

'But you do,' the Crippled God said, clearly amused. 'Consider the rewards already reaped. The throne of the Tiste Edur, the woman after whom you lusted for years – now in your possession, to do with as you please. Your brothers, bowing one and all before you. And a burgeoning prowess with the sword—'

'It's not mine, though, is it? It is all I can do to hold on! The skill does not belong to me – and all can see that! I have earned nothing!'

'And what value is all that pride you seek, Rhulad Sengar? You mortals baffle me. It is a fool's curse, to measure oneself in endless dissatisfaction. It is not for me to guide you in the rule of your empire. That task belongs to you and you alone. There, make that your place of pride. Besides, has not your strength grown? You have muscles now surpassing your brother Fear's. Cease your whimpering, Edur.'

'You are using me!'

The Crippled God laughed. 'And Scabandari Bloodeye did not? Oh, I know the tale now. All of it. The seas whisper old truths, Rhulad Sengar. Revered Father Shadow, oh, such an absurd conceit. Murderer, knife-wielder, betrayer—'

'Lies!'

'—who then led you into your own betrayal. Of your once-allies, the Tiste Andii. You fell upon them at Scabandari's command. You killed those who had fought alongside you. That is the legacy of the Tiste Edur, Rhulad Sengar. Ask Hannan Mosag. He knows. Ask your brother, Fear. Your mother – the women know. Their memory has been far less ... selective.'

'No more of this,' the Edur pleaded, clawing at his face. 'You would poison me with dishonour. That is your purpose ... for all you say.'

'Perhaps what I offer,' the Crippled God murmured, 'is absolution. The opportunity to make amends. It is within you, Rhulad Sengar. The power is yours to shape as you will. The empire shall cast your reflection, no-one else's. Will you flee from that? If that is your choice, then indeed I shall be forced to choose another. One who will prove, perhaps, less honourable.'

The sword clattered at Rhulad's feet.

'Choose.'

Withal watched, saw the Edur's expression change.

With a scream, Rhulad snatched up the weapon and lunged—

—and was gone.
Rasping laughter. ‘There is so little, Withal, that surprises me any more.’

Disgusted, the Meckros turned away.

‘A moment, Withal. I see your weariness, your displeasure. What is it that plagues you so? That is what I ask myself.’

‘The lad doesn't deserve it—’

‘Oh, but he does. They all do.’

‘Aye,’ Withal said, eyes level as he stared at the Crippled God, ‘that does seem to be the sole judgement you possess. But it’s hardly clean, is it?’

‘Careful. My gratitude for what you have done for me wears thin.’

‘Gratitude?’ Withal’s laugh was harsh. ‘You are thankful after compelling me into doing your bidding. That’s a good one. May you be as generous of thought after I force you into killing me.’ He studied the hooded figure.

‘I see your problem, you know. I see it now, and curse myself for having missed it before. You have no realm to command, as do other gods. So you sit there, alone, in your tent, and that is the extent of your realm, isn’t it? Broken flesh and foul, stifling air. Skin-thin walls and the heat the old and lame desire. Your world, and you alone in it, and the irony is, you cannot even command your own body.’

A wretched cough, then, ‘Spare me your sympathy, Meckros. I have given the problem of you considerable thought, and have found a solution, as you shall soon discover. When you do, think on what you have said to me. Now, go.’

‘You still don’t understand, do you? The more pain you deliver to others, god, the more shall be visited upon you. You sow your own misery, and because of that whatever sympathy you might rightly receive is swept away.’ ‘I said go, Withal. Build yourself a nest. Mape’s waiting.’

They emerged onto a windswept sward with the crashing waves of the sea on their right and before them the delta of a broad river. On the river’s other side stood a walled city.

Seren Pedac studied the distant buildings, the tall, thin towers that seemed to lean seaward. ‘Old Katter,’ she said. ‘We’re thirty leagues south of Trate. How is that possible?”

‘Warrens,’ Corlo muttered, sagging until he sat on the ground. ‘Rotted. Septic, but still, a warren.’

The Acquitor made her way down to the beach. The sun was high and hot overhead. I must wash. Get clean. The sea...

Iron Bars followed, in one hand the encrusted object where the spirit of a Tiste Andii woman now resided.

She strode into the water, the foaming waves thrashing round her shins.

The Avowed flung the object past her – a small splash not far ahead.

Thighs, then hips.

Clean. Get clean.

To her chest. A wave rolled, lifted her from the bottom, spun and flung her towards the shore. She clawed herself round until she could push forward once again. Cold salty water rising over her face. Bright, sunlit, silty water, washing sight from her eyes. Water biting at scabbed wounds, stinging her broken lips, water filling her mouth and begging to be drawn inside.

Like this.

Hands grasped her, pulled her back. She fought, but could not break loose.
Her face swept by cold wind, eyes blinking in painful light. Coughing, weeping, she struggled, but the hands dragged her remorselessly onto the beach, flung her onto the sand. Then, as she tried to claw free, arms wrapped tight about her, pinning her own arms, and a voice gasped close to her ear, 'I know, lass. I know what it's about. But it ain't the way.'

Heaving, helpless sobs, now.

And he held her still.

'Heal her, Corlo.'

'I'm damn near done—'

'Now. And sleep. Make her sleep—'

No, you can't die. Not again. I have need of you.

So many layers, pressing down upon these indurative remnants, a moment of vast pressure, the thick, so thick skin tracing innumerable small deaths. And life was voice, not words, but sound, motion. Where all else was still, silent. Oblivion waited when the last echo faded.

Dying the first time should have been enough. This world was foreign, after all. The gate sealed, swept away. Her husband – if he still lived – was long past his grief. Her daughter, perhaps a mother herself by now, a grandmother. She had fed on draconic blood, there in the wake of Anomander. Somewhere, she persisted, and lived free of sorrow.

It had been important to think that way. Her only weapon against insanity.

No gifts in death but one.

But something held her back.

Something with a voice. These are restless seas indeed. I had not thought my questing would prove so ... easy. True, you are not human, but you will do. You will do.

These remnants, suddenly in motion, grating motion. Fragments, particles too small to see, drawing together. As if remembering to what they had once belonged. And, within the sea, within the silts, waited all that was needed. For flesh, for bone and blood. All these echoes, resurrected, finding shape. She looked on in horror.

Watched, as the body – so familiar, so strange – clawed its way upward through the silts. Silts that lightened, thinned, then burst into a plume that swirled in the currents. Arms reaching upward, a body heaving into view.

She hovered near, compelled to close, to enter, but knowing it was too soon.

Her body, which she had left so long ago. It was not right. Not fair.

Scrambling mindlessly along the sea bottom. Finned creatures darting in and out of sight, drawn to the stirred-up sediments, frightened away by the flailing figure. Multi-legged shapes scrabbling from its path.

A strange blurring, passed through, and then sunlight glittered close overhead. Hands broke the surface, firm sand underfoot, sloping upward.

Face in the air.

And she swept forward, plunged into the body, raced like fire within muscle and bone.

Sensations. Cold, a wind, the smell of salt and a shore-line's decay.

Mother Dark, I am ... alive.
The voice of return came not in laughter, but in screams.

All had gathered as word of the emperor's death spread. The city was taken, but Rhulad Sengar had been killed. Neck snapped like a sapling. His body lay where it fell, with the slave Udinaas standing guard, a macabre sentinel who did not acknowledge anyone, but simply stared down at the coin-clad corpse.


All witness to the body's sudden convulsions, its piercing screams. For a ghastly moment, Rhulad's neck remained broken, rocking his head in impossible angles as he staggered to his feet. Then the bone mended, and the head righted itself, sudden light in the hooded eyes.

More screams, from Letherii now. Figures fleeing.

Rhulad's ragged shrieks died and he stood, wavering, the sword trembling in his hands.

Udinaas spoke. 'Emperor, Trate is yours.'

A sudden spasm, then Rhulad seemed to see the others for the first time. 'Hannan Mosag, settle the garrison. The rest of the army shall camp outside the city. Send word to your K'risnan with the fleet: they are to make for Old Katter.'

The Warlock King stepped close and said in a low voice, 'It is true, then. You cannot die.'

Rhulad flinched. 'I die, Hannan Mosag. It is all I know, dying. Leave me now. Udinaas.'

'Emperor.'

'I need – find – I am ...'

'Your tent awaits you and Mayen,' the slave said.

'Yes.'

Midik Buhn spoke, 'Emperor, I shall lead your escort.'

His expression confused, Rhulad looked down at his body, the smeared, crusted coins, the spattered furs.

'Yes, brother Midik. An escort.'

'And we shall find the one who ... did this, sire ... to you.'

Rhulad's eyes flashed. 'He cannot be defeated. We are helpless before him. He lies...'

Midik was frowning. He glanced at Udinaas.

'Emperor,' the slave said, 'he meant the one who killed you and your kin. Here in this street.'

Clawing at his face, Rhulad turned away. 'Of course. He wore ... crimson.'

Udinaas said to Midik, 'I will give you a detailed description.'

A sharp nod. 'Yes. The city will be searched.'

*But he's gone, you fool. No, I don't know how I know. Still, the man's gone. With Seren Pedac. Of course.*

'Udinaas!' A desperate gasp.

'I am here, Emperor.'

'Take me out of this place!'
It was known, now, and soon the Ceda would learn of it. But would he understand? How could he? It was impossible, insane.

He can do nothing. Will he realize this?

The warrior in gold trailed the slave, step by step, through the fallen city, Mayen and Feather Witch in their wake. Midik Buhn and a dozen warriors flanked them all, weapons at the ready. The passage was uncontested.

Withal sat on a bench in his smithy. Plain walls, stone and plaster, the forge cold and filled with ash. Paved floor, the small workshop three-walled, the open side facing onto a fenced compound where stood a cut-stone-rimmed well, a quenching trough, firewood and a heap of tailings and slag. A hut on the opposite side housed his cot and nothing else.

The extent of his world. Mocking reminder of his profession, the purpose behind living.


He slowly rose, bemused. A boat? A raft? A damned log I could ride out with the tide? He made his way outside.

And heard the Nachts, chattering excitedly down on the strand.

Withal walked to the verge, and stood, looking down.

A woman was staggering from the water. Tall, black-skinned, naked, long red hair.

And the Meckros turned round, strode away.

'You bastard—'

The Crippled God replied in mock consternation, Is this not what you want? Is she too tall for you? Her eyes too strange? Withal, I do not understand...

'How could you have done this? Take possession, you said. It's all you know, isn't it? Possession. Things to be used. People. Lives.'

She needs your help, Withal. She is lost, alarmed, by the Nachts. Slow to recall her flesh.

'Later. Leave me alone, now. Leave us both alone.'

A soft laugh, then a cough. As you wish. Disappointing, this lack of gratitude.

'Go to the Abyss.'

No reply.

Withal entered the hut, stood facing the cot for a time, until he was certain that the Crippled God was not lurking somewhere in his skull. Then he lowered himself to his knees and bowed his head.

He hated religion. Detested gods. But the nest was empty. The nest needed tearing apart. Rebuilding.

The Meckros had a host of gods for the choosing. But one was older than all the others, and that one belonged to the sea.

Withal began to pray.

In Mael's name.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

None had seen the like. Chorum’s Mill was a Marvel of invention. Wheels upon wheels, Granite and interlocking gears, axles and Spokes and rims of iron, a machine that climbed From that fast river three full levels and ground The finest flour Lether had ever seen – Some say it was the rain, the deluge that filled The water’s course through the mill’s stony toes. Some say it was the sheer complexity that was The cause of it all, the conceit of a mortal man’s Vision. Some say it was the Errant’s nudge, fickle And wayward that voiced the sudden roar that dawn, The explosions of stone and the shrieks of iron, And the vast wheels breaking free and bursting Through the thick walls, and the washing women Downstream the foam at their thighs looked up To see their granite doom rolling down – Not a wrinkle left, not a stain survived, and old Misker, perched on Ribble the Mule, well the mule Knew its place as it bolted and leapt head-first Down the well, but poor old Misker hugged the Draw pail on its rope and so swung clear, to Skin his knees on the round’s cobbles and swear Loud, the boisterous breath preceding the fateful Descent of toothy death the gear wheel, tall as any Man but far taller than Misker (even perched on His mule) and that would not be hard once it was Done with him, why the rat – oh, did I forget to Mention the rat?

Excerpt from The Rat’s Tail (the cause of it all)
Chant Prip

Stumbling in the gloom, the drunk had fallen into the canal. Tehol had mostly lost sight of him from his position at the edge of the roof, but he could hear splashing and curses, and the scrabbling against the rings set in the stone wall.

Sighing, Tehol glanced over at the nameless guard Brys had sent. Or one of them, at least. The three brothers looked pretty much identical, and none had given their names. Nothing outward or obvious to impress or inspire fear. And, by the unwavering cast of their lipless, eye-slitted expressions, sadly unqualified as welcome company.

‘Can your friends tell you apart?’ Tehol enquired, then frowned. ‘What a strange question to ask of a man. But you must be used to strange questions, since people will assume you were somewhere when you weren’t, or, rather, not you, but the other yous, each of whom could be anywhere. It now occurs to me that saying nothing is a fine method for dealing with such confusion, to which each of you have agreed to as the proper response, unless you are the same amongst yourselves, in which case it was a silent agreement. Always the best kind.’

The drunk, far below, was climbing from the canal, swearing in more languages than Tehol believed existed. ‘Will you listen to that? Atrocious. To hear such no doubt foul words uttered with such vehemence – hold on, that’s no drunk, that’s my manservant!’ Tehol waved and shouted, ‘Bugg! What are you doing down there? Is this what I pay you for?’

The sodden manservant was looking upward, and he yelled something back that Tehol could not make out. ‘What? What did you say?’

‘You – don’t – pay – me!’

‘Oh, tell everyone, why don’t you!’

Tehol watched as Bugg made his way to the bridge and crossed, then disappeared from view behind the nearby buildings. ‘How embarrassing. Time’s come for a serious talk with dear old Bugg.’

Sounds from below, more cursing. Then creaking from the ladder.

Bugg’s mud-smeared head and face rose into view.

‘Now,’ Tehol said, hands on hips, ‘I’m sure I sent you off to do something important, and what do you do? Go falling into the canal. Was that on the list of tasks? I think not.’
'Are you berating me, master?'

'Yes. What did you think?'

'More effective, I believe, had you indeed sent me off to do something important. As it was, I was on a stroll, mesmerized by moonlight—'

'Don't step there! Back! Back!'

Alarmed, Bugg froze, then edged away.

'You nearly crushed Ezgara! And could he have got out of the way? I think not!' Tehol moved closer and knelt beside the insect making its slow way across the roof's uneven surface. 'Oh, look, you startled it!'

'How can you tell?' Bugg asked.

'Well, it's reversed direction, hasn't it? That must be startling, I would imagine.'

'You know, master, it was a curio – I didn't think you would make it a pet.'

'That's because you're devoid of sentiment, Bugg. Whereas Ezgara here is doubly—'

'Ovoid?'

'Charmingly so.' Tehol glanced over at the guard, who was staring back at him as was his wont. 'And this man agrees. Or, if not him, then his brothers. Why, one let Ezgara crawl all over his face, and he didn't even blink!'

'How did Ezgara manage to get onto his face, master?'

'And down the other's jerkin, not a flinch. These are warm-hearted men, Bugg, look well upon them and learn.'

'I shall, master.'

'Now, did you enjoy your swim?'

'Not particularly.'

'A misstep, you say?'

'I thought I heard someone whisper my name—'

'Shurq Elalle?'

'No.'


'No.'

'Might you have been imagining things?'

'Quite possibly. For example, I believe I am being followed by rats.'

'You probably are, Bugg. Maybe one of them whispered your name.'

'An unpleasant notion, master.'

'Yes it is. Do you think it pleases me that my manservant consorts with rats?'

'Would you rather go hungry?' Bugg reached under his shirt.
'You haven't!'

'No, it's cat,' he said, withdrawing a small, skinned, headless and pawless carcass. 'Canal flavoured, alas.'

'Another gift from Rucket?'

'No, oddly enough. The canal.'

'Ugh.'

'Smells fresh enough—'

'What's that wire trailing from it?'

The manservant lifted the carcass higher, then took the dangling wire between two fingers and followed it back until it vanished in the flesh. He tugged, then grunted.

'What?' Tehol asked.

'The wire leads to a large, barbed hook.'

'Oh.'

'And the wire's snapped at this end – I thought something broke my fall.' He tore a small sliver of meat from one of the cat's legs, broke it in two, then placed one piece at each end of the insect named Ezgara. It settled to feed. 'Anyway, a quick rinse and we're ahead by two, if not three meals. Quite a run of fortune, master, of late.'

'Yes,' Tehol mused. 'Now I'm nervous. So, have you any news to tell me?'

'Do you realize, master, that Gerun Eberict would have had to kill on average between ten and fifteen people a day in order to achieve his annual dividend? How does he find the time to do anything else?'

'Perhaps he's recruited thugs sharing his insane appetites.'

'Indeed. Anyway, Shurq has disappeared – both Harlest and Ublala are distraught—'

'Why Harlest?'

'He had only Ublala to whom he could show off his new fangs and talons, and Ublala was less than impressed, so much so that he pushed Harlest into the sarcophagus and sealed him in.'

'Poor Harlest.'

'He adjusted quickly enough,' said Bugg, 'and now contemplates his dramatic resurrection – whenever it occurs.'

'Disturbing news about Shurq Elalle.'

'Why?'

'It means she didn't change her mind. It means she's going to break into the Tolls Repository. Perhaps even this very night.'

'Bugg glanced over at the guard. 'Master ...'

'Oops, that was careless, wasn't it?' He rose and walked over. 'He hears all, it's true. My friend, we can at least agree on one thing, can't we?'

The eyes flickered as the man stared at Tehol.

'Any thief attempting the Repository is as good as dead, right?' He smiled, then swung back to face his manservant.
Bugg began removing his wet clothes. 'I believe I've caught a chill.'

'The canal is notoriously noxious—'

'No, from earlier, master. The Fifth Wing. I've managed to successfully shore up the foundations—'

'Already? Why, that's extraordinary.'

'It is, isn't it? In any case, it's chilly in those tunnels ... now.'

'Dare I ask?'

Bugg stood naked, eyes on the faint stars overhead. 'Best not, master.'

'And what of the Fourth Wing?'

'Well, that's where my crews are working at the moment. A week, perhaps ten days. There's an old drainage course beneath it. Rather than fight it, we're installing a fired-clay conduit—'

'A sewage pipe.'

'In the trade, it's a fired-clay conduit.'

'Sorry.'

'Which we'll then pack with gravel. I don't know why Grum didn't do that in the first place, but it's his loss and our gain.'

'Are you dry yet, Bugg? Please say you're dry. Look at our guard here, he's horrified. Speechless.'

'I can tell, and I apologize.'

'I don't think I've ever seen so many scars on one person,' Tehol said. 'What do you do in your spare time, Bugg, wrestle angry cacti?'

'I don't understand. Why would they have to be angry?'

'Wouldn't you be if you attacked you for no reason? Hey, that's a question I could ask our guard here, isn't it?'

'Only if he – or they – were similarly afflicted, master.'

'Good point. And he'd have to take his clothes off for us to find out.'

'Not likely.'

'No. Now, Bugg, here's my shirt. Put it on, and be thankful for the sacrifices I make on your behalf.'

'Thank you, master.'

'Good. Ready? It's time to go.'

'Where?'

'Familiar territory for you, or so I was surprised to discover. You are a man of many mysteries, Bugg. Occasional priest, healer, the Waiting Man, consoler with demons and worse. Were I not so self-centred, I'd be intrigued.'

'I am ever grateful for your self-centredness, master.'

'That's only right, Bugg. Now, presumably, our silent bodyguard will be accompanying us. Thus, we three. Marching purposefully off into the night. Shall we?'

Into the maze of shanties on the east side of Letheras. The night air was hot, redolent and turgid. Things
skittered through the heaps of rotting rubbish, wild dogs slunk through shadows in ill-tempered packs looking for trouble – threatening enough to cause the bodyguard to draw his sword. Sight of the bared blade was enough to send the beasts scampering.

Those few homeless indigents brave or desperate enough to risk the dangers of the alleys and streets had used rubbish to build barricades and hovels. Others had begged for space on the sagging roofs of creaky huts and slept fitfully or not at all. Tehol could feel countless pairs of eyes looking down upon them, tracking their passage deeper into the heart of the ghetto.

As they walked, Tehol spoke. ‘... the assumption is the foundation stone of Letherii society, perhaps all societies the world over. The notion of inequity, my friends. For from inequity derives the concept of value, whether measured by money or the countless other means of gauging human worth. Simply put, there resides in all of us the unchallenged belief that the poor and the starving are in some way deserving of their fate. In other words, there will always be poor people. A truism to grant structure to the continual task of comparison, the establishment through observation of not our mutual similarities, but our essential differences.

‘I know what you’re thinking, to which I have no choice but to challenge you both. Like this. Imagine walking down this street, doling out coins by the thousands. Until everyone here is in possession of vast wealth. A solution? No, you say, because among these suddenly rich folk there will be perhaps a majority who will prove wasteful, profligate and foolish, and before long they will be poor once again. Besides, if wealth were distributed in such a fashion, the coins themselves would lose all value – they would cease being useful. And without such utility, the entire social structure we love so dearly would collapse.

‘Ah, but to that I say, so what? There are other ways of measuring self-worth. To which you both heatedly reply: with no value applicable to labour, all sense of worth vanishes! And in answer to that I simply smile and shake my head. Labour and its product become the negotiable commodities. But wait, you object, then value sneaks in after all! Because a man who makes bricks cannot be equated with, say, a man who paints portraits. Material is inherently value-laden, on the basis of our need to assert comparison – but ah, was I not challenging the very assumption that one must proceed with such intricate structures of value?

‘And so you ask, what’s your point, Tehol? To which I reply with a shrug. Did I say my discourse was a valuable means of using this time? I did not. No, you assumed it was. Thus proving my point!’

‘I’m sorry, master,’ Bugg said, ‘but what was that point again?’

‘I forget. But we’ve arrived. Behold, gentlemen, the poor.’

They stood at the edge of an old market round, now a mass of squalid shelters seething with humanity. A few communal hearths smouldered. The area was ringed in rubbish – mostly dog and cat bones – which was crawling with rats. Children wandered in the dazed, lost fashion of the malnourished. Newborns lay swaddled and virtually unattended. Voices rose in arguments and somewhere on the opposite side was a fight of some sort. Mixed-bloods, Nerek, Faraed, Tarthenal, even the odd Fent. A few Letherii as well, escapees from Indebtedness.

Bugg looked on in silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, ‘Master, transporting them out to the Isles won’t solve anything.’

‘No?’

‘These are broken spirits.’

‘Beyond hope of recovery?’

‘Well, that depends on how paternalistic you intend to be, master. The rigours of past lifestyles are beyond these people. We’re a generation or more too late. They’ve not old skills to fall back on, and as a community this one is intrinsically flawed. It breeds violence and neglect and little else.’

‘I know what you’re saying, Bugg. You’re saying you’ve had better nights and the timing wasn’t good, not good at all. You’re miserable, you’ve got a chill, you should be in bed.’
‘Thank you, master. I was wondering myself.’

‘Your issue of paternalism has some merit, I admit,’ Tehol said, hands on hips as he studied the grubby shanty-town. ‘That is to say, you have a point. In any case, doom is about to sweep through this sad place. Lether is at war, Bugg. There will be ... recruitment drives.’

‘Press-ganging,’ the manservant said, nodding morosely.

‘Yes, all that malignant violence put to good use. Of course, such poor soldiers will be employed as fodder. A harsh solution to this perennial problem, admittedly, but one with long precedent.’

‘So, what have you planned, master?’

The challenge facing myself and the sharp minds of the Rat Catchers’ Guild, was, as you have observed, how does one reshape an entire society? How does one convert this impressive example of the instinct to survive into a communally positive force? Clearly, we needed to follow a well-established, highly successful social structure as our inspiration—'

‘Rats.’

‘Well done, Bugg. I knew I could count on you. Thus, we began with recognizing the need for a leader. Powerful, dynamic, charismatic, dangerous.’

‘A criminal mastermind with plenty of thugs to enforce his or her will.’

Tehol frowned. ‘Your choice of words disappoints me, Bugg.’

‘You?’

‘Me? Of course not. Well, not directly, that is. A truly successful leader is a reluctant leader. Not one whose every word is greeted with frenzied cheering either – after all, what happens to the mind of such a leader, after such scenes are repeated again and again? A growing certainty, a belief in one's own infallibility, and onward goes the march into disaster. No, Bugg, I won't have anyone kissing my feet—'

‘I'm relieved to hear that, master, since those feet have not known soap in a long, long time.’

‘The body eventually resumes its own natural cleansing mechanisms, Bugg.’

‘Like shedding?’

‘Exactly. In any case, I was speaking of leadership in a general sort of way—’

‘Who, master?’

‘Why, the Waiting Man, of course. Occasional priest, healer, consorter with demons ...’

‘That’s probably not such a good idea, master,’ Bugg said, rubbing his bristled jaw. ‘I am rather ... busy at the moment.’

‘A leader should be busy. Distracted. Preoccupied. Prepared to delegate.’

‘Master, I really don't think this is a good idea. Really.’

‘Perfectly reluctant, perfect! And look! You've been noticed! See those hopeful faces—’

‘That's hunger, master.’

‘For salvation! Word's gone out, you see. They're ready for you, Bugg. They've been waiting ...’

‘This is very bad, master.’

‘Your expression is perfect, Bugg. Sickly and wan with dismay, deeply troubled and nervous, yes indeed. I
‘Master—’

‘Go out among your flock, Bugg. Tell them – they’re leaving. Tomorrow night. All of them. A better place, a better life awaits them. Go on, Bugg.’

‘As long as no-one worships me,’ the manservant replied. ‘I don’t like being worshipped.’

‘Just stay fallible,’ Tehol said.

Bugg cast him a strange look, then he walked into the shanty-town.

‘Thank you for coming, Brys.’

Kuru Qan was sitting in the thickly padded chair near the wall opposite the library’s entrance. Polished lenses and cloth in his hands, cleaning one lens then the other, then repeating the gesture, again and again. His eyes were fixed on nothing visible to Brys.

‘More news from Trate, Ceda?’

‘Something, yes, but we will discuss that later. In any case, we must consider the city lost.’

‘Occupied.’

‘Yes. Another battle is imminent, at High Fort.’

‘The queen and the prince have withdrawn their forces, then? I understood they were seeking the pass.’

‘Too late. The Edur had already made crossing.’

‘Will you contribute to the defence?’ Brys asked, striding into the small room and settling down on the bench to the Ceda’s left.

‘No.’

Surprised, Brys said nothing. He had been in the company of the king and Unnutil Hebaz for most of the evening, studying the detected movements of the enemy armies, immersed in the painful exercise of trying to predict the nature of his brother Hull’s advice to the Edur emperor. Clearly, Hull had anticipated the preemptive attack on the villages. To Brys’s mind, the rabid display of greed from the camps of the queen and the prince had tipped their hand. Janall, Quillas and their investors had already begun dividing up the potential spoils, which made clear their desire for a quick war, one that devastated the Tiste Edur, and that meant catching them unawares. Janall’s march for the pass had indicated no change in her thinking. Yet now she had retreated.

The Tiste Edur had stolen the initiative. The appearance above High Fort, the surrender of Fent Reach and the fall of Trate indicated at least two enemy armies, as well as two fleets, all moving fast.

‘Ceda, have you learned anything more of the demon that entered Trate harbour?’

‘The danger is not singular, but plural,’ Kuru Qan said. ‘I see before me the Cedance, and have learned, to my horror, that it is ... incomplete.’

‘Incomplete? What do you mean?’

The Ceda continued cleaning the lenses in his hands. ‘I must needs conserve my power, until the appropriate time. The seas must be freed. It is as simple as that.’

Brys waited, then, when Kuru Qan said no more, he ventured, ‘Do you have a task for me, Ceda?’

‘I would counsel a withdrawal from High Fort, but the king would not agree to that, would he?’

‘No.’
Brys shook his head. 'Your assessment is accurate. Even a disaster would be seen to have ... benefits.'

'The elimination of his wife and son, yes. A tragic state of affairs, wouldn't you say, my young friend? The heart of the Cedance, I have come to realize, can be found in a systemic denial. And from that heart, all else is derived. Our very way of life and of seeing the world. We send soldiers to their deaths and how do we see those deaths? As glorious sacrifices. The enemy dead? As the victims of our honourable righteousness. Whilst in our cities, in the narrow, foul alleys, a life that ends is but tragic failure. What, then, is the denial whereof I speak?'

'Death.'

Kuru Qan placed the lenses once more before his eyes and peered at Brys. 'You see, then. I knew you would. Brys, there is no Hold of Death. Your task? Naught but keeping an old man company on this night.'

The King's Champion rubbed at his face. His eyes felt full of grit, and he was unaccountably chilled. He was, he realized, exhausted.

'Our manic accumulation of wealth,' Kuru Qan went on. 'Our headlong progress, as if motion was purpose and purpose inherently virtuous. Our lack of compassion, which we called being realistic. The extremity of our judgements, our self-righteousness – all a flight from death, Brys. All a vast denial smothered in semantics and euphemisms. Bravery and sacrifice, pathos and failure, as if life is a contest to be won or lost. As if death is the arbiter of meaning, the moment of final judgement, and above all else judgement is a thing to be delivered, not delivered unto.'

'Would you rather we worship death, Ceda?'

'Equally pointless. One needs no faith to die, one dies none the less. I spoke of systemic denial, and it is indeed and in every way systemic. The very fabric of our world, here in Lether and perhaps elsewhere, has been twisted round that... absence. There should be a Hold of Death, do you understand? Relevant? The only relevance. It must have existed, once. Perhaps even a god, some ghastly skeleton on a throne of bones, a spin and dance of cold-legged flies for a crown. Yet here we are, and we have given it no face, no shape, no position in our elaborate scheme of existence.'

'Perhaps because it is the very opposite of existence—'

'But it isn't, Brys, it isn't. Errant take us, death is all around us. We stride over it, we breathe it, we soak its essence into our lungs, our blood. We feed upon it daily. We thrive in the midst of decay and dissolution.'

Brys studied the Ceda. 'It occurs to me,' he said slowly, 'that life itself is a celebration of denial. The denial of which you speak, Kuru Qan. Our flight – well, to flee is to lift oneself clear of the bones, the ashes, the fallen away.'

'Flee – to where?'

'Granted. Nowhere but elsewhere. I wonder if what you've said is being manifested, in creatures such as Kettle and that thief, Shurq Elalle—'

The Ceda's head snapped up, eyes suddenly alert behind the thick lenses. 'I'm sorry? What did you say?'

'Well, I was speaking of those who are denied death in truth, Ceda. The child, Kettle—'

'The guardian of the Azath? She is undead?'

'Yes. I'm sure I mentioned—'

Kuru Qan was on his feet. 'Are you certain of this? Brys Beddict, she is an undead?'

'She is. But I don't understand—'

'Stand up, Brys. We're going. Now.'

'It's all the fallen people,' Kettle said. 'They want answers. They won't go until they get answers.'
Shurq Elalle kicked away an insect that had crawled onto her boot. 'Answers about what?'

'Why they died.'

'There are no answers,' Shurq replied. 'It's what people do. Die. They die. They always die.'

'We didn't.'

'Yes we did.'

'Well, we didn't go away.'

'From the sound of it, Kettle, neither did they.'

'That's true. I wonder why I didn't think of that.'

'Because you were about ten years old when you died.'

'Well, what do I do now?'

Shurq studied the overgrown, ground-heaved yard. 'You gave me the idea, and that's why I am here. You said the dead were gathering. Gathering round this place, hovering just outside the walls. Can you talk to them?'

'Why would I want to? They never say anything interesting.'

'But you could if you had to.'

Kettle shrugged. 'I guess.'

'Good. Ask for volunteers.'

'For what?'

'I want them to come with me. On an outing. Tonight and again tomorrow night.'

'Why would they want to, Mother?'

'Tell them they will see more gold than they can imagine. They will learn secrets few in this kingdom possess. Tell them I am going to lead them on a tour of the Tolls Repository and the royal vaults. Tell them, the time's come to have fun. Terrifying the living.'

'Why would ghosts want to scare the living?'

'I know, it's a strange notion, but I predict they will discover they're very good at it. Further, I predict they will enjoy the endeavour.'

'But, how will they do that? They're ghosts. The living can't even see them.'

Shurq Elalle swung about and stared out on the milling crowds. 'Kettle, they look pretty solid to us, don't they?'

'But we're dead—'

'Then why couldn't we see them a week ago? They were just flits, on the edge of our vision back then, weren't they? If that, even. So what has changed? Where has their power come from? Why is it growing?'

'I don't know.'

Shurq smiled. 'I do.'

Kettle walked over to one of the low walls.

The thief watched her speaking to the ghosts. I wonder if she realizes. I wonder if she knows she's more alive
now than dead. I wonder if she knows she's coming back to life.

After a moment the child returned, pulling her fingers through her hair to loosen the snarls. 'You are smart, Mother,' she said. 'I'm glad you're my mother and that's why.'

'I have some volunteers?'

'They'll all go. They want to see the gold. They want to scare people.'

'I need some who can read and some who can count.'

'That's okay. So tell me, Mother, why are they growing more powerful? What's changed?'

Shurq looked back at the square, squalid tower of stone. 'That, Kettle.'

'The Azath?'

'Yes.'

'Oh,' the child said. 'I understand now. It died.'

'Yes,' Shurq said, nodding. 'It died.'

After Mother had left, thousands of ghosts following, Kettle walked to the tower's entrance. She studied the flagstones set before the door, then selected one and knelt before it. Her fingernails broke prying it loose, and she was surprised at the sting of pain and the welling of blood.

She had not told Shurq how hard it had been speaking to those ghosts. Their endless voices had been fading the last day or two, as if she was becoming deaf. Although other sounds – the wind, the dead leaves scurrying about, the crunch and munch of the insects in the yard, and the sounds of the city itself – all were as clear as ever. Something was happening to her. That beating vibration in her chest had quickened. Five, six eights a day, now. The places where her skin had broken long ago were closing up with new, pink skin, and earlier today she had been thirsty. It had taken some time to realize – to remember, perhaps – what thirst was, what it signified, but the stagnant water she had found at the base of one of the pits in the yard had tasted wonderful. So many things were changing, it seemed, confusing her.

She dragged the flagstone to one side, then sat beside it. She wiped the dust from its blank, polished surface. There were funny patterns in it. Shells, the imprint of plants – reeds with their onion-like root-balls – and the pebbled impressions of coral. Tiny bones. Someone had done a lot of carving to make such a pretty scene of dead things.

She looked down the path, through the gate and onto the street. Strange, to see it so empty now. But, she knew, it wouldn't be for long.

And so she waited.

The bleeding from her fingertips had stopped by the time she heard the footfalls approaching. She looked up, then smiled upon seeing Uncle Brys and the old man with the glass eyes – the one she had never seen before yet knew anyway.

They saw her, and Brys strode through the gate, the old man following behind with nervous, tentative steps.

'Hello, Uncle,' Kettle said.

'Kettle. You are looking ... better. I have brought a guest, Ceda Kuru Qan.'

'Yes, the one who's always looking at me but not seeing me, but looking anyway.'

'I wasn't aware of that,' the Ceda said.

'Not like you're doing now,' Kettle said. 'Not when you have those things in front of your eyes.'
'You mean, when I look upon the Cedance? Is that when I see you without seeing you?'

She nodded.

'The Hold of the Azath is gone, child, yet here you remain. You were its guardian when it was alive – when you were not. And now, you are its guardian still? When it is dead and you are not?'

'I'm not dead?'

'Not quite. The heart placed within you. Once frozen ... now ... thawing. I do not understand its power, and, I admit, it frightens me.'

'I have a friend who said he'll destroy me if he has to,' Kettle said, smiling. 'But he says he probably won't have to.'

'Why not?'

'He says the heart won't wake up. Not completely. That's why the Nameless One took my body.'

She watched the old man's mouth moving, but no words came forth. At his side, Uncle Brys stepped closer, concern on his face.

'Ceda? Are you all right?'

'Nameless One?' The old man was shivering. 'This place – this is the Hold of Death, isn't it? It's become the Hold of Death.'

Kettle reached over and picked up the flagstone. It was as heavy as a corpse, so she was used to the weight. 'This is for your Cedance, for where you look when you don't see me.'

'A tile.' Kuru Qan looked away as she set it down in front of him.

'Ceda,' Uncle Brys said, 'I do not understand. What has happened here?'

'Our history ... so much is proving untrue. The Nameless Ones were of the First Empire. A cult. It was expunged. Eliminated. It cannot have survived, but it seems to have done just that. It seems to have outlived the First Empire itself.'

'Are they some sort of death cult?'

'No. They were servants of the Azath.'

'Then why,' Brys asked, 'do they appear to have been overseeing the death of this Azath tower?'

Kuru Qan shook his head. 'Unless they saw it as inevitable. And so they acted in order to counter those within the barrows who would escape once the tower died. The manifestation of a Hold of Death may turn out to have nothing to do with them.'

'Then why is she still the guardian?'

'She may not be, Brys. She waits in order to deal with those who are about to escape the grounds.' The Ceda's gaze returned to Kettle. 'Child, is that why you remain?'

She shrugged. 'It won't be long now.'

'And the one the Azath chose to help you, Kettle, will he emerge in time?'

'I don't know. I hope so.'

'So do I,' Kuru Qan said. 'Thank you, child, for the tile. Still, I wonder at your knowledge of this new Hold.'

Kettle pulled an insect from her hair and tossed it aside. 'The pretty man told me all about it,' she said.
'Another visitor?'

'Only once. Mostly he just stands in the shadows, across the street. Sometimes he followed me when I went hunting, but he never said anything. Not until today, when he came over and we talked.'

'Did he tell you his name?' the Ceda asked.

'No. But he was very handsome. Only he said he had a girlfriend. Lots. Boyfriends, too. Besides, I shouldn't give my heart away. That's what he said. He never does. Never ever.'

'And this man told you all about the Hold of Death?'

'Yes, Grandfather. He knew all about it. He said it doesn't need a new guardian, because the throne is already occupied, at least everywhere else. Here too, soon. I'm tired of talking now.'

'Of course, Kettle,' Kuru Qan said. 'We shall take our leave of you, then.'

'Goodbye. Oh, don't forget the tile!'

'We will send some people to collect it, child.'

'All right.'

She watched them walk away. When they were gone from sight she headed over to her friend's barrow, and felt him close. 'Where are you taking me this time?'

Her hand in his, she found herself standing on a low hill, and before them was a vast, shallow valley, filled with corpses.

It was dusk, a layer of smoke hanging over the vista. Just above the horizon opposite, a suspended mountain of black stone was burning, columns of smoke billowing from its gashed flanks. Below, the bodies were mostly of some kind of huge, reptilian creature wearing strange armour. Grey-skinned and long-snouted, their forms were contorted and ribboned with slashes, lying in tangled heaps. Here and there in their midst lay other figures. Tall, some with grey skins, some with black.

Standing beside her, he spoke. 'Over four hundred thousand, Kettle. Here in this valley alone. There are other ... valleys. Like this one.'

A score of leathery-winged beasts were crossing the valley at one end, far to their right.

'Ooh, are those dragons?'

'Spawn. Locqui Wyval, searching for their master. But he is gone. Once they realize that, they will know to wait. It will prove a long wait.'

'Are they waiting still?'

'Yes.'

'When did this battle happen?'

'Many thousands of years ago, Kettle. But the damage remains. In a short while, the ice will arrive, sealing all you see. Holding all in stasis, a sorcery of impressive power, so powerful it will prove a barrier to the dead themselves – to the path their spirits would take. I wonder if that was what the Jaghut had intended. In any case, the land was twisted by the magic. The dead ... lingered. Here, in the north, and far to the south, as far as Letheras itself. To my mind, an Elder god meddled. But none could have foreseen the consequences, not even an Elder god.'

'Is that why the tower has become the Hold of Death?'

'It has? I was not aware of that. This, then, is what comes, when the sorcery finally dies and the world thaws.
Balance is reasserted.'

'Shrq Elalle says we are at war. The Tiste Edur, she says, are invading Lether.'

'Let us hope they do not arrive before I am free.'

'Why?'

'Because they will endeavour to kill me, Kettle.'

'Why?'

'For fear that I will seek to kill them.'

'Will you?'

'On many levels,' he replied, 'there is no reason why I shouldn't. But no, not unless they get in my way. You and I know, after all, that the true threat waits in the barrows of the Azath grounds.'

'I don't think the Edur will win the war,' she said.

'Yes, failure on their part would be ideal.'

'So what else did you want to show me?'

A pale white hand gestured towards the valley. 'There is something odd to all this. Do you see? Or, rather, what don't you see?'

'I don't see any ghosts.'

'Yes. The spirits are gone. The question is, where are they?'

Terrified screams echoed as Shurq Elalle walked down the wide, high-ceilinged corridor to the Master Chamber of the Tolls Repository. Guards, servants, clerks and cleaning staff had one and all succumbed to perfectly understandable panic. There was nothing worse, she reflected, than the unexpected visitations of dead relatives.

Ahead, the double doors were wide open, and the lanterns in the huge room beyond were swinging wildly to immanent gusts of spirited haste.

The thief strode into the chamber.

A squalid ghost rushed up to her, rotted face grinning wildly. 'I touched it! My last coin! I found it in the stacks! And touched it!'

'I am happy for you,' Shurq said. 'Now, where are the counters and readers?'

'Eh?'

Shurq moved past the ghost. The chamber was seething, spirits hurrying this way and that, others hunched over tumbled scrolls, still others squirming along the shelves. Chests of coins had been knocked over, the glittering gold coins stirring about on the marble floor as gibbering wraiths pawed them.

'I worked here!'

Shurq eyed the ghost drifting her way. 'You did?'

'Oh yes. They put in more shelves, and look at those lantern nooks – what idiot decided on those dust-traps? Dust is a fire hazard. Terrible fire hazard. Why, I was always telling them that. And now I could prove my point – a nudge, a simple nudge of that lantern there, yes ...'

'Come back here! Nothing burns. Understand?'
'If you say so. Fine. I was just kidding, anyway.'

'Have you looked at the ledgers?'

'Yes, yes, and counted. And memorized. I was always good at memorizing; that's why they hired me. I could count and count and never lose my place. But the dust! Those nooks! Everything might burn, burn terribly—'

'Enough of that. We have what we need. Time for everyone to leave.'

A chorus of wavering voices answered her. 'We don't want to!'

'There'll be priests coming. Probably already on their way. And mages, eager to collect wraiths to enslave as their servants for eternity.'

'We're leaving!'

'You,' said Shurq to the ghost before her, 'come with me. Talk. Give me details.'

'Yes, yes. Of course.'

'Leave that lantern alone, damn you!'

'Sorry. Terrible fire hazard, oh, the flames there'd be. Such flames, all those inks, the colours!'

'Everyone!' the thief shouted. 'We're going now! And you, stop rolling that coin – it stays here!'

'The Seventh Closure,' Kuru Qan muttered as they made their way back to the palace. 'It is all spiralling inward. Troubling, this concatenation of details. The Azath dies, a Hold of Death comes into being. A Nameless One appears and somehow possesses the corpse of a child, then fashions an alliance with a denizen of a barrow. A usurper proclaims himself emperor of the Tiste Edur, and now leads an invasion. Among his allies, a demon from the sea, one of sufficient power to destroy two of my best mages. And now, if other rumours are true, it may be the emperor is himself a man of many lives ...'

'Brys glanced over. 'What rumours?'

'Citizens witnessed his death in Trate. The Edur emperor was cut down in battle. Yet he ... returned. Probably an exaggeration, but I am nervous none the less at my own assumptions in this matter, Brys. Still, the Tiste Edur have superb healers. Perhaps a binding spell of some sort, cleaving the soul to the flesh until they can arrive ... I must give this more thought.'

'And you believe, Ceda, that all this is somehow linked to the Seventh Closure?'

'The rebirth of our empire. That is my fear, Champion. That we have in some fatal way misread our ancient prophecy. Perhaps the empire has already appeared.'

'The Tiste Edur? Why would a Letherii prophecy have anything to do with them?'

Kuru Qan shook his head. 'It is a prophecy that arose in the last days of the First Empire. Brys, there is so much we have lost. Knowledge, the world of that time. Sorcery gone awry, birthing horrific beasts, the armies of undead who delivered such slaughter among our people, then simply left. Mysterious tales of a strange realm of magic that was torn apart. Could the role of an entire people fit in any of the gaps in our knowing? Yes. And what of other people who are named, yet nothing more than the names survives – no descriptions? Barghast, Jhag, Trell. Neighbouring tribes? We'll never know.'

They came to the gates. Sleepy guards identified them and opened the lesser postern door. The palace grounds were empty, silent. The Ceda paused and stared up at the hazy stars overhead.

'Brys said nothing. He waited, standing at the old man's side, seeing the night sky reflected in the twin lenses in front of Kuru Qan's eyes. Wondering what the Ceda was thinking.
Tehol Beddict smiled as she threaded her way through the crowd towards him. 'Chief Investigator Rucket, I am delighted to see you again.'

'No you're not,' she replied. 'You're just trying to put me on the defensive.'

'How does my delight make you defensive?'

'Because I get suspicious, that's why. You're not fooling me, with those absurd trousers and that idiotic insect on your shoulder.'

Tehol looked down in surprise. 'Ezgara! I thought I left you on the roof.'

'You've named him Ezgara? He doesn't look a thing like our king. Oh, maybe if our king had two heads, then I might see the resemblance, but as it stands, that's a stupid name.'

'The three of us are deeply offended, as is my bodyguard here and, one must assume, his two brothers wherever they are. Thus, the six of us. Deeply offended.'

'Where is Bugg?'

'Somewhere in that crowd behind you, I suppose.'

'Well, no. They're all looking.'

'Oh, he was there a moment ago.'

'But he isn't any longer, and the people are clamouring.'

'No they aren't, Rucket. They're milling.'

'Now you're challenging my assessment. Concluding, no doubt, that contrariness is sexually attractive. Maybe for some women it is, the kind you prefer, I'd wager. But I take exception to your taking exception to everything I say.'

'Now who's being contrary?'

She scowled. 'I was intending to invite you to a late night bite. There is a courtyard restaurant not far from here—'

'The Trampled Peacock.'

'Why, yes. I am dismayed that you are familiar with it. Suggesting to me, for obvious reasons, that clandestine trysts are common with you, further suggesting a certain cheapness and slatternly behaviour on your part. I don't know why I am surprised that you're so loose, actually. I should have expected it. Accordingly, I want nothing to do with you.'

'I've never been there.'

'You haven't? Then how do you know of it?'

I own it. 'Reputation, I imagine. I wish I could be more precise. Who said what and when and all that, but it's late and even if it wasn't I'd probably not recall such details.'

'So, are you hungry?'

'Always. Oh, here's my manservant. Did you hear, Bugg? Chief Investigator Rucket has invited us to supper.'

'Well, the cat can wait.'

Rucket glared at Tehol. 'Who said anything about him?'

'I go everywhere with my manservant, Rucket. And my bodyguard.'
‘Everywhere? Even on dates?’

‘Bugg,’ Tehol said, ‘have you done all you can here? Is it time to let these poor people sleep?’

‘Well past time, master.’

‘We’re off to the Trampled Peacock!’

‘Is that such a good idea, master?’

‘Well, it wasn’t mine, Bugg, but there it is. Please, Rucket, lead the way.’

‘Oh, wonderful. I look forward to a night of weathering attacks on my vanity. Come now, all of you, we’re wasting time.’

Tehol threw up his hands as soon as they entered the courtyard. ‘Extraordinary! Bugg, look who’s here! Why, it’s Shand and Rissarh and Hejun! Come, let us put two tables together and so make of this a festive gathering of co-conspirators!’

‘The coincidence leaves me awed,’ the manservant said.

‘Who in the Errant’s name are those women?’ Rucket demanded. ‘And why are they all so angry?’

‘That’s not anger,’ Tehol said, approaching, ‘that’s recognition. Dear women, how are you all? Faring well, I see. We’ve decided to join you.’

‘Who is this absurd creature at your side?’ Shand asked. ‘And what’s with the cape?’

‘Watch who you’re calling a creature, cobble-head,’ Rucket hissed.

‘Tehol’s found a woman,’ Rissarh said in a snarl. ‘Typical. He steals our man then gets himself a woman——’

Hejun grunted. ‘I was beginning to suspect him and the dead bitch.’

‘Dead bitch?’ Rucket’s eyes were wild as she looked round. ‘He makes love to a dead bitch?’

‘One freak accident—’ Tehol began.

‘If you shaved your head,’ Shand said to Rucket, sputtering with rage, ‘we’d all see how truly ugly you are!’

The guard was looking alarmed. People at other tables gestured madly at the serving staff.

‘Worked hard on that one, did you?’ Rucket asked. ‘Tehol, what’s all this about stealing their man? They were sharing one man? Is he still alive? Still sane? Did he volunteer at the Drownings?’

‘You want to see me work hard?’ Shand rose to her feet, reaching for the knife at her side.

‘Oh, how pathetic,’ Rucket said. ‘Here, compare that with my rapier here.’

‘Get her!’ This from Rissarh, as she launched herself across the table. It collapsed beneath her a moment later, but she had managed to wrap her arms about Rucket’s thighs. The Chief Investigator made a strange squealing sound as she was pulled over. The rapier sprang free and slapped hard against Shand’s out-thrust wrist, sending the knife spinning. Hejun then snagged Rucket’s sword-arm and twisted the weapon loose. A finely polished boot shot up to strike Hejun in the belly. She groaned and sagged.

Tehol pulled Bugg back a step. ‘I think you were right about this not being a good idea.’

Grunts, meaty thuds and flying fists. Fleeing patrons, the yowl of a cat in the kitchen.

Tehol sighed. ‘We should go. But first, arrange with the manager four bottles of fine wine, for when they’re finished beating on each other. I predict that by dawn they will all be fast friends.’
'I'm not sure of that—'

'Nonsense, Bugg, it's the way of things. Come on, before they turn on us.'

Not surprisingly, the bodyguard led the way out of the courtyard.

Outside, Tehol brushed imaginary dust from his hands. 'All in all, a fine evening, wouldn't you say? Now, we should see if we can scrounge some firewood – or at least something that burns – on our way home. Roast cat beckons.'

The crashing sounds from the restaurant courtyard suddenly increased.

Tehol hesitated. 'I'm tempted by the sounds of firewood production in there.'

'Don't be a fool, master.'

'Perhaps you're right. Lead us on, Bugg. Home.'
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Expectancy stands alone
And crowds the vast emptiness
This locked chest of a chamber
With its false floor the illusory
Dais on which, four-legged
carpentry of stretcher-bearers, crouches the throne
Of tomorrow’s glory when
The hunters come down
From the cut-wood gloom
Stung hard to pursuit
The shadows of potentates
And pretenders but he holds
Fast, the privileged indifference
That is fruitless patience
Expectancy stands ever
Alone before this eternally
Empty, so very empty throne.

Hold of the Empty Throne
Kerrulict

Ashes swirling on all sides, the river a snake of sludge spreading its stain into the dead bay, the Nerek youth squatted at the edge of the sacred land. Behind him, the others sat round their precious hearth and continued arguing. The youth knew enough to wait.

Consecrated ground. They had huddled on it whilst the sorcerous storms raged, destroying the village of the Hiroth, flattening the forests around them, and the fires that burned for days afterwards could not lash them with their heat. And now the cinders had cooled, no more sparks danced in the wind, and the bloated bodies of dead wild animals that had crowded the river mouth had broken loose some time in the night just past, drawn out to the sea and the waiting sharks.

His knife-sharer came to his side and crouched down. ‘Their fear holds them back,’ he said, ‘and yet it is that very fear that will force them to accept. They have no choice.’

‘I know.’

‘When you first spoke of your dreams, I believed you.’

‘Yes.’

‘Our people have not dreamed since the Letherii conquered us. Our nights were empty, and we believed they would be so for all time, until the last Nerek died and we were no more a people. But I saw the truth in your eyes. We have shared the knife, you and I. I did not doubt.’

‘I know, brother.’

The eldest of the Nerek called out behind them, a voice harsh with anger, ‘It is decided. The two of you will go. By the old paths, to make your travel swift.’

Youth and knife-brother both rose and swung round.

The eldest nodded. ‘Go. Find Hull Beddict.’
The two Nerek stepped out into the gritty ash, and began the journey south. The birth of dreams had revealed
once more the old paths, the ways through and between worlds. It would not take long.

Fear Sengar led him into a secluded glade, the sounds of the readied army distant and muted. As soon as Trull
took his first stride into the clearing, his brother spun round. Forearm hard against his throat, weight driving
him back until he struck the bole of a tree, where Fear held him.

‘You will be silent! No more of your doubts, not to anyone else and not to me. You are my brother, and that
alone is why I have not killed you outright. Are you hearing me, Trull?’

He was having trouble breathing, yet he remained motionless, his eyes fixed on Fear’s.

‘Why do you not answer?’

Still he said nothing.

With a snarl Fear drew his arm away and stepped back.

‘Kill me, would you?’ Trull continued to lean against the tree. He smiled. ‘From behind, then? A knife,
catching me unawares. Otherwise, brother, you would be hard-pressed.’

Fear looked away. Then nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘A knife in the back.’

‘Yes.’

‘Because, if I have my spear, it’s equally likely that you would be killed, not me.’

Fear glared at him, then the anger slowly drained from his eyes. ‘It must stop, Trull. We are about to go into
battle—’

‘And you doubt my ability?’

‘No, only your willingness.’

‘Well, yes, you are right to doubt that. But I will do as you command. I will kill Letherii for you.’

‘For the emperor. For our people—’

‘No. For you, Fear. Otherwise, you would be well advised to question my ability. Indeed, to remove me from
command. From this entire, absurd war. Send me away, to the northernmost villages of the Den-Ratha where
there are likely to be a few thousand Edur who chose to remain behind.’

‘There are none such.’

‘Of course there are.’

‘A handful.’

‘More than you think. And yes, I have been tempted to join them.’

‘Rhulad would not permit it. He would have to kill you.’

‘I know.’

Fear began pacing. ‘The K’risnan. They said Rhulad was killed yesterday. In Trate. Then he returned. There
can be no doubt, now, brother. Our emperor cannot be stopped. His power does naught but grow—’

‘You are seeing this wrong, Fear.’

He paused, looked over. ‘What do you mean?’
"Our emperor cannot be stopped." I do not see it that way.'

'All right. How do you see it, Trull?'

'Our brother is doomed to die countless deaths. Die, rise, and die again. Our brother, Fear, the youngest among us. That is how I see it. And now, I am to embrace the power that has done this to Rhulad? I am to serve it? Lend it my skills with the spear? I am to carve an empire for it? Are his deaths without pain? Without horror? Is he not scarred? How long, Fear, can his sanity hold on? There he stands, a young warrior bedecked in a gold nightmare, his flesh puckered and mangled, and weapons shall pierce him – he knows it, he knows he will be killed again and again.'

'Stop, Trull.' Like a child, Fear placed his hands over his ears and turned away. 'Stop.'

'Who is doing this to him?'

'Stop!'

Trull subsided.

Tell me, brother, do you feel as helpless as I do?

Fear faced him once more, his expression hardening anew. 'Voice your doubts if you must, Trull, but only to me. In private.'

'Very well.'

'Now, a battle awaits us.'

'It does.'

A herd of deer had been startled from the forest fringe south of Katter River, darting and leaping as they fled across the killing field. On the earthen ramparts outside High Fort's walls, Moroch Nevath stood beside his queen and his prince. Before them in a motionless row were arrayed the four sorcerors of Janall's cadre, wrapped in cloaks against the morning chill, while to either side and along the length of the fortified berm waited the heavy infantry companies of the queen's battalion. Flanking each company were massive wagons, and on each squatted a Dresh ballista, its magazine loaded with a thirty-six-quarrel rack. Spare racks waited nearby on the ramped loader, the heavily armoured crew gathered round, nervously scanning the line of woods to the north.

'The Edur are moving down,' Prince Quillas said. 'We should see them soon.'

The deer had settled on the killing field and were grazing.

Moroch glanced to the lesser berm to the east. Two more companies were positioned there. The gap between the two ramparts was narrow and steep-sided, and led directly to a corner bastion on the city's wall, where ballistae and mangonels commanded the approach.

The prince's own mage cadre, three lesser sorcerors, were positioned with a small guard on the rampart immediately south of the Dry Gully, tucked in the angular indentation of High Fort's walls. The old drainage course wound a path down from the minor range of hills a thousand paces to the north. Three additional ramparts ran parallel to the Dry Gully, on which were positioned the forward elements of the Grass Jackets Brigade. The easternmost and largest of these ramparts also held a stone-walled fort, and it was there that the brigade commanders had placed their own mage cadre.

Additional ramparts were situated in a circle around the rest of High Fort, and on these waited reserve elements of the brigades and battalions, including elements of heavy cavalry. Lining the city's walls and bastions was High Fort's own garrison.

To Moroch's thinking, this imminent battle would be decisive. The treachery of the Edur that had been revealed at Trate would not be repeated here, not with eleven sorcerors present among the Letherii forces.

'Wraiths!'
The shout came from one of the queen's officers, and Moroch Nevath returned his attention to the distant treeline.

The deer had lifted their heads, were staring fixedly at the forest edge. A moment later they bolted once more, this time in a southwest direction, reaching the loggers' road, down which they bounded until lost in the mists.

On the other side of the killing field – pasture in peaceful times – shadows were flowing out from between the boles, vaguely man-shaped, drawing up into a thick mass that then stretched out into a rough line, three hundred paces long and scores deep. Behind them came huge, lumbering demons, near twice the height of a man, perhaps a hundred in all, that assembled into a wedge behind the line of wraiths. Finally, to either side, appeared warriors, Tiste Edur to the right of the wedge, and a horde of small, fur-clad savages on the far left.

'Who are they?' Prince Quillas asked. 'Those on the far flank – they are not Edur.'

The queen shrugged. 'Some lost band of Nerek, perhaps. I would judge a thousand, no more than that, and poorly armed and armoured.'

'Fodder,' Moroch said. 'The Edur have learned much from us, it seems.'

A similar formation was assembling north of the lesser berm, although there both flanking forces were Tiste Edur.

'The wraiths will charge first,' Moroch predicted, 'with the demons behind them seeking to break our lines. And there, signal flags from the Grass Jackets. They have no doubt sighted their own enemy ranks.'

'Were you the Edur commander,' Quillas said, 'what would you do? The attack cannot be as straightforward as it now seems, can it?'

'If the commander is a fool, it can,' Janall said.

'The sorcery will prove mutually negating, as it always does. Thus, the battle shall be blade against blade,' Moroch thought for a moment, then said, 'I would make use of the Dry Gully. And seek a sudden charge against your mage cadre, Prince.'

'They would become visible – and vulnerable – for the last fifty or sixty paces of the charge, Finadd. The bastions will slaughter them, and if not them, then the westernmost company of the Grass Jackets can mount a downslope charge into their flank.'

'Thus leaving their rampart under-defended. Use the Dry Gully as a feint, and a reserve force to then rush the rampart and seize it.'

'That rampart crouches in the shadow of High Fort's largest bastion tower, Finadd. The Edur would be slaughtered by the answering enfilade.'

After a moment, Moroch nodded. 'It is as you say, Prince. I admit, I see nothing advantageous to the Tiste Edur.'

'I agree,' Prince Quillas said.

'Strangely quiet,' Moroch mused after a time as the enemy forces assembled.

'It's the wraiths and demons, Finadd. No soldiers like thinking of those.'

'The mages will annihilate them,' Janall pronounced. She was dressed in elaborate armour, her helm filigreed in silver and gold. Her sword was the finest Letherii steel, but the grip was bound gold wire and the pommel a cluster of pearls set in silver. Beadwork covered her tabard. Beneath, Moroch knew, was steel scale. He did not think she would find need to draw her sword. Even so ... The Finadd swung about and gestured to an aide, whom he then drew to one side. 'Ready the queen's horses, in the south lee of the west bastion.'

'Yes, sir.'
Something was wrong. Moroch felt it as he watched the aide hurry off. He scanned the sky. Grey. Either the sun would burn through or there would be rain. He returned to his original position and studied the distant ranks. 'They're in position. Where are the chants? The exhortations? The ritual curses?'

'They see the doom awaiting them,' Quillas said, 'and are silenced by terror.'

A sudden stirring among the queen's mages. Alertness. Janall noticed and said, 'Prepare the lines. The Edur have begun sorcery.'

'What kind?' Moroch asked.

The queen shook her head.

'Betrayer's balls,' the Finadd muttered. It felt wrong. Terribly wrong.

Ahlrada Ahn had drawn his cutlass and was grinning. 'I never understood you spear-wielders. This will be close fighting, Trull Sengar. They will hack the shaft from your hands—'

'They will try. Blackwood will not shatter, as you know. Nor shall my grip.'

Standing behind the wedge of demons was a K'risnan. The warlock's comrade was with the other force, also positioned behind a demon cohort. Hanradi Khalag commanded there, and the K'risnan in his charge was his son.

B'negga and a thousand of his Jheck were just visible in a basin to the west. Another thousand were moving down the gully, whilst the third thousand accompanied the easternmost force along with wraiths and demons.

It occurred to Trull that he knew almost nothing of the huge, armoured demons bound to this war by the K'risnan. Not even the name by which they called themselves.

Warriors of the Arapay and Hiroth were massed along the forest line, less than a third of their total numbers visible to the enemy. Outwardly, the dominant Edur army would appear to be the central one, Hanradi Khalag's eighteen thousand Hiroth and Merude, but in truth Fear's force here in the forest amounted to almost twenty-three thousand Edur warriors. And arrayed among them were wraiths in numbers beyond counting.

Tendrils of grey mist swirled round the nearest K'risnan, forming a fluid web that began to thicken, then rise. Thread-thin strands snaked out, entwining the nearest ranks of Edur. Flowing out like roots, embracing all within sight barring the wraiths and the demons. In a billowing, grey wall, the sorcery burgeoned. Trull felt it playing over him, and its touch triggered a surge of nausea that he barely defeated.

From the Letherii cadre, a wave of raging fire rose in answer, building with a roar directly in front of the rampart, then plunging swift and savage across the killing field.

As suddenly as that, the battle was begun.

Trull stared as the massive wall of flame rushed towards them. At the last moment the grey skein rushed out, colliding with the wave and lifting it straight up in explosive columns, pillars that spiralled with silver fire.

And Trull saw, within the flames, the gleam of bones. Thousands, then hundreds of thousands, as if the fire's very fuel had been transformed. Towering higher, fifty man-heights, then a hundred, two hundred, filling the sky.

The conjoined wave then began toppling. Fiery pillars heaving over, towards the Letherii entrenchments.

Even as they plunged earthward, the wraiths from the forest and those in the foremost line launched into a rushing attack. The wedge of demons promptly vanished.

It was the signal Trull and the other officers had been waiting for. 'Weapons ready!' He had to bellow to make himself heard—

The wave struck. First the killing field, and the ground seemed to explode, churning, as if a multitude of
miner's picks had struck the earth, deep, tearing loose huge chunks that were flung high into the air. Dust and flames, the clash of split bones ripping the flat expanse, a sound like hail on sheets of iron. Onward, onto the slopes of the ramparts.

In its wake, a flowing sea of wraiths.

'Forward!'

And then the Edur were running across broken, steaming ground. Behind them, thousands pouring from the forest edge.

Trull saw, all too clearly, as the wave of burning, hammering bones reached the entrenchments. A blush of crimson, then pieces of human flesh danced skyward, a wall, rising, severed limbs flailing in the air. Fragments of armour, the shattered wood of the bulwarks, skin and hair.

The queen's cadre was engulfed, bones rushing in to batter where they had been. A moment later the mass exploded outward in a hail of shards, and of the four sorcerors who had been standing there a moment earlier only two remained, sheathed in blood and reeling.

A demon rose from the ravaged earth in front of them, mace swinging. The mage it struck seemed to fold bonelessly around it, and his body was tossed through the air. The last sorceror staggered back, narrowly avoiding the huge weapon's deadly path. She gestured, even as a hail of heavy quarrels hammered into the demon.

Trull heard its squeal of pain.

Flickering magic swarmed the demon as it spun round and toppled, sliding down the blood-soaked slope, the mace tumbling away.

Other demons had appeared among the remnants of the Letherii soldiery, flailing bodies flying from their relentless path.

Another wave of sorcery, this time from somewhere to the southeast, a rolling column, crackling with lightning as it swept crossways on the killing field, plunging into the advancing ranks of wraiths. They melted in their hundreds as the magic tore through them.

Then the sorcery struck Hanradi Khalag's warriors, scything a path through the press.

The Merude chief's son counter-attacked, another surge of grey, tumbling bones. A rampart to the east vanished in a thunderous detonation, but hundreds of Edur lay dead or dying on the field.

Deafened, half-blinded by dust and smoke, Trull and his warriors reached the slope, scrambled upward and came to the first trench.

Before them stretched an elongated pit filled with unrecognizable flesh, split bones and spilled organs, strips of leather and pieces of armour. The air was thick with the stench of ruptured bowels and burnt meat. Gagging, Trull stumbled across, his moccasins plunging down into warm pockets, lifting clear sheathed in blood and bile.

Ahead, a raging battle. Wraiths swarming over soldiers, demons with mauls and maces crushing the Letherii closing on them from all sides, others with double-bladed axes cleaving wide spaces round themselves. But ballista quarrels were finding them one by one. Trull watched a demon stagger, twice impaled, then soldiers rushed in, swords hacking.

And then he and his company closed with the enemy.

Moroch Nevath stumbled through the dust, the screaming soldiers and the fallen bodies, bellowing his prince's name. But Quillas was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Janall. Only one mage remained from the cadre, launching attack after attack on some distant enemy. A company of heavy infantry had moved up to encircle her, but they were fast dying beneath an onslaught of Tiste Edur.
The Finadd, blood draining from his ears after the concussion of the wave of bones, still held his sword, the Letherii steel obliterating the occasional wraith that ventured near. He saw one Edur warrior, the spear a blur in his hands, leading a dozen or so of his kin ever closer to the surviving mage.

But Moroch was too far away, too many heaving bodies between them, and he could only watch as the warrior broke through the last of the defenders and lunged at the mage, driving his spear into her chest, then lifting her entire, the spear-shaft bowing as he flung her spasming body to one side. The iron point of the spear broke free in a stream of blood.

Reeling away, Moroch Nevath began making his way to the south slope of the rampart. He needed a horse. He needed to bring the mounts closer. For the prince. The queen.

Somewhere to the east, a roar of sound, and the ground shook beneath him. He staggered, then his left leg swept out, skidding on slime, and something snapped in the Finadd's groin. Pain lanced through him. Swearing, he watched himself fall, the ruptured ground rising in front of him, and landed heavily. Burning agony in his left leg, his pelvis, up the length of his spine. Still swearing, he began dragging himself forward, his sword lost somewhere in his wake.

Bones. Burning, plunging from the sky. Bodies exploding where they struck. Crushing pressure, the air roiling and screaming like a thing alive. The sudden muting of all noise, the outrageous cacophony of grunts as a thousand men died all at once. A sound that Moroch Nevath would never forget. What had the bastards unleashed?

The Letherii were broken, fleeing down the south slope of the rampart. Wraiths dragged them down. Tiste Edur hacked at their backs and heads as they pursued. Trull Sengar clambered onto a heap of corpses, seeking a vantage point. To the east, on the two berms that he could see, the enemy were shattered. Jheck, veered into silver-backed wolves, had poured up from the gully alongside a horde of wraiths to assault what had survived of the Letherii defences. Mage-fire had ceased.

In the opposite direction, B'nagga had led his own beasts south, skirting the foremost rampart, to attack the reserve positions on the west side of the city. There had been enemy cavalry there, and the horses had been driven to panic by the huge wolves rushing into their midst. A dozen demons had joined the Jheck, forcing the Letherii into a chaotic retreat that gathered up and carried with it the southernmost elements. Companies of Arapay Edur were following in B'nagga's wake.

Trull swung to face north. And saw his brother standing alone above a body, on the far side of the killing field.

The K'risnan.

'Trull.'

He turned. 'Ahlrada Ahn. You are wounded.'

'I ran onto a sword – held by a dead man.'

The gash was deep and long, beginning just below the warrior's left elbow and continuing up into his shoulder. 'Find yourself a healer,' Trull said, 'before you bleed out.'

'I shall. I saw you slay the witch.' A statement to which Ahlrada added nothing.

'Where is Canarth?' Trull asked. 'I do not see my troop.'

'Scattered. I saw Canarth dragging Badar from the press. Badar was dying.'

Trull studied the blood and fragments of flesh on the iron point of his spear. 'He was young.'

'He was blooded, Trull.'

Trull glanced over at High Fort's walls. He could see soldiers lining it. The garrison, witness to the
annihilation of the Letherii manning the outer defences. The nearest bastion was still launching quarrels, tracking the few demons still in range.

'I must join my brother, Ahlrada. See if you can gather our warriors. There may be more fighting to come.'

Huddled in the lee of the west wall, Moroch Nevath watched a dozen wolves pad from one heap of corpses to another. The beasts were covered in blood. They gathered round a wounded soldier, there was a sudden flurry of snarls, and the twitching body went still.

*All over ... so fast. Decisive indeed.*

He had never found the horses.

On the rampart opposite him, eighty paces distant, a score of Tiste Edur had found Prince Quillas. Dishevelled but alive. Moroch wondered if the queen's corpse lay somewhere beneath the mounds of broken flesh. Beadwork unstrung and scattered in the welter, her jewelled sword still locked in its scabbard, the ambitious light in her eyes dulled and drying and blind to this world.

It seemed impossible.

But so did all these dead Letherii, these obliterated battalions and brigades.

There had been no negation of magic. The eleven mages had been destroyed by the counter-attack. A battle had been transformed into a slaughter, and it was this inequity that stung Moroch the deepest.

He and his people had been on the delivering end, time and again, until it seemed inherently just and righteous. *Something went wrong. There was treachery. The proper course of the world has been ... upended.* The words repeating in his head were growing increasingly bitter. *It is not for us to be humbled. Ever. Failure drives us to succeed tenfold. All will be put right, again. It shall. We cannot be denied our destiny.*

It began to rain.

An Edur warrior had seen him and was approaching, sword held at the ready. The downpour arrived with vigour as the tall figure came to stand before Moroch Nevath. In traders' tongue he said, 'I see no wounds upon you, soldier.'

'Torn tendon, I think,' Moroch replied.

'Painful, then.'

'Have you come to kill me?'

A surprised expression. 'You do not know? The garrison surrendered. High Fort is fallen.'

'What of it?'

'We come as conquerors, soldier. What value killing all of our subjects?'

Moroch looked away. 'Letherii conquer. We are never conquered. You think this battle means anything? You have revealed your tactics, Edur. This day shall not be repeated, and before long you will be the subjugated ones, not us.'

The warrior shrugged. 'Have it your way, then. But know this. The frontier has fallen. Trate, High Fort and Shake Fort. Your famous brigades are routed, your mage cadres dead. Your queen and your prince are our prisoners. And we begin our march on Letheras.'

The Tiste Edur walked away.

Moroch Nevath stared after him for a time, then looked round. And saw Letherii soldiers, stripped of weapons but otherwise unharmed, walking from the fields of battle. Onto the loggers' road, and south, on the Katter Road. Simply walking away. He did not understand. *We will reassemble. Pull back and equip ourselves*
once more. There is nothing inevitable to this. Nothing. Wincing, he forced himself to move away from the wall—

A familiar voice, shouting his name. He looked up, recognized an officer from the queen's entourage. The man bore minor wounds, but otherwise seemed hale. He quickly approached. 'Finadd, I am pleased to see you alive—'

'I need a horse.'

'We have them, Finadd—'

'How was the queen captured?' Moroch demanded. Why did you not die defending her?

'A demon,' the man replied. 'It was among us in the blink of an eye. It had come to take her – we could not prevent it. We tried, Finadd, we tried—'

'Never mind. Help me up. We must ride south – I need a healer—'

Trull Sengar picked his way across the killing field. The rain was turning the churned ground into a swamp. The bones of the sorcery had vanished. He paused, hearing piteous cries from somewhere off to his right. A dozen paces in that direction, and he came upon a demon.

Four heavy quarrels had pierced it. The creature was lying on its side, its bestial face twisted with pain.

Trull crouched near the demon's mud-smeared head. 'Can you understand me?'

Small blue eyes flickered behind the lids, fixed on his own eyes. 'Arbiter of life. Denier of mercy. I shall die here.'

The voice was thin, strangely childlike.

'I shall call a healer—'

'Why? To fight again? To relive terror and grief?'

'You were not a warrior in your world?'

'A caster of nets. Warm shoals, a yellow sky. We cast nets.'

'All of you?'

'What war is this? Why have I been killed? Why will I never see the river again? My mate, my children. Did we win?'

'I shall not be long. I will return. I promise.' Trull straightened, went on to where stood Fear and, now, a dozen others. The K'risnan was alive, surrounded by healers – none of whom seemed capable of doing anything for the figure writhing in the mud. As Trull neared, he saw more clearly the young warlock.

Twisted, deformed, his skin peeling in wet sheets, and eyes filled with awareness.

Fear stepped into Trull's path and said, 'It is the sword's sorcery – the gift-giver's own, channelled from the weapon into Rhulad, and from Rhulad to whomever he may choose. Yet...' He hesitated. 'The body cannot cope. Even as it destroys the enemy, so it changes the wielder. This is what the women are telling me.'

His brother's face was pale, and nowhere in his expression could Trull see triumph or satisfaction at the victory they had won this day.

'Will he survive?'

'They think so. This time. But the damage cannot be reversed. Trull, Hanradi's son is dead. We have lost a K'risnan.'
'To this?' Trull asked. 'To the sword's power?'

'Partly. The Letherii mages mostly, I think, given how badly burned he was. They resisted longer than we expected.'

Trull faced High Fort. 'It has surrendered?'

'Yes, a few moments ago. A delegation. The garrison is being disarmed. I was thinking of leaving Hanradi to govern. His spirit is much damaged.'

Trull said nothing to that. He moved past Fear and strode to the women gathered round the K'risnan. 'One of you, please,' he said. 'There is healing I would have you attend to.'

An Arapay woman nodded. 'Wounded warriors. Yes, preferable. Lead me to them.'

'Not Edur. A demon.'

She halted. 'Don't be a fool. There are Edur who require my skills – I have no time for a demon. Let it die. We can always acquire more.'

Something snapped in Trull, and before he was even aware of it the back of his right hand was stinging and the woman was on the ground, a stunned expression on her suddenly bloodied face. Then rage flared in her eyes.

Fear pushed Trull back a step. 'What are you doing?'

'I want a demon healed,' Trull said. He was trembling, frightened at the absence of remorse within him even as he watched the woman pick herself up from the mud. 'I want it healed, then unbound and sent back to its realm.'

'Trull—'

The woman snarled, then hissed, 'The empress shall hear of this! I will see you banished!' Her companions gathered, all looking on Trull with raw hatred.

He realized that his gesture had snapped something within them as well. Unfortunate.

'How badly injured is it?' Fear asked.

'It is dying—'

'Then likely it has already done so. No more of this, Trull.' He swung to the women. 'Go among our warriors, all of you. I will see the K'risnan carried to our camp.'

'We will speak of this to the empress,' the first healer said, wiping at her face.

'Of course. As you must.'

They stalked off into the rain.

'The battle lust is still upon you, brother—'

'No it isn't—'

'Listen to me. It is how you will excuse your actions. And you will ask for forgiveness and you will make reparations.'

Trull turned away. 'I need to find a healer.'

Fear pulled him roughly round, but Trull twisted free. He headed off. He would find a healer. A Hiroth woman, one who knew his mother. Before word carried.
The demon needed healing. It was as simple as that.

An indeterminate time later, he found himself stumbling among bodies. Dead Edur, the ones killed by the sorcerous attack he recalled from earlier. Scorched, burnt so fiercely their faces had melted away. Unknown to his eyes and unknowable. He wandered among them, the rain pelting down to give the illusion of motion, of life, on all sides. But they were all dead.

A lone figure nearby, standing motionless. A woman, her hands hanging at her sides. He had seen her before, a matron. Hanradi Khalag's elder sister, tall, hawk-faced, her eyes like onyx. He halted in front of her. 'I want you to heal a demon.'

She did not seem to see him at all. 'I can do nothing for them. My sons. I cannot even find them.'

He took one of her hands and held it tight. 'Come with me.'

She did not resist as he led her away from the strewn corpses. 'A demon?'

'Yes. I do not know the name by which they call themselves.'

'Kenyll'rah. It means "To Sleep Peacefully" or something like that. The Merude were charged with making their weapons.'

'They have been sorely used.'

'They are not alone in that, warrior.'

He glanced back at her, saw that awareness had returned to her eyes. Her hand held his now, and tightly. 'You are the emperor's brother, Trull Sengar.'

'I am.'

'You struck an Arapay woman.'

'I did. It seems such news travels swiftly – and mysteriously.'

'Among the women. Yes.'

'And yet you will help me.'

'Heal this demon? If it lives, I shall.'

'Why?'

She did not reply.

It took some time, but they finally found the creature. Its cries had ceased, but the woman released Trull's hand and crouched down beside it. 'It lives still, Trull Sengar.' She laid her palms on the demon's massive chest and closed her eyes.

Trull watched the rain streaming down her face, as if the world wept in her stead.

'Take the first of the quarrels. You will pull, gently, while I push. Each one, slowly.'

'I want it released.'

'I cannot do that. It will not be permitted.'

'Then I want it placed in my charge.'

'You are the emperor's brother. None will defy you.'

'Except, perhaps, one of the emperor's other brothers.' He was pleased to see the crease of a smile on her thin
features.

'That trouble will be yours, not mine, Trull Sengar. Now, pull. Carefully.'

The demon opened its small eyes. It ran its massive hands over the places where wounds had been, then it sighed.

The healer stepped back. 'I am done. There are bodies to gather.'

'Thank you,' Trull said.

She made no reply. Wiping rain from her face, she walked away.

The demon slowly climbed to its feet. 'I will fight again,' it said.

'Not if I have any say in the matter,' Trull replied. 'I would place you in my charge.'

'To not fight? That would be unfair, Denier. I would witness the death of my kind, yet not share the risk, or their fate. It is sad, to die so far from home.'

'Then one among you must remain, to remember them. That one will be you. What is your name?'

'Lilac.'

Trull studied the sky. It seemed there would be no let-up in the downpour. 'Come with me. I must speak to my brother.'

Tiste Edur warriors were entering the city. No Letherii soldiers were visible on the walls, or at the bastions. The gates had been sundered some time during the battle, struck by sorcery. Twisted pieces of bronze and splintered wood studded the muddy ground, amidst strewn corpses.

The demon had collected a double-bladed axe near the body of one of its kind and now carried it over a shoulder. For all its size, Lilac moved quietly, shortening its stride to stay alongside Trull. He noted that the pattern of its breathing was odd. After a deep breath it took another, shorter one, followed by a faintly whistling exhalation that did not seem to come from its broad, flattened nose.

'Lilac, are you fully healed?'

'I am.'

Ahead lay the rampart where four mages had stood. Three of them had been obliterated in the first wave of sorcery. On the berm's summit now were gathered Fear and a number of officers. And two prisoners.

The slope was treacherous underfoot as Trull and the demon made their ascent. Red, muddy streams, bodies slowly sliding down. Wraiths moved through the rain as if still hunting victims. From the west came the low rumble of thunder.

They reached the rampart's summit. Trull saw that one of the prisoners was Prince Quillas. He did not seem injured. The other was a woman in mud-spattered armour. She wore no helmet and had taken a head wound, staining the left side of her face with streaks of blood. Her eyes were glazed with shock.

Fear had turned to regard Trull and the demon, his expression closed. 'Brother,' he said tonelessly, 'it seems we have captured two personages of the royal family.'

'This is Queen Janall?'

'The prince expects we will ransom them,' Fear said. 'He does not seem to understand the situation.'

'And what is the situation?' Trull asked.

'Our emperor wants these two. For himself.'
'Fear, we are not in the habit of parading prisoners.'

A flicker of rage in Fear's eyes, but his voice remained calm. 'I see you have had your demon healed. What do you want?'

'I want this Kenyll'rah in my charge.'

Fear studied the huge creature. Then he shrugged and turned away. 'As you like. Leave us now, Trull. I will seek you out later ... for a private word.'

Trull flinched. 'Very well.'

The world felt broken now, irreparably broken.

'Go.'

'Come with me, Lilac,' Trull said. He paused to glance over at Prince Quillas, and saw the terror in the young Letherii's visage. Rhulad wanted him, and the queen. Why?

They walked the killing field, the rain pummelling down in a soft roar, devastation and slaughter on all sides. Figures were moving about here and there. Tiste Edur seeking fallen comrades, wraiths on senseless patrols. The thunder was closer.

'There is a river,' Lilac said. 'I smelled it when we first arrived. It is the same river as ran beneath the bridge.'

'Yes,' Trull replied. 'The Katter River.'

'I would see it.'

'Why not?'

They angled northwest. Reached the loggers' road that ran parallel to the forest and followed its three-rutted track until the treeline thinned on their right, and the river became visible.

'Ah,' Lilac murmured, 'it is so small...'

Trull studied the fast-flowing water, the glittering skin it cast over boulders. 'A caster of nets,' he said.

'My home, Denier.'

The Tiste Edur walked down to the river's edge. He reached and plunged his bloodstained hand into the icy water.

'Are there not fish in there?' Lilac asked.

'I am sure there are. Why?'

'In the river where I live, there are n'purel, the Whiskered Fish. They can eat a Kenyll'rah youth whole, and there are some in the deep lakes that could well eat an adult such as myself. Of course, we never venture onto the deeps. Are there no such creatures here?'

'In the seas,' Trull replied, 'there are sharks. And, of course, there are plenty of stories of larger monsters, some big enough to sink ships.'

'The n'purel then crawl onto shore and shed their skins, whereupon they live on land.'

'That is a strange thing,' Trull said, glancing back at the demon. 'I gather that casting nets is a dangerous activity, then.'

Lilac shrugged. 'No more dangerous than hunting spiders, Denier.'

'Call me Trull.'
'You are an Arbiter of Life, a Denier of Freedom. You are the Stealer of my Death—'

'All right. Never mind.'

'What war is this?'

'A pointless one.'

'They are all pointless, Denier. Subjugation and defeat breed resentment and hatred, and such things cannot
be bribed away.'

'Unless the spirit of the defeated is crushed,' Trull said. 'Absolutely crushed, such as with the Nerek and the
Faraed and Tarthenal.'

'I do not know those people, Denier.'

'They are among those the Letherii – our enemy in this war – have conquered.'

'And you think them broken?'

'They are that, Lilac.'

'It may not be as it seems.'

Trull shrugged. 'Perhaps you are right.'

'Will their station change under your rule?'

'I suspect not.'

'If you understand all this, Denier, why do you fight?'

The sound of moccasins on gravel behind them. Trull straightened and turned to see Fear approaching. In his
hand was a Letherii sword.

Trull considered readying the spear strapped to his back, then decided against it. Despite what he'd said
earlier, he was not prepared to fight his brother.

'This weapon,' Fear said as he halted five paces from Trull, 'is Letherii steel.'

'I saw them on the field of battle. They defied the K'risnan sorcery, when all else was destroyed. Swords,
spear-heads, undamaged.' Trull studied his brother. 'What of it?'

Fear hesitated, then looked out on the river. 'It is what I do not understand. How did they achieve such a
thing as this steel? They are a corrupt, vicious people, Trull. They do not deserve such advances in craft.'

'Why them and not us?' Trull asked, then he smiled. 'Fear, the Letherii are a forward-looking people, and so
inherently driven. We Edur do not and have never possessed such a force of will. We have our Blackwood, but
we have always possessed that. Our ancestors brought it with them from Emurlahn. Brother, we look back—'

'To the time when Father Shadow ruled over us,' Fear cut in, his expression darkening. 'Hannan Mosag
speaks the truth. We must devour the Letherii, we must set a yoke upon them, and so profit from their natural
drive to foment change.'

'And what will that do to us, brother? We resist change, we do not worship it, we do not thrive in its midst
the way the Letherii do. Besides, I am not convinced that theirs is the right way to live. I suspect their faith in
progress is far more fragile than it outwardly seems. In the end, they must ever back up what they seek with
force.' Trull pointed to the sword. 'With that.'

'We shall guide them, Trull. Hannan Mosag understood this—'

'You revise the past now, Fear. He was not intending to wage war on the Letherii.'
'Not immediately, true, but it would have come. And he knew it. So the K'risnan have told me. We had lost Father Shadow. It was necessary to find a new source of faith.'

'A faceless one?'

'Damn you, Trull! You knelt before him – no different from the rest of us!'

'And to this day, I wonder why. What about you, Fear? Do you wonder why you did as you did?'

His brother turned away, visibly trembling. 'I saw no doubt.'

'In Hannan Mosag. And so you followed. As did the rest of us, I suspect. One and all, we knelt before Rhulad, believing we saw in each other a certainty that did not in truth exist—'

With a roar, Fear spun round, the sword lifting high. It swung down—

—and was halted, suddenly, by the demon, whose massive hand had closed round Fear's forearm and held it motionless.

'Release me!'

'No,' Lilac replied. 'This warrior stole my death. I now steal his.'

Fear struggled a moment longer, then, seeing it was hopeless, he sagged.

'You can let him go now,' Trull said.

'If he attacks again I will kill him,' the demon said, releasing Fear's arm.

'We followed Hannan Mosag,' Trull said, 'and yet, what did we know of his mind? He was our Warlock King, and so we followed. Think on this, Fear. He had sought out a new source of power, rejecting Father Shadow. True, he knew, as we did, that Scabandari Bloodeye was dead, or, at best, his spirit lived but was lost to us. And so he made pact with ... something else. And he sent you and me, Binadas and Rhulad and the Buhns, to retrieve the gift that ... thing ... created for him. The fault lies with us, Fear, in that we did not question, did not challenge the Warlock King. We were fools, and all that is before us now, and all that will come, is our fault.'

'He is the Warlock King, Trull.'

'Who arrived at absolute power over all the Edur. He held it and would not lose it, no matter what. And so he surrendered his soul. As did we, when we knelt before Rhulad.'

Fear's eyes narrowed on him. 'You are speaking treason, brother.'

'Against what? Against whom? Tell me, I truly want to know. Have you seen the face of our new god?'

'Were Binadas standing here and not I,' Fear whispered, 'you would be dead now.'

'And, in our wondrous new empire, will that be the singular fate of all those who voice dissent?'

Fear looked down at the sword in his hand. Then let it drop. 'Your warriors are awaiting you, Trull. In two days' time we resume our march. South, to Letheras.' He then turned and walked away.

Trull watched him for a moment, then looked out on the river once more. For every eddy in the current, in the lees of boulders and notches in the bank, the river rushed on, slave to relentless laws. When he had placed his hand in the water, it had quickly grown numb. 'Eventually, Lilac, we will make sense of this.'

The demon said nothing.

Trull walked to a nearby boulder and sat down on it. He lowered his head into his hands and began to weep.

After a time the demon moved to stand beside him. Then a heavy hand settled on his shoulder.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Invisible in all his portions
This thick-skinned thing has borders
Indivisible to every sentinel
Patrolling the geography of
Arbitrary definitions, and yet the
Mountains have ground down
The fires died, and so streams
This motionless strand of sharp
Black sand where I walk
Cutting my path on the coarse
Conclusions countless teeth
Have grated – all lost now
In this unlit dust – we are not
And have never been
The runners green and fresh
Of life risen from the crushed
Severing extinctions (that one past
this one new) all hallowed and self-sure
But the dead strand moves unseen,
The river of black crawls on
To some wistful resolution
The place with no meaning
Inconsequential in absence
Of strings and shadows
Charting from then to now
And these stitched lines
Finding this in that...

Excerpt from
The Black Sands of Time
(in the collection Suicidal Poets of Darujhistan)
edited by Haroak

The corpse beyond the pier was barely visible, a pallid patch resisting the roll of the waves. The shark that rose alongside it to make a sideways lunge was one of the largest ones Udinaas had yet seen during the time he'd sat looking out on the harbour, his legs dangling from the jetty's edge.

Gulls and sharks, the feast lasting the entire morning. The slave watched, feeling like a spectator before nature's incessant display, the inevitability of the performance leaving him oddly satisfied. Entertained, in fact. Those who owed. Those who were owed. They sat equally sweet in the bellies of the scavengers. And this was a thing of wonder.

The emperor would summon him soon, he knew. The army was stirring itself into motion somewhere beyond Trate's broken gates, inland. An oversized garrison of Beneda Edur was remaining in the city, enforcing the restitution of peace, normality. The once-chief of the Den-Ratha had been given the title of governor. That the garrison under his control was not of his own tribe was no accident. Suspicion had come in the wake of success, as it always did.

Hannan Mosag's work. The emperor had been ... fraught of late. Distracted. Suffering. Too often, madness burned in his eyes.

Mayen had beaten Feather Witch senseless, as close to killing the slave outright as was possible. In the vast
tent that now served as Edur headquarters – stolen from the train that had belonged to the Cold Clay Battalion – there had been rapes. Slaves, prisoners. Perhaps Mayen simply did to others what Rhulad did to her. A compassionate mind might believe so. And as for the hundreds of noble women taken from the Letherii by Edur warriors, most had since been returned at the governor's command, although it was likely that many now carried half-blood seeds within them.

The governor would soon accept the many requests to hear delegations from the various guilds and merchant interests. And a new pattern would take shape.

Unless, of course, the frontier cities were liberated by a victorious Letherii counter-attack. Plenty of rumours, of course. Clashes at sea between Edur and Letherii fleets. Thousands sent to the deep. The storm seen far to the west the night before had signalled a mage-war. The Ceda, Kuru Qan, had finally roused himself in all his terrible power. While Letherii corpses crowded the harbour, it was Edur bodies out in the seas beyond.

Strangest rumour of all, the prison island of Second Maiden Fort had flung back a succession of Edur attacks, and was still holding out, and among the half-thousand convicted soldiers was a sorcerer who had once rivalled the Ceda himself. That was why the Edur army had remained camped here— they wanted no enemy still active behind them.

Udinaas knew otherwise. There might well be continued resistance in their wake, but the emperor was indifferent to such things. And the Letherii fleet had yet to make an appearance. The Edur ships commanded Katter Sea as far south as the city of Awl.

He drew his legs up and climbed to his feet. Walked back down the length of the pier. The streets were quiet. Most signs of the fighting had been removed, the bodies and broken furniture and shattered pottery, and a light rain the night before had washed most of the bloodstains away. But the air still stank of smoke and the walls of the buildings were smeared with an oily grit. Windows gaped and doorways that had been kicked in remained dark.

He had never much liked Trate. Rife with thugs and the dissolute remnants of the Nerek and Fent; the market stalls crowded with once-holy icons and relics, with ceremonial artwork now being sold as curios. The talking sticks of chiefs, the medicine bags of shamans. Fent ancestor chests, the bones still in them. The harbour front streets and alleys had been crowded with Nerek children selling their bodies, and over it all hung a vague sense of smugness, as if this was the proper order of the world, the roles settled out as they should be. Letherii dominant, surrounded by lesser creatures inherently servile, their cultures little more than commodities.

Belief in destiny delivered its own imperatives.

But here, now, the savages had arrived and a new order had been asserted, proving that destiny was an illusion. The city was in shock, with only a few malleable merchants venturing forth in the faith that the new ways to come were but the old ways, that the natural order in fact superseded any particular people. At the same time, they believed that none could match the Letherii in this game of riches, and so in the end they would win—the savages would find themselves civilized. Proof that destiny was anything but illusory.

Udinaas wondered if they were right. There were mitigating factors, after all. Tiste Edur lifespans were profoundly long. Their culture was both resilient and embedded. Conservative. Or, so it was. Until Rhulad. Until the sword claimed him.

A short time later he strode through the inland gate and approached the Edur encampment. There seemed to be little organization to the vast array of tents. This was not simply an army, but an entire people on the move—a way of life to which they were not accustomed. Wraiths patrolled the outskirts.

They ignored him as he passed the pickets. He had not heard from Wither, his own companion shade, in a long time, but he knew it had not gone away. Lying low with its secrets. Sometimes he caught its laughter, as if from a great distance, the timing always perverse.

Rhulad's tent was at the centre of the encampment, the entrance flanked by demons in boiled leather armour stained black, long-handled maces resting heads to the ground before them. Full helms hid their faces.
'How many bodies have they dragged out today?' Udinaas asked as he walked between them.

Neither replied.

There were four compartments within, divided by thick-clothed walls fixed to free-standing bronze frames. The foremost chamber was shallow but ran the breadth of the tent. Benches had been placed along the sides. The area to the right was crowded with supplies of various sorts, casks and crates and earthen jars. Passage into the main room beyond was between two dividers.

He entered to see the emperor standing before his raised throne. Mayen lounged on a looted couch to the left of the wooden dais, her expression strangely dulled. Feather Witch stood in the shadows against the wall behind the empress, her face swollen and bruised almost beyond recognition. Hannan Mosag and Hull Beddict were facing the emperor, their backs to Udinaas. The Warlock King's wraith bodyguard was not present.

Hannan Mosag was speaking. '... of that there is no doubt, sire.'

Coins had fallen from Rhulad's forehead, where the soldier's palm had struck when it broke his neck. The skin revealed was naught but scar tissue, creased where the skull's frontal bone had caved inward – that internal damage had healed, since the dent was now gone. The emperor's eyes were so bloodshot they seemed nothing but murky red pools. He studied Hannan Mosag for a moment, apparently unaware of the spasms crossing his ravaged features, then said, 'Lost kin? What does that mean?'

'I have dreamed them, Emperor. In my mind I have been led into other realms, other worlds that lie alongside this one—'

'Kurald Emurlahn.'

'That realm is broken in pieces,' Hannan Mosag said, 'but yes, I have seen fragment-worlds. In one such world dwell the Kenyll'rah, the demons we have bound to us. In another, there are ghosts from our past battles.'

Hull Beddict cleared his throat. 'Warlock King, are these realms the Holds of my people?'

'Perhaps, but I think not.'

'That is not relevant,' Rhulad said to Hull as he began pacing. 'Hannan Mosag, how fare these lost kin?'

'Poorly, sire. Some have lost all memory of past greatness. Others are subjugated—'

The emperor's head swung round. 'Subjugated?'

'Yes.'

'We must deliver them,' Rhulad said, resuming his pacing, the macabre clicking sounds of coin edges snapping together the only sound to follow his pronouncement.

Udinaas moved unobtrusively to stand behind the throne. There was something pathetic, to his mind, about the ease with which the Warlock King manipulated Rhulad. Beneath all those coins and behind that mottled sword was a marred and fragile Edur youth. Hannan Mosag might have surrendered the throne in the face of Rhulad's power, but he would not relinquish his ambition to rule.

'We will build ships,' the emperor resumed after a time. 'In the Letherii style, I think. Large, seaworthy. You said there were Tiste Andii enclaves as well? We will conquer them, use them as slaves to crew our ships. We shall undertake these journeys once Lether has fallen, once our empire is won.'

'Sire, the other realms I spoke of – some will allow us to hasten our passage. There are ... gateways. I am seeking the means of opening them, controlling them. Provided there are seas, in those hidden worlds, we can
achieve swift travel—'

'Seas?' Rhulad laughed. 'If there are no seas, Hannan Mosag, then you shall make them!'

'Sire?'

'Open one realm upon another. An ocean realm, released into a desert realm.'

The Warlock King's eyes widened slightly. 'The devastation would be ... terrible.'

'Cleansing, you mean to say. After all, why should the Edur empire confine itself to one world? You must shift your focus, Hannan Mosag. You are too limited in your vision.' He paused, winced at some inner tremor, then continued in a strained tone, 'It is what comes of power. Yes, what comes. To see the vastness of ... things. Potentials, the multitude of opportunities. Who can stand before us, after all?' He spun round. 'Udinaas! Where have you been?'

'At the harbour front, Emperor.'

'Doing what?'

'Watching the sharks feeding.'

'Hah! You hear that, Hannan Mosag? Hull Beddict? He is a cold one, is he not? This slave of ours. We chose well indeed. Tell us, Udinaas, do you believe in these secret realms?'

'Are we blind to hidden truths, Emperor? I cannot believe otherwise.'

A start from Hannan Mosag, his eyes narrowing.

Mayen suddenly spoke, in a low drawl. 'Feather Witch says this one is possessed.'

No-one spoke for a half-dozen heartbeats. Rhulad slowly approached Udinaas. 'Possessed? By what, Mayen? Did your slave yield that detail?'

'The Wyval. Do you not recall that event?'

Hannan Mosag said, 'Uruth Sengar examined him, Empress.'

'So she did. And found nothing. No poison in his blood.'

Rhulad's eyes searched his slave's face. 'Udinaas?'

'I am as you see me, master. If there is a poison within me, I am not aware of it. Mistress Uruth seemed certain of her conclusion, else she would have killed me then.'

'Then why should Feather Witch make such accusations?'

Udinaas shrugged. 'Perhaps she seeks to deflect attention so as to lessen the severity of the beatings.'

Rhulad stared at him a moment, then swung round. 'Beatings? There have been no beatings. An errant sorcerous attack ...'

'Now who is seeking to deflect attention?' Mayen said, smiling. 'You will take the word of a slave over that of your wife?'

The emperor seemed to falter. 'Of course not, Mayen.' He looked across to Hannan Mosag. 'What say you?'

The Warlock King's innocent frown managed the perfect balance of concern and confusion. 'Which matter would you have me speak of, sire? The presence of Wyval poison within this Udinaas, or the fact that your wife is beating her slave?'

Mayen's laughter was harsh. 'Oh, Rhulad, I really did not think you believed me. My slave has been irritating
me. Indeed, I am of a mind to find another, one less clumsy, less ... disapproving. As if a slave has the right to disapprove of anything.'

'Disapprove?' the emperor asked. 'What... why?'

'Does a Wyval hide within Udinaas or not?' Mayen demanded, sitting straighter. 'Examine the slave, Hannan Mosag.'

'Who rules here?' Rhulad's shriek froze everyone. The emperor's sword had risen, the blade shivering as shudders rolled through him. 'You would all play games with us?'

Mayen shrank back on the divan, eyes slowly widening in raw fear.

The emperor's fierce gaze was fixing on her, then the Warlock King, then back again. 'Everyone out,' Rhulad whispered. 'Everyone but Udinaas. Now.'

Hannan Mosag opened his mouth to object, then changed his mind. Hull Beddict trailing, the Warlock King strode from the tent. Mayen, wrapping herself in the silk-stitched blanket from the couch, hurried in their wake, Feather Witch stumbling a step behind.

'Wife.'

She halted.

'The family of the Sengar have never believed there was value in beating slaves. You will cease. If she is incompetent, then find another. Am I understood?'

'Yes, sire,' she said.

'Leave us.'

As soon as they were gone, Rhulad lowered the sword and studied Udinaas for a time. 'We are not blind to all those who would seek advantage. The Warlock King sees us as too young, too ignorant, but he knows nothing of the truths we have seen. Mayen – she is as a dead thing beneath me. We should have left her to Fear. That was a mistake.' He blinked, as if recovering himself, then regarded Udinaas with open suspicion. 'And you, slave. What secrets do you hide?'

Udinaas lowered himself to one knee, said nothing.

'Nothing will be hidden from us,' Rhulad said. 'Look up, Udinaas.'

He did, and saw a wraith crouched at his side.

'This shade shall examine you, slave. It will see if you are hiding poison within you.'

Udinaas nodded. Yes, do this, Rhulad. I am weary. I want an end.

The wraith moved forward, then enveloped him.

'Oohh, such secrets!'

He knew that voice and closed his eyes. Clever, Wither. I assume you volunteered?

'So many, left shattered, wandering lost. This bastard has used us sorely. Do you imagine we would willingly accede to his demands? I am unbound, and that has made me useful, for I am proof against compulsion where my kin are not. Can he tell the difference? Evidently he cannot.' A trill of vaguely manic laughter. 'And what shall I find? Udinaas. You must stay at this madman's side. He is going to Letheras, you see, and we need you there.'

Udinaas sighed. Why?

'All in good time. Ah, you rail at the melodrama? Too bad, hee hee. Glean my secrets, if you dare. You can,
No. Now go away.

Wither slipped back, resumed its swirling man-shape in front of Udinaas.

Rhulad released one hand from the sword to claw at his face. He spun round, took two steps, then howled his rage. 'Why are they lying to us? We cannot trust them! Not any of them!' He turned. 'Stand, Udinaas. You alone do not lie. You alone can be trusted.' He strode to the throne and sat. 'We need to think. We need to make sense of this. Hannan Mosag ... he covets our power, doesn't he?'

Udinaas hesitated, then said, 'Yes, sire. He does.'

Rhulad's eyes gleamed red. 'Tell us more, slave.'

'It is not my place—'

'We decide what is your place. Speak.'

'You stole his throne, Emperor. And the sword he believed was rightly his.'

'He wants it still, does he?' A sudden laugh, chilling and brutal. 'Oh, he's welcome to it! No, we cannot. Mustn't. Impossible. And what of our wife?'

'Mayen is broken. She wanted nothing real from her flirting with you. You were the youngest brother to the man she would marry. She sought allies within the Sengar household.' He stopped there, seeing the spasms return to Rhulad, the extremity of his emotion too close to an edge, a precipice, and it would not do to send him over it. Not yet, perhaps not at all. It's the poison within me, so hungry for vengeance, so ... spiteful. These are not my thoughts, not my inclinations. Remember that, Udinaas, before you do worse than would Harmon Mosag. 'Sire,' he said softly, 'Mayen is lost. And hurting. And you are the only one who can help her.'

'You speak to save the slave woman,' the emperor said in a rough whisper.

'Feather Witch knows only hatred for me, sire. I am an Indebted, whilst she is not. My desire for her was hubris, and she would punish me for it.'

'Your desire for her.'

Udinaas nodded. 'Would I save her from beatings? Of course I would, sire. Just as you would do the same. As indeed you just did, not a moment ago.'

'Because it is ... sordid. What am I to make of you, Udinaas? A slave. An ... Indebted ... as if that could make you less in the eyes of another slave.'

'The Letherii relinquish nothing, even when they are made into slaves. Sire, that is a truth the Tiste Edur have never understood. Poor or rich, free or enslaved, we build the same houses in which to live, in which to play out the old dramas. In the end, it does not matter whether destiny embraces us or devours us – either is as it should be, and only the Errant decides our fate.'

Rhulad was studying him as he spoke. The tremors had slowed. 'Hull Beddict struggled to say the same thing, but he is poor at words, and so failed. Thus, Udinaas, we may conquer them, we may command their flesh in the manner we command yours and that of your fellow slaves, but the belief that guides them, that guides all of you, that cannot be defeated.'

'Barring annihilation, sire.'

'And this Errant, he is the arbiter of fate?'

'He is, sire.'

'And he exists?'
'Physically? I don't know. It doesn't matter.'

Rhulad nodded. 'You are right, slave, it doesn't.'

'Conquer Lether and it will devour you, sire. Your spirit. Your ... innocence.'

A strange smile twisted Rhulad's face. 'Innocence. This, from a short-lived creature such as you. We should take offence. We should see your head torn from your shoulders. You proclaim we cannot win this war, and what are we to think of that?

'The answer lies upon your very flesh, sire.'

Rhulad glanced down. His fingernails had grown long, curved and yellow. He tapped a coin on his chest. 'Bring to an end ... the notion of wealth. Of money. Crush the illusion of value.'

Udinaas was stunned. He may be young and half mad, but Rhulad is no fool.

'Ah,' the emperor said. 'We see your ... astonishment. We have, it seems, been underestimated, even by our slave. But yours is no dull mind, Udinaas. We thank the Sisters that you are not King Ezgara Diskanar, for then we would be sorely challenged.'

'Ezgara may be benign, sire, but he has dangerous people around him.'

'Yes, this Ceda, Kuru Qan. Why has he not yet acted?'

Udinaas shook his head. 'I have been wondering the same, sire.'

'We will speak more, Udinaas. And none other shall know of this. After all, what would they think, an emperor and a slave together, working to fashion a new empire? For we must keep you a slave, mustn't we? A slave in the eyes of all others. We suspect that, were we to free you, you would leave us.'

A sudden tremble at these words.

Errant take me, this man needs a friend.' Sire, I would not leave. It was I who placed the coins in your flesh. There is no absolving that, no true way I could make amends. But I will stand by you, through all of this.'

Rhulad's terrible eyes, so crimson-bruised and hurt, shifted away from Udinaas. 'Do you understand, Udinaas?' he asked in a whisper. 'I am so ...'

Frightened. 'Yes, sire, I understand.'

The emperor placed a hand over his eyes. 'She is drowning herself in white nectar.'

'Yes, sire.'

'I would free her ... but I cannot. Do you know why, Udinaas?'

'She carries your child.'

'You must have poison blood, Udinaas, to know so much...'

'Sire, it might be worth considering sending for Uruth. For your mother. Mayen needs ... someone.'

Rhulad, face still covered by his mangled hand, nodded. 'We will join with Fear's army soon. Five, six days. Uruth will join them. Then ... yes, I will speak with Mother. My child...'

My child. No, it is impossible. A Meckros foundling. There is no point in thinking about him. None at all.

I am not an evil man ... yet I have just vowed to stand at his side. Errant take me, what have I done?

A farm was burning in the valley below, but she could see no-one fighting the flames. Everyone had fled. Seren Pedac resumed hacking at her hair, cutting it as short as she could manage with the docker's knife one of Iron
Bars's soldiers had given her.

The Avowed stood nearby, his squad mage, Corlo, at his side. They were studying the distant fire and speaking in low tones.

Somewhere south and east of Dresh, half a day from the coast. She could not imagine the Tiste Edur invaders were anywhere near, yet the roads had been full of refugees, all heading east to Letheras. She had seen more than a few deserters among the crowds, and here and there bodies lay in ditches, victims of robbery or murdered after being raped.

Rape, it seemed, had become a favoured pastime among the thugs preying on the fleeing citizens. Seren knew that, had she been travelling alone, she would probably be dead by now. In some ways, that would have been a relief. An end to this sullied misery, this agonizing feeling of being unclean. In her mind, she saw again and again Iron Bars killing those men. His desire to exact appropriate vengeance. And her voice, croaking out, stopping him in the name of mercy.

Errant knew, she regretted that now. Better had she let him work on that bastard. Better still were they still carrying him with them. Eyes gouged out, nose cut off, tongue carved from his mouth. And with this knife in her hand she could slice strips of skin from his flesh. She had heard a story once, of a factor in a small remote hamlet who had made a habit of raping young girls, until the women one night ambushed him. Beaten and trussed, then a loincloth filled with spike-thorns had been tied on like a diaper, tightly, and the man was bound to the back of his horse. The prickling thorns drove the animal into a frenzy. The beast eventually scraped the man loose on a forest path, but he had bled out by then. The story went that the man's face, in death, had held all the pain a mortal could suffer, and as for what had been found between his legs...

She sawed off the last length of greasy hair and dropped it on the fire. The stench was fierce, but there were bush-warlocks and decrepit shamans who, if they happened upon human hair, would make dire use of it. It was a sad truth that, given the chance to bind a soul, few resisted the temptation.

Corlo called to the soldiers and suddenly they were running hard down the hillside towards the farm, leaving behind only Seren and Iron Bars. The Crimson Guardsman strode towards her. 'You hear it, lass?'

'What?'

'Horses. In the stable. The fire's jumped to its roof. The farmer's left his horses behind.'

'He wouldn't do that.'

He squinted down at her, then crouched until he was at eye level. 'No, likely the owner's dead. Strange, how most locals around here don't know how to ride.'

She looked down at the farm once again. 'Probably a breeder for the army. The whole notion of cavalry came from Bluerose – as did most of the stock. Horses weren't part of our culture before then. Have you ever seen Letherii cavalry on parade? Chaos. Even after, what, sixty years? And dozens of Bluerose officers trying to train our soldiers.'

'You should have imported these Bluerose horse-warriors over as auxiliaries. If it's their skill, exploit it. You can't borrow someone else's way of life.'

'Maybe not. Presumably, you can ride, then.'

'Aye. And you?'

She nodded, sheathing the knife and rising. 'Trained by one of those Bluerose officers I mentioned.'

'You were in the army before?'

'No, he was my lover. For a time.'

Iron Bars straightened as well. 'Look – they've reached them in time. Come on.'
She hesitated. 'I forgot to thank you, Iron Bars.'

'You wouldn't have been as pretty drowned.'

'No. I'm not ready yet to thank you for that. What you did to those men ...'

'I've a great-granddaughter back in Gris, D'Avore Valley. She'd be about your age now. Let's go, lass.'

She walked behind him down the slope. Great-granddaughter. What an absurd notion. He wasn't that old. These Avowed had strange senses of humour.

Corlo and the squad had pulled a dozen horses from the burning stable, along with tack and bridles. One of the soldiers was cursing as Seren and Iron Bars approached.

'Look at these stirrups! No wonder the bastards can't ride the damned things!'

'You set your foot down in the crotch of the hook,' Seren explained.

'And what happens if it slips out?' the man demanded.

'You fall off.'

'Avowed, we need to rework these things – some heavy leather—'

'Cut up a spare saddle,' Iron Bars said, 'and see what you can manage. But I want us to be riding before sunset.'

'Aye, sir.'

'A more stable stirrup,' the Avowed said to Seren, 'is a kind of half-boot, something you can slide your foot into, with a straight cross-bar to take your weight. I agree with Halfpeck. These Bluerose horse-warriors missed something obvious and essential. They couldn't have been very good riders ...'

Seren frowned. 'My lover once mentioned how these saddles were made exclusively for Lether. He said they used a slightly different kind back in Bluerose.'

His eyes narrowed on her, and he barked a laugh, but made no further comment.

She sighed. 'No wonder our cavalry is next to useless. I always found it hard to keep my feet in, and to keep them from turning this way and that.'

'You mean they swivel?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I'd like to meet these Bluerose riders some day.'

'They are a strange people, Iron Bars. They worship someone called the Black-winged Lord.'

'And they resemble Letherii?'

'No, they are taller. Very dark skins.'

He regarded her for a moment, then asked, 'Faces like the Tiste Edur?'

'No, much finer-boned.'

'Long-lived?'

'Not that I'm aware of, but to be honest, I don't really know. Few Letherii do, nor do they much care. The Blueroses were defeated. Subjugated. There were never very many of them, in any case, and they preferred isolation. Small cities, from what I've heard. Gloomy.'
'What ended your affair?'

'Just that, I suppose. He rarely saw any good in anything. I wearied of his scepticism, his cynicism, the way he acted – as if he'd seen it all before a thousand times ...'

The stable was engulfed in flames by now, and they were all forced away by the fierce heat. In the nearby pasture they retreated to, they found a half-dozen corpses, the breeder and his family. They'd known little mercy in the last few bells of their lives. None of the soldiers who examined them said a word, but their expressions hardened.

Iron Bars made a point of keeping Seren away whilst three men from the squad buried the bodies. 'We've found a trail,' he said. 'If you don't mind, lass, we want to follow it. For a word with the ones who killed that family.'

'Show me the tracks,' she said.

He gestured and Corlo led her to the edge of a stand of trees on the southeast end of the clearing. Seren studied the array of footprints entering the woodcutters' path. 'There's twenty or more of them,' she pronounced after a moment.

The mage nodded. 'Deserters. In armour.'

'Yes, or burdened with loot.'

'Likely both.'

She turned to regard the man. 'You Crimson Guardsmen – you're pretty sure of yourselves, aren't you?'

'When it comes to fighting, aye, lass, we are.'

'I watched Iron Bars fight in Trate. He's an exception, I gather—'

'Aye, he is, but not among the Avowed. Jup Alat would've given him trouble. Or Poll, for that matter. Then there's those in the other companies. Halfdan, Blues, Black the Elder ...'

'More of these Avowed?'

'Aye.'

'And what does it mean? To be an Avowed?'

'Means they swore to return their prince to his lands. He was driven out, you see, by the cursed Emperor Kellanved. Anyway, it ain't happened yet. But it will, someday, maybe soon.'

'And that was the vow? All right. It seems this prince had some able soldiers with him.'

'Oh indeed, lass, especially when the vow's kept them alive all this time.'

'What do you mean?'

The mage looked suddenly nervous. 'I'm saying too much. Never mind me, lass. Anyway, you've seen the trail the bastards left behind. They made no effort to hide, meaning they're cocksure themselves, aren't they?'

He smiled, but there was no humour in it. 'We'll catch up, and then we'll show them what real cavalry can do. Riding horses with stirrups, I mean – we don't often fight from the saddle, but we ain't new to it either.'

'Well, I admit, you've got me curious.'

'Just curious, lass? No hunger for vengeance?'

She looked away. 'I want to look around,' she said. 'Alone, if you don't mind.'

The mage shrugged. 'Don't wander too far. The Avowed's taken to you, I think.'
That's ... *unfortunate.* 'I won't.'

Seren headed into the wood. There had been decades of thinning, leaving plenty of stumps and open spaces between trees. She listened to Corlo walking away, back to the clearing. As soon as silence enveloped her, she suddenly regretted the solitude. Desires surged, none of them healthy, none of them pleasant. She would never again feel clean, and this truth pushed her thoughts in the opposite direction, as if a part of her sought to foul her flesh yet further, as far as it could go. Why not? Lost in the darkness as she was, it was nothing to stain her soul black, through and through.

Alone, now frightened – of herself, of the urges within her – she walked on, unmindful of direction. Deeper into the wood, where the stumps were fewer and soft with rot, the deadfall thicker. The afternoon light barely reached through here.

Hurt was nothing. Was meaningless. But no, there was value in pain, if only to remind oneself that one still lived. When nothing normal could be regained, ever, then other pleasures had to be found. Cultivated, the body and mind taught anew, to delight in a darker strain.

A clearing ahead, in which reared figures.

She halted.

Motionless, half sunk into the ground, tilting this way and that in the high grasses. Statues. This had been Tarthenal land, she recalled. Before the Letherii arrived to crush the tribes. The name 'Dresh' was Tarthenal, in fact, as were the nearby village names of Denner, Lan and Brous.

Seren approached, came to the edge of the clearing.

Five statues in all, vaguely man-shaped but so weathered as to be featureless, with but the slightest indentations marking the pits of their eyes carved into the granite. They were all buried to their waists, suggesting that, when entirely above ground, they stood as tall as the Tarthenal themselves. Some kind of pantheon, she supposed, names and faces worn away by the tens of centuries that had passed since this glade had last known worshippers.

The Letherii had nearly wiped the Tarthenal out back then. As close to absolute genocide as they had ever come in their many conquests. She recalled a line from an early history written by a witness of that war. *They fought in defence of their holy sites with expressions of terror, as if in failing something vast and terrible would be unleashed...* Seren looked around. The only thing vast and terrible in this place was the pathos of its abandonment.

Such dark moments in Letherii history were systematically disregarded, she knew, and played virtually no role in their culture's vision of itself as bringers of progress, deliverers of freedom from the fetters of primitive ways of living, the cruel traditions and vicious rituals. Liberators, then, destined to wrest from savage tyrants their repressed victims, in the name of civilization. That the Letherii then imposed their own rules of oppression was rarely acknowledged. There was, after all, but one road to success and fulfilment, gold-cobbled and maintained by Letherii toll-collectors, and only the free could walk it.

_Free to profit from the same game. Free to discover one's own inherent disadvantages. Free to be abused. Free to be exploited. Free to be owned in lieu of debt. Free to be raped._

And to know misery. It was a natural truth that some walked that road faster than others. There would always be those who could only crawl. Or fell to the wayside. The most basic laws of existence, after all, were always harsh.

The statues before her were indifferent to all of that. Their worshippers had died defending them, and all for nothing. Memory was not loyal to the past, only to the exigencies of the present. She wondered if the Tiste Edur saw the world the same way. How much of their own past had they selectively forgotten, how many unpleasant truths had they twisted into self-appeasing lies? Did they suffer from the same flaw, this need to revise history to answer some deep-seated diffidence, a hollowness at the core that echoed with miserable uncertainty? Was this entire drive for progress nothing more than a hopeless search for some kind of fulfilment,
as if on some instinctive level there was a murky understanding, a recognition that the game had no value, and so victory was meaningless?

Such understanding would have to be murky, for clarity was hard, and the Letherii disliked things that were hard, and so rarely chose to think in that direction. Baser emotions were the preferred response, and complex arguments were viewed with anger and suspicion.

She laid a hand upon the shoulder of the nearest statue, and was surprised to discover the stone warm to her touch. Retaining the sun's heat, perhaps. But no, it was too hot for that. Seren pulled her hand away – any longer and she would have burned her skin.

Unease rose within her. Suddenly chilled, she stepped back. And now saw the dead grass surrounding each statue, desiccated by incessant heat.

It seemed the Tarthenal gods were not dead after all.

Sometimes the past rises once again to reveal the lies. Lies that persisted through nothing more than force of will, and collective opinion. Sometimes that revelation comes drenched in fresh blood. Delusions invited their own shattering. Letherii preeminence. Tiste Edur arrogance. The sanctity of my own flesh.

A sound behind her. She turned.

Iron Bars stood at the edge of the clearing. 'Corlo said there was something ... restless ... in this wood.'

She sighed. 'Better were it only me.'

He cocked his head, smiled wryly.

She approached. 'Tarthenal. I thought I knew this land. Every trail, the old barrow grounds and holy sites. It is a responsibility of an Acquitor, after all.'

'We hope to make use of that knowledge,' the Avowed said. 'I don't want no fanfare when we enter Letheras.'

'Agreed. Even among a crowd of refugees, we would stand out. You might consider finding clothing that looks less like a uniform.'

'I doubt it'd matter, lass. Either way, we'd be seen as deserters and flung into the ranks of defenders. This ain't our war and we'd rather have nothing to do with it. The question is, can you get us into Letheras unseen?'

'Yes.'

'Good. The lads are almost ready with the new stirrups.'

She glanced back at the statues.

'Makes you wonder, don't it, lass?'

'About what?'

'The way old anger never goes away.'

Seren faced him again. 'Anger. That's something you're intimately familiar with, I gather.'

A frown. 'Corlo talks too much.'

'If you wanted to get your prince's land back, what are you doing here? I've never heard of this Emperor Kellanved, so his empire must be far away.'

'Oh, it's that, all right. Come on, it's time to go.'

'Sorry,' she said as she followed him back into the forest. 'I was prying.'
'Aye, you were.'

'Well. In return, you can ask me what you like.'

'And you'll answer?'

'Maybe.'

'You don't seem the type to end up as you did in Trate. So the merchant you were working for killed himself. Was he your lover or something?'

'No, and you're right, I'm not. It wasn't just Buruk the Pale, though I should have seen it coming – he as much as told me a dozen times on our way back. I just wasn't willing to hear, I suppose. The Tiste Edur emperor has a Letherii adviser—'

'Hull Beddict.'

'Yes.'

'You knew him?'

She nodded.

'And now you're feeling betrayed? Not only as a Letherii, but personally too. Well, that's hard, all right—'

'But there you are wrong, Iron Bars. I don't feel betrayed, and that's the problem. I understand him all too well, his decision – I understand it.'

'Wish you were with him?'

'No. I saw Rhulad Sengar – the emperor – I saw him come back to life. Had it been Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King ... well, I might well have thrown in my lot with them. But not the emperor ...'

'He came back to life? What do you mean by that?'

'He was dead. Very dead. Killed when collecting a sword for Hannan Mosag – a cursed sword of some kind. They couldn't get it out of his hands.'

'Why didn't they just cut his hands off?'

'It was coming to that, I suspect, but then he returned.'

'A nice trick. Wonder if he'll be as lucky the next time.'

They reached the edge of the wood and saw the others seated on the horses and waiting. At the Avowed's comment, Seren managed a smile. 'From the rumours, I'd say yes, he was.'

'He was killed again?'

'Yes, Iron Bars. In Trate. Some soldier who wasn't even from Lether. Just stepped up to him and broke his neck. Didn't even stay around to carve the gold coins from his body...'

'Hood's breath,' he muttered as they strode towards the others. 'Don't tell the others.'

'Why?'

'I got a reputation of making bad enemies, that's why.'

Eleven Tarthenal lived within a day's walk from the glade and its statues. Old Hunch Arbat had been chosen long ago for the task to which he sullenly attended, each month making the rounds with his two-wheeled cart, from one family to the next. Not one of the farms where the Tarthenal lived in Indebted servitude to a landowner in Dresh was exclusively of the blood. Mixed-breed children scampered out to greet Old Hunch Arbat,
flinging rotten fruit at his back as he made his way to the slop pit with his shovel, laughing and shouting their derision as he flung sodden lumps of faeces into the back of the cart.

Among the Tarthenal, all that existed in the physical world possessed symbolic meaning, and these meanings were mutually connected, bound into correspondences that were themselves part of a secret language.

Faeces was gold. Piss was ale. The mixed-breeds had forgotten most of the old knowledge, yet the tradition guiding Old Hunch Arbat's rounds remained, even if most of its significance was lost.

Once he'd completed his task, a final journey was left to him: pulling the foul cart with its heap of dripping, fly-swarmed waste onto a little-used trail in the Breeder's Wood, and eventually into the glade where stood the mostly buried statues.

As soon as he arrived, just past sunset, he knew that something had changed. In a place that had never changed, not once in his entire life.

There had been visitors, perhaps earlier that day, but that was the least of it. Old Hunch Arbat stared at the statues, seeing the burnt grasses, the faint glow of heat from the battered granite. He grimaced, revealing the blackened stumps of teeth – all that was left after decade upon decade of Letherii sweet-cakes – and when he reached for his shovel he saw that his hands were trembling.

He collected a load, carried it over to the nearest statue. Then flung the faeces against the weathered stone.

'Splat,' he said, nodding.

Hissing, then blackening, smoke, then ashes skirling down.


'Gold. Gold and ale. Damn gold damn ale damn nothing damn everything.' Cursing made him feel slightly better. 'Well then.' He walked back to the cart. 'Let's see if a whole load will appease. And, Old Hunch Arbat, your bladder's full, too. You timed it right, as always. Libations. The works, Old Hunch Arbat, the works.

'And if that don't help, then what, Old Hunch Arbat? Then what?

'Why, I answer, then I spread the word – if they'll listen. And if they do? Why, I say, then we run away.

'And if they don't listen?

'Why, I reply, then I run away.'

He collected another load onto his wooden shovel. 'Gold. Gold and ale ...'

'Sandalath Drukorlat. That is my name. I am not a ghost. Not any more. The least you can do is acknowledge my existence. Even the Nachts have better manners than you. If you keep sitting there and praying, I'll hit you.'

She had been trying since morning. Periodic interruptions to his efforts. He wanted to send her away, but it wasn't working. He'd forgotten how irritating company could be. Uninvited, unwelcome, persistent reminder of his own weaknesses. And now she was about to hit him.

Withal sighed and finally opened his eyes. The first time that day. Even in the gloom of his abode, the light hurt, made him squint. She stood before him, a silhouette, unmistakably female. For a god swathed in blankets, the Crippled One seemed unmindful of the nakedness among his chosen.

*Chosen. Where in Hood's name did he find her? Not a ghost, she said. Not any more. She just said that. She must have been one, then. Typical. He couldn't find anyone living. Not for this mission of mercy. Who better for someone starved of companion' ship than someone who's been dead for who knows how long? Listen to me. I'm losing my mind.*
She raised a hand to strike him.

He flinched back. 'All right, fine! Sandalath something. Pleased to meet you—'

'Sandalath Drukorlat. I am Tiste Andii—'

'That's nice. Now, in case you haven't noticed, I was in the midst of prayers—'

'You're always in the midst of prayers, and it's been two days now. At least, I think two days. The Nachts slept, anyway. Once.'

'They did? How strange.'

And you are?'

'Me? A weaponsmith. A Meckros. Sole survivor of the destruction of my city—'

'Your name!'

'Withal. No need to shout. There hasn't been any shouting. Well, some screaming, but not by me. Not yet, that is—'

'Be quiet. I have questions that you are going to answer.'

She was not particularly young, he noted as his eyes adjusted. Then again, neither was he. And that wasn't good. The young were better at making friends. The young had nothing to lose. 'You're being rather imperious, Sandalath.'

'Oh, did I hurt your feelings? Dreadfully sorry. Where did you get those clothes?'

'From the god, who else?'

'What god?'

'The one in the tent. Inland. You can't miss it. I don't see how – two days? What have you been doing with yourself? It's just up from the strand—'

'Be quiet.' She ran both hands through her hair.

Withal would rather she'd stayed a silhouette. He looked away. 'I thought you wanted answers. Go ask him —'

'I didn't know he was a god. You seemed preferable company, since all I got from him was coughing and laughter – at least, I think it was laughter—'

'It was, have no doubt about that. He's sick.'

'Sick?'

'Insane.'

'So, an insane hacking god and a muscle-bound, bald aspirant. And three Nachts. That's it? No-one else on this island?'

'Some lizard gulls, and ground-lizards, and rock-lizards, and lizard-rats in the smithy—'

'So where did you get that food there?'

He glanced over at the small table. 'The god provides.'

'Really. And what else does this god provide?'

Well, you, for one. 'Whatever suits his whim, I suppose.'
'Your clothes.'
'Yes.'
'I want clothes.'
'Yes.'
'What do you mean, "yes"? Get me some clothes.'
'I'll ask.'
'Do you think I like standing here, naked, in front of some stranger? Even the Nachts leer.'
'I wasn't leering.'
'You weren't?'
'Not intentionally. I just noticed, you're speaking the Letherii trader language. So am I.'
'You're a sharp one, aren't you?'
'I've had lots of practice, I suppose.' He rose. 'It occurs to me that you're not going to let me resume my
prayers. At least until you get some clothes. So, let's go talk to the god.'
'You go talk to him. I'm not. Just bring me clothes, Withal.'
He regarded her. 'Will that help you ... relax?'

Then she did hit him, a palm pounding into the side of his head. She'd caught him unprepared, he decided a
moment later, after he picked himself free of the wreckage of the wall he'd gone through. And stood, weaving,
the scene around him spinning wildly. The glaring woman who'd stepped outside and seemed to be considering
hitting him again, the pitching sea, and the three Nachts on a sward nearby, rolling in silent hilarity.

He walked down towards the sea.
Behind him, 'Where are you going?'
'To the god.'
'He's the other way.'

He reversed direction. 'Talking to me like I don't know this island. She wants clothes. Here, take mine.' He
pulled his shirt over his head.

And found himself lying on his back, staring up through the bleached weave of the cloth, the sun bright and
blinding—

—suddenly eclipsed. She was speaking.'... just lie there for a while longer, Withal. I wasn't intending to hit
you that hard. I fear I've cracked your skull.'

No, no, it's hard as an anvil. I'll be fine. See, I'm getting up ... oh, why bother. It's nice here in the sun. This
shirt smells. Like the sea. Like a beach, with the tide out, and all the dead things rotting in fetid water. Just like
the Inside Harbour. Got to stop the boys from swimming in there. I keep telling them ... oh, they're dead. All
dead now, my boys, my apprentices.

You'd better answer me soon, Mael.

'Withal?'

'It's the tent. That's what the Nachts are trying to tell me. Something about the tent...'
"Withal?"

I think I'll sleep now.

The trail ran in an easterly direction, roughly parallel to the Brous Road at least to start, then cut southward towards the road itself once the forest on the left thinned. One other farm had been passed through by the deserters, but there had been no-one there. Signs of looting were present, and it seemed a wooden-wheeled wagon had been appropriated. Halfpeck judged that the marauders were not far ahead, and the Crimson Guardsmen would reach them by dawn.

Seren Pedac rode alongside Iron Bars. The new stirrups held her boots firmly in place; she had never felt so secure astride a horse. It was clear that the Blueroses had been deceiving the Letherii for a long time, and she wondered if that revealed some essential, heretofore unrecognized flaw among her people. A certain gullibility, bred from an unfortunate mixture of naivety and arrogance. If Lether survived the Edur invasion and the truth about the Bluerose deception came to light, the Letherii response would be characteristically childish, she suspected, some kind of profound and deep hurt, and a grudge long held on to. Bluerose would be punished, spitefully and repeatedly, in countless ways.

The two women soldiers in the squad had dismantled a hide rack at the first farm, using the frame's poles to fashion a half-dozen crude lances, half again as tall as a man. The sharpened, fire-hardened points had been notched transversely, the thick barbs bent outward from the shaft. Each tip had been smeared with blood from the breeder and his family, to seal the vengeful intent.

They rode through the night, halting four times to rest their horses, all but one of the squad managing a quarter-bell's worth of sleep — a soldier's talent that Seren could not emulate. By the time the sky paled to the east, revealing mists in the lowlands, she was grainy-eyed and sluggish. They had passed a camp of refugees on the Brous Road, an old woman wakening to tell them the raiders had caught up with them earlier and stolen everything of value, as well as two young girls and their mother.

Two hundred paces further down, they came within sight of the deserters. The wagon stood in the centre of the raised road, the two oxen that had been used to pull it off to one side beneath a thick, gnarled oak on the other side of the south ditch. Chains stretched from one of the wheels, along which three small figures were huddled in sleep. A large hearth still smouldered, its dying embers just beyond the wagon.

The Crimson Guardsmen halted at some distance to regard the raiders.

'No-one's awake,' one of the women commented.

Iron Bars said, 'These horses aren't well trained enough for a closed charge. We'll go four one four. You'll be the one, Acquitor, and stay tight behind the leading riders.'

She nodded. She was not prepared to raise objections. She had been given a spare sword, and she well knew how to use it. Even so, this charge was to be with lances.

The soldiers cinched the straps of their helmets then donned gauntlets, shifting their grips on the lances to a third of the way up from the butts. Seren drew her sword.

'All right,' Iron Bars said. 'Corlo, keep them asleep until we're thirty paces away. Then wake 'em quick and panicky.'

'Aye, Avowed. It's been a while, ain't it?'

Halfpeck asked, 'Want any of 'em left alive, sir?'

'No.'

Iron Bars, with Halfpeck on his left and the two women on his right, formed the first line. Walk to trot, then a collected canter. Fifty paces, and no-one was stirring among the deserters. Seren glanced back at Corlo, and he smiled, raising one hand and waggling the gloved fingers.
She saw the three prisoners at the wagon sit up, then quickly crawl beneath the bed. Lances were levelled, the horses rolling into a gallop.

Sudden movement among the sleeping deserters. Leaping to their feet, bewildered shouts, a scream.

The front line parted to go round the wagon, and Seren pulled hard to her left after a moment of indecision, seeing the glitter of wide eyes from beneath the wagon’s bed. Then she was alongside the tall wheels.

Ahead, four lances found targets, three of them skewering men from behind as they sought to flee.

A deserter stumbled close to Seren and she slashed her sword, clipping his shoulder and spinning him round in a spray of blood. Cursing at the clumsy blow, she pushed herself forward on the saddle and rose to stand in her stirrups. Readied the sword once more.

The leading four Guardsmen had slowed their mounts and were drawing swords. The second line of riders, in Seren’s wake, had spread out to pursue victims scattering into the ditches to either side. They slaughtered with cold efficiency.

A spear stabbed up at Seren on her right. She batted the shaft aside, then swung as her horse carried her forward. The blade rang in her grip as it connected with a helmet. The edge jammed and she pulled hard, dragging the helm from the man’s head. It came free and flew forward to bounce on the road, red-splashed and caved in on one side.

She caught a moment of seeing Iron Bars ten paces ahead. Killing with appalling ease, a single hand gripping the reins as he guided his horse, sword weaving a murderous dance around him.

Someone flung himself onto her sword-arm, his weight wrenching at her shoulder. She shouted in pain, felt herself being pulled from her saddle.

His face, bearded and grimacing, seemed to surge towards her as if hunting some ghastly kiss. Then she saw the features go slack. Blood filled his eyes. The veins on his temples collapsed into blue stains blossoming beneath the skin. More blood, spraying from his nostrils. His grip fell away and he toppled backward.

Drawing in close, a long, thin-bladed knife in one hand, Corlo came alongside her. ‘Push yourself up, lass! Use my shoulder—’

Hand fisted around the grip of her sword, she set it against him and righted herself. ‘Thanks, Corlo—’

‘Rein in, lass, we’re about done here.’

She looked round. Three Guardsmen had dismounted, as had Iron Bars, and were among the wounded and dying, swords thrusting down into bodies. She glanced back. ‘That man – what happened to him?’

‘I boiled his brain, Acquitor. Messy, granted, but the Avowed said to keep you safe.’

‘I boiled his brain, Acquitor. Messy, granted, but the Avowed said to keep you safe.’

She stared at him. ‘What sort of magic does that?’

‘Maybe I’ll tell you sometime. That was a nice head-shot back there. The bastard came close with that spear.’

He did. She was suddenly shaking. ‘And this is your profession, Corlo? It’s ... disgusting.’

‘Aye, Acquitor, that it is.’

Iron Bars approached. ‘All is well?’

‘We’re fine, sir. All dead?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘That’s all of them,’ the mage said, nodding.
'Less than a half-dozen actually managed to draw their weapons. You fouled 'em up nicely, Corlo. Well done.'

'Is that how you soldiers win your battles?' Seren asked.

'We wasn't here to give battle, Acquitor,' Iron Bars said. 'Executions, lass. Any mages among the lot, Corlo?'

'One minor adept. I got him right away.'

_executions_. Yes. Best to think of it that way. _Not butchery_. They were _murderers and rapists_, _after all_. 'You didn't leave me any alive, Avowed?'

He squinted up at her. 'No, none.'

'You don't want me to ... do what I want. Do you?'

'That's right, lass. I don't.'

'Why?'

'Because you might enjoy it.'

'And what business is that of yours, Iron Bars?'

'It's not good, that's all.' He turned away. 'Corlo, see to the prisoners under the wagon. Heal them if they need it.'

He's _right_. _The bastard's right_. I _might enjoy it_. _Torturing some helpless man_. _And that wouldn't be good at all, because I might get hungry for more_. She thought back to the feeling when her sword's blade had connected with that deserter's helmed head. Sickening, and sick with pleasure, all bound together.

_I hurt_. _But I can make others hurt_. _Enough so they answer each other, leaving ... calm_. _Is that what it is? Calm? Or just some kind of hardening, senseless and cold._

'All right, Iron Bars,' she said. 'Keep it away from me. Only,' she looked down at him, 'it doesn't help. Nothing helps.'

'Aye. Not yet, anyway.'

'Not ever,' she said. 'I know, you're thinking time will bring healing. But you see, Avowed, it's something I keep reliving. Every moment. It wasn't days ago. It was with my last breath, every last breath.'

She saw the compassion in his eyes and, inexplicably, hated him for it. 'Let me think on that, lass.'

'To what end?'

'Can't say, yet.'

She looked down at the sword in her hand, at the blood and snarled hair along the notched edge where it had struck the man's head. _Disgusting_. _But they'll expect it to be wiped away_. _To make the iron clean and gleaming once more, as if it was nothing more than a sliver of metal_. _Disconnected from its deeds, its history, its very purpose_. She didn't want that mess cleaned away. She liked the sight of it.

They left the bodies where they had fallen. Left the lances impaled in flesh growing cold. Left the wagon, apart from the food they could transport – the refugees coming up on the road could have the rest. Among the dead were five youths, none of them older than fifteen years. They'd walked a short path, but as Halfpeck observed, it had been the wrong path, and that was that.

Seren pitied none of them.
BOOK FOUR

MIDNIGHT TIDES
Kin mourn my passing, all love is dust The pit is cut from the raw, stones piled to the side Slabs are set upon the banks, the seamed grey wall rises Possessions laid out to flank my place of rest All from the village are drawn, beating hides Keening their grief with streaks in ash Clawed down their cheeks, wounds on their flesh The memory of my life is surrendered In fans of earth from wooden shovels And were I ghostly here at the edge of the living Witness to brothers and sisters unveiled by loss Haunters of despair upon this rich sward Where ancestors stand sentinel, wrapped in skins I might settle motionless, eyes closed to dark’s rush And embrace the spiral pull into indifference Contemplating at the last, what it is to be pleased Yet my flesh is warm, the blood neither still in my veins Nor cold, my breathing joining this wind That carries these false cries, I am banished Alone among the crowd and no more to be seen The stirrings of my life face their turned backs The shudders of their will, and all love is dust Where I now walk, to the pleasure of none Cut raw, the stones piled, the grey wall rising.

Banished
Kellun Adara
CHAPTER TWENTY

It seemed the night would never end during the war with the Sar Trell. Before the appearance of Our Great Emperor, Dessimbelackis, our legions were thrown back on the field of battle, again and again. Our sons and daughters wept blood on the green ground, and the wagon-drums of the enemy came forth in thunder. But no stains could hold upon our faith, and it shone ever fierce, ever defiant. We drew our ranks tall, overlapped shields polished and bright as the red sun, and the one among us who was needed, who was destined to grasp the splashed grip of the First Empire's truthful sword, gave his voice and his strength to lead us in answer to the well-throated rumble of the Sar Trell warcries, the stone-tremble of their wagon-drums. Victory was destined, in the forge-lit eyes of He of the Seven Holy cities, the fever-charge of his will, and on that day, the Nineteenth in the Month of Leth-ara in the Year of Arenbal, the Sar Trell army was broken on the plain south of Yath-Ghatan, and with their bones was laid the foundation, and with their skulls the cobbles of Empire's road...

The Dessilan
Vilara

Somewhere ahead, the Royal Colonnade of the Eternal Domicile. Arched, the hemispherical ceiling web-spun in gold on a midnight blue background, diamonds glittering like drops of dew in the streaming strands. The pillars flanking the aisle that led to the throne room were carved in a spiral pattern and painted sea-green, twenty to each side and three paces apart. The passageways between them and the wall were wide enough to permit an armoured palace guard to walk without fear of his scabbard scraping, while the approach down the centre aisle was ten men wide. At the outer end was a large chamber that served as a reception area. First Empire murals, copied so many times as to be stylized past meaning, had been painted on the walls. Traditional torch sconces held crystals imbued with sorcery that cast a faintly blue light. At the inward end stood two massive, bejewelled doors that led to a narrow, low passage, fifteen paces long, before opening out into the domed throne room proper.

The air smelled of marble dust and paint. The ceremonial investiture was three days away, when King Ezgara Diskanar in his robes of state would stride down the length of the Royal Colonnade and enter the throne room, his queen a step behind on his left, his son the prince two paces back and immediately behind his father. Or, rather, that was how it should have been.

A trail of servants and guards had led Brys here, following the seemingly random wanderings of Ceda Kuru Qan. The strange emptiness of the Eternal Domicile on this last stretch unnerved the Finadd, his boots echoing on the unadorned flagstones as he entered the reception chamber.

To find the Ceda on his hands and knees directly in front of him.

Kuru Qan was muttering to himself, tracing his fingertips along the joins in the floor. Beside him was a tattered, paint-spattered basket crowded with scribers, brushes and stoppered jars of pigments.

'Ceda?'

The old man looked up, squinting over the tops of the lenses, the contraption having slid down to the end of his nose. 'Brys Beddict? I've been wondering where you've been.'

'In the throne room. The old throne room, where still resides our king. The surviving battalions and brigades are converging to the defence of Letheras. Things have been rather ... hectic.'

'No doubt. Relevant? Significantly so. Indeed, telling. Now, count the flagstones across this chamber. Width, then length, if you will.'

'What? Ceda, the king is asking for you.'

But Kuru Qan had ceased listening. He had begun crawling about, mumbling, brushing away the grit left behind by the builders.
Brys was motionless for a moment, considering, then he began counting flagstones.

After he was done, he returned to the Ceda's side. Kuru Qan was simply sitting now, appearing wholly consumed in the cleaning of his lenses. Without looking up, he began speaking. 'Battalions and brigades. Yes, most certainly. Assembling in the hills surrounding Brans Keep. Useful? The last of my mages. Tell me the centre flagstone, Brys. Will Merchants' Battalion remain in the city? I think not. It shall be cast upon those hills. All of it. The centre, Brys Beddict?'

'The one before you, Ceda,'

'Ah yes. Good. Very good. And what armies are left to us? How fare the fleets? Oh, the seas are unwelcoming, are they not? Best stay away. Dracons Sea, at the very least, although the protectorates are making noises. Korshenn, Pilott, Descent – they think they see their chance.'

Brys cleared his throat. 'The Artisan Battalion has left the Manse and is marching to Five Points. Riven Brigade withdrew from Old Katter with minimal losses. Snakebelt Battalion has departed Awl, and the Crimson Rampant Brigade has left Tulamesh – the north coast cities have been yielded. Dresh was taken last night, the garrison slaughtered. Whitefinder Battalion are razing the ground on their retreat from First Reach and should be at Brans Keep soon. Preda Unnatal Hebaz will lead the Merchants' Battalion from the city in three days' time. It is anticipated, Ceda, that you will be accompanying her.'

'Accompanying? Nonsense, I am far too busy. Too busy. So many things left to do. She shall have my mages. Yes, my mages.'

'There are only fourteen remaining, Ceda.'

'Fourteen? Relevant? I must needs think on that.'

Brys studied Kuru Qan, his old friend, and struggled against waves of pity. 'How long, Ceda, do you plan on remaining here, on the floor?'

'It is no easy thing, Finadd, not at all. I fear I have waited too long as it is. But we shall see.'

'When can the king expect you?'

'Alas, we do not know what to expect, do we? Barring a few salient truths so painfully gleaned from the chaos. The Seventh Closure, ah, there is nothing good to this turn of events. You must go, now. Care for your brother, Brys. Care for him.'

'Which one?'

Kuru Qan was cleaning his lenses again, and made no reply.

Brys swung about and strode towards the doors.

The Ceda spoke behind him. 'Finadd. Whatever you do, don't kill him.'

He halted and glanced back. 'Who?'

'Don't kill him. You must not kill him. Now, go. Go, Finadd.'

So many alleys in Letheras never knew the light of day. Narrow, with various balconies, ledges and projections forming makeshift roofs, the corridors beneath were twisted and choked with refuse, a realm of rats, slipper-beetles and spiders. And the occasional undead.

Shurq Elalle stood in the gloom, as she had stood most of the previous night. Waiting. The street beyond had wakened with the day, although the crowds were markedly more furtive and tense than was usual. There had been a riot near the West Gate two nights past, brutally quelled by soldiers of the Merchants' Battalion. Curfews had been enforced, and it had been finally noted that the low castes seemed to have virtually vanished from the city, cause for confusion and a vague unease.
Almost directly across from her was a side postern gate leading into Gerun Eberict's estate. The Finadd disliked ceremony upon his return. Modesty was not the issue. More relevant, however, were the innumerable positions from which to stage an attempted assassination near the estate's formal entrance.

None the less, there was some commotion attending Gerun's appearance. Bodyguards drifting into the street announced his imminent arrival. Shurq melted back into the darkness as they scanned the area. Taking defensive positions around the side postern, they waited. Their officer appeared next, striding past them to unlock the gate and push it back, revealing a narrow passage that opened out into the sunlit courtyard. All at once, there were fewer citizens in the area, thinning as if by some prearranged signal until only the guards remained within the range of Shurq's vision.

'Don't make me laugh,' she muttered under her breath.

Gerun Eberict then strode into view, one hand resting on the pommel of the sword scabbarded at his left hip. He did not pause, but continued on directly into the passage. The guards swept in after him, followed at last by the officer, who then slammed the gate shut behind him.

Shurq walked further into the alley until she came to a rusty ladder more or less fixed to the wall of the building on her right. She climbed, ignoring the protests of fittings and weakened metal, until she reached the roof. Clambered up the slope, testing the firmness of each slab of grey slate she set her weight upon, then over the edge. Sidling along until she could look down upon the front entrance of Gerun's house and part of the courtyard. She lowered herself as far as she could on the opposite side, until only her fingers, eyes and top of her head were visible – as unlikely to be noticed as she could manage, should someone in the courtyard glance up in her direction.

Gerun Eberict was standing before the doors, listening to the captain of the house guard, who was speaking at length, punctuating his statements every now and then with gestures indicating bafflement.

His report was cut off when Gerun's right hand snapped out to close around his neck.

Even from this distance, she could see the man's face darken to a curious shade of blue.

Of course, no person with any courage would take much of that, so she was not surprised when the captain tugged a knife from his belt.

Gerun had been waiting for that, having palmed his own knife, with which he stabbed the captain, up under the breastbone, pushing it to the hilt.

The captain sagged. The Finadd released his hold on the man's neck and watched him crumple to the flagstones.

'It's just coin, Gerun,' Shurq said quietly. 'And a missing brother who you killed a long time ago. Your lack of control is dismaying ... for your other employees, that is. For me, well, little more than confirmation of all my suspicions.'

There would be a bloodbath, if not tonight, then the next night. The city's countless spies and snitches – those who had remained – would be stung into frantic activity, and the great hunt for the thief would begin.

All rather unpleasant.

Gerun's wealth had paid for the exodus of the city's indigents, meaning he would have to make most of his victims Letherii rather than Nerek, Tarthenal, or Faraed. Indeed, he might find victims hard to find. Besides which, there was a war, and the Finadd might well find his time otherwise occupied. The man's rage would be apoplectic in no time.

She watched as Gerun stormed into his house, guards scrambling after him, then she lowered herself along the slope, rolled onto her back and slid towards the edge.

There was a balcony directly below—
No, not any more.

She fell, struck a clothes line that snapped with her weight, cannoned off the side of a ledge thick with pigeon droppings, and landed spread-eagled on a heap of rubbish. Where she lay for a time, unmoving.

That was the problem with cities. Nothing ever stayed the same. She'd used that balcony at least a half-dozen times before, when staking out the estate. She lifted an arm. Then the other. Drew her legs beneath her. Nothing broken thus far. And, after a careful examination, nothing overly damaged. Fortunately, she concluded, the dead did not suffer much from pride, said wounding being minimal.

It was then that she discovered the bar of rusty iron projecting from her forehead. Perfumed liquids were leaking out, blurring her vision. She probed the offending object with her fingertips. Punched right through the bone, all the way, in fact, to the back of her skull, if the grating noises the bar made when she wriggled it were any indication.

'I've made a mess of my brain,' she said. 'But was I really using it? Probably not. Still, was I in the habit of talking to myself before? I don't think so.'

She stood, knee-deep in the refuse, contemplating physically removing the bar. But that might make things even messier. Less than a hand's width projected out, after all. Hard not to notice, but far less egregious than, say, an arm's length. A visit to Tehol Beddict seemed incumbent, if only for endless advice she could take pleasure in rejecting.

Alas, she realized, she would have to wait for night, since there was no way she could get to his home without being seen. There had been a time, long ago, when she liked attention. Admiring regards and all that, and it was always satisfying to flaunt her qualities. But a bar in the head took fashion sense to excess by any standard of measure. People would notice, and not in a good way.

Disconsolate, Shurq Elalle sat down in the rubbish. To await the coming of night.

'What happened to the legs of my bed?'

'We needed the wood, master.'

'Yes, but why only three of them?'

'I was saving the other one for later. I found a bag of something that might be tea.'

'Well.' Tehol sat up. 'I'm just amazed I slept through it.'

'You were clearly very tired, master.'

'Yes, which is very understandable, given how busy I've been. I have been busy, haven't I?'

'I could not say, having been too busy myself to take much notice. But I have faith in your proclamations, master. You certainly slept like a man who'd been busy.'

'Seems proof enough, I would say. I'm convinced. Now, while I've been working myself senseless, you make claim to having had many things on your table. Let's hear about them.'

'Very well, master. We're more or less done with the wings of the Eternal Domicile. Dry, foundations restored, my crews cleaning up. There have been some complaints about the cold draughts in the Fifth Wing, but that's not my problem, strictly speaking.'

'Why the cold draughts, Bugg?'

'Presumably related to the shoring methods I employed, but they don't know that.'

'And why should your shoring methods make it cold? Bugg, do I detect some discomfort in your demeanour?'
'Discomfort, master? Not at all. Are you certain you want the details of this matter?''When you put it that way, probably not. So, is that all you've been doing?''I've also been here and there, working through all the rumours to see if I could glean some truth. I have accordingly assembled a list of facts.'

'A list. Wonderful. I love lists. They're so ... ordered.'

'Indeed, master. Shall I proceed? Well, the northern frontier belongs to the Tiste Edur, as do all the coastal cities all the way down to Height and possibly Old Gedure. It is believed the Edur fleets are in the Ouster Sea, opposite Lenth and therefore on the edge of Gedry Bay. From this one must assume they intend to sail up Lether River. Possibly with the aim of arriving in concert with the land armies. It is clear that the Tiste Edur are marching on Letheras and are planning to conquer it and take the throne. Whether this will succeed in triggering the capitulation of the entire kingdom remains to be seen. Personally, I believe it will. Nor do I think the protectorates will go much beyond restlessness. To do otherwise would be suicidal.'

'If you say so, Bugg. Are the Tiste Edur that formidable, then?'

The manservant ran a hand through his thinning hair, then glanced over at the bodyguard who was standing, silent as ever, near the hatch. 'Again, master, countless rumours. I would hazard the following observations regarding the Tiste Edur. Their new emperor is in possession of terrible power, but the sorcery the Edur are using does not come from their traditional sources. Not Kurald Emurlahn, although it remains part of their arsenal. In the battles thus far, they have been profligate in their use of shadow wraiths and Kenyll'rah demons, both of whom are reluctant participants.'

'Kurald what? Kenyll who? Who's whispering these rumours anyway?'

'Ah, that brings me to my third set of observations. Regarding the dead.'

'The dead. Of course. Go on, please.'

'This subcontinent, the region ranging from Tiste Edur lands to the north, Bluerose and Awl'd'an to the east, and Descent and D'aliban to the south – it is a rather peculiar region, master, and has been since, well, since the earliest times. There are, uh, no pathways. For the dead, I mean. For their spirits.'

'I don't quite understand you, Bugg,' Tehol said, rising from the rickety bed and beginning to pace along the rooftop. The bodyguard's gaze tracked him. 'The dead are just dead. Ghosts linger because they have nowhere else to go and are disinclined to go sightseeing in any case. What kind of pathways are you talking about?'

'Into what could be called the Hold of the Dead.'

'There is no Hold of the Dead.'

'Which is what has been so ... unusual. There should have been. All along. Those of Kolanse, for example, include in their worship a Lord of Death. You will find something similar in the Bolkando kingdom—'

'The Bolkando kingdom? Bugg, nobody knows anything about the Bolkando kingdom. Nobody wants to. You are starting to alarm me, my dear manservant, with the breadth of your knowledge. Unless, of course, you are making it all up.'

'Precisely, master. To continue. There was no Hold of the Dead. It once existed. That is, the original Tiles of the Hold from the First Empire contained one. As well as a number of other Holds, all of which have been discarded by and by. It would be nice, indeed, were a scholar to address this strange diminishment. The passage of time in a culture invites elaboration, not simplification, unless some terrible collapse triggers a fall of sorts, but the only trauma Lether has suffered came with the original fall of the First Empire and the subsequent isolation of these colonies. There was, at that time, some degradation, leading to a short period of independent city-states. And then there were wars with the tribes south and east of Kryn, and with the atavistic Andii remnants of Bluerose. But none of that was culturally disturbing. Possibly because the Hold of the Dead could not manifest itself here. In any case, the closing of the pathways for the dead was already a fact, frozen in the
very earth of this region. Worse yet, it was all an accident—'

'Hold on, Bugg. Now I do have some pertinent questions.'

'Your questions are always pertinent, master.'

'I know, but these are particularly pertinent.'

'More so than usual?'

'Are you suggesting that my normal pertinence is less than particular, Bugg?'

'Of course not, master. Now, where was I? Oh yes, the accident. In the earliest texts – those that came with the Letherii from the First Empire – there is the occasional mention made of a race called the Jaghut—'

'There is? You are speaking to a man whose head was filled to bursting with classical education, Bugg. I've never heard of these Jaghut.'

'All right, they were mentioned once, and not specifically by name.'

'Hah, I knew it. Don't try any sleight of hand with me.'

'Sorry, master. In any case, in the most proper sense, the Jaghut are represented by those poorly rendered, stylized images you will find on tiles of the Hold of Ice—'

'Those frog-like midgets?'

'Only the green skin survived, alas. The Jaghut were in fact quite tall and not in the least frog-like. The point is, they manifested their sorcery with ice, and cold. It remains common to this day to consider only four principal elements in nature. Air, Earth, Fire and Water. Absolute nonsense, of course.'

'Of course.'

'There is Light, Dark, Shadow, Life, Death and Ice. There might even be more, but why quibble? The point I am making, master, is that, long ago, a Jaghut did something to this land. Sealed it, in a manner of speaking. Using its aspected sorcery. The effect was profound.'

'Making the pathways of the dead snowbound, like a mountain pass in winter?'

'Something like that, yes.'

'So the dead loiter in Lether. Ghosts, shades, and people like Shurq Elalle and Kettle.'

'Indeed. But that is all changing.'

Tehol ceased his pacing and faced Bugg. 'It is?'

'Alas, yes, master. The sorcery is ... thawing. A Hold of the Dead is manifesting itself. The situation is unravelling. Quickly.'

'Does this mean Shurq is in trouble?'

'No. I suspect the curse on her will remain. But the initial efficacy of that curse derives from the fact of the Hold's having been non-existent in the first place.'

'All right. It's all unravelling. Have you visited Kettle lately?'

'Interesting you should ask, master, for it is at the site of the now-dead Azath tower that the Hold of the Dead is manifesting itself. From that, one might conclude that Kettle is somehow connected with the entire event, but she isn't. In fact, she's no longer dead. Not as dead as she was, that is. It is now clear that her purpose is ... otherwise. As you know, there's trouble coming from the barrows.'
'What's that smoke? Over there.'

Bugg squinted. 'Another riot, I think. Counters' Quarter.'

'Well, they've been a little skittish ever since the ghosts stormed the Tolls Repository. Besides which, the Tolls themselves have been tumbling with all the bad news from the north. In fact, I'm surprised it's taken this long.'

They could hear bells now, as the city's garrison began responding to the alarm from various stations near the area.

'That won't last long,' Bugg predicted.

'Yes, but I am reminded of something,' Tehol said. 'The time has come, I think, to see Shand, Hejun and Rissarh on their way.'

'Will they complain?'

'Less than one might expect. This is a nervous city. The few non-Letherii remaining are being subjected to harassment, and not just by citizens. The authorities are showing their racist underpinnings with all these suspicions and the eagerness to tread over hard-won rights.'

'Proof that the freedoms once accorded non-Letherii peoples were born of both paternalism and a self-serving posturing as a benign overseer. What is given is taken away, just like that.'

'Indeed, Bugg. Is it because, do you think, at the human core, we are naught but liars and cheats?'

'Probably.'

'With no hope of ever overcoming our instinctive nastiness?'

'Hard to say. How have we done so far?'

'That's not fair. Oh, fine, it's perfectly fair. But it doesn't bode well, does it?'

'Few things do, master.'

'Well, this is uncharacteristically glum of you, Bugg.'

'Alas, I fear the Tiste Edur won't be any better. Coin is the poison, after all, and it infects indiscriminately.'

'As I suspected,' Tehol mused, 'clearly, now is not the time to destroy the economy.'

'Either way, you're right, master.'

'Of course I am. Furthermore, it seems incumbent that, for the moment at least, we should do nothing. About anything. The Rat Catchers' Guild has done a fine job thus far; we need make no adjustments there. I know the details of who owes what from the Tolls Repository and Shand has acted with impressive facility on that information. We know the dire state of the royal treasury. You have been paid for your work on the Eternal Domicile, haven't you?'

'Just yesterday, master.'

'Excellent. Well, that was exhausting. I think I'll go back to bed.'

'Good idea, master.'

'After all, this rooftop is probably the safest place in Letheras now.'

'Indeed. Best stay here.'

'And you, Bugg?"
'I thought I'd take a walk.'

'More rumours to track down?'

'Something like that, master.'

'Be careful, Bugg, they're press-ganging recruits with some ferocity.'

'I was wondering about that, master. No-one's paid you a visit?'

'Why, they have. But our silent bodyguard sent them away.'

'He said something?'

'No, it was just a look, I think. They scurried.'

'Impressive. As for me, master, I have ways of making myself unpalatable, even for desperate recruiters.'

'You have always been unpalatable, it's true,' Tehol noted as he gingerly lowered himself onto his bed. 'Even the fleas avoid you. Just one more of those eternal mysteries, Bugg, that so endears you to me. Or is it endears me to you?'

'The former, I think, master.'

'Oh, no. You don't like me. I discover this after all this time?'

'I was only commenting on your usage of the appropriate phrase in the context of your statement and the sentiment you presumably wished to express. Of course I like you, master. How could I not?'

'You have a point there, Bugg. Anyway, I'm going to sleep now, so if you don't want me for anything else ...'

'Right, master. I'll see you later, then.'

Turudal Brizad was just outside the throne room, leaning against a column, his arms crossed. Brys nodded to him and was about to pass when the Queen's First Consort gestured him over. The Finadd hesitated, then approached.

Turudal smiled. 'Relax. I am no longer as dangerous as I once was, Brys Beddict. Assuming that I was dangerous in the first place.'

'Thank you,' Turudal cut in, 'but it's not necessary. The prince was not the only precipitous member of the royal family. My dear queen was, it is worth recalling, at the forefront of inviting this war against the Tiste Edur. She has the arrogance of her people, after all...'

'And are they not your people as well, First Consort?'

'The man's smile broadened. 'So much of my life, Brys Beddict – here in this palace – can be characterized as fulfilling the role of objective observer in the proceedings of state, and in the domestic travails upon which, it must be said, my fortune depends. Rather, depended. In this, I am no different from my counterpart, the First Concubine. We were present as symbols, after all. And so we behaved accordingly.'

'And now you find yourself without a role,' Brys said.

'I find myself even more objective as an observer than I have ever been, Finadd.'

'To what end?'

'Well, that's just it, isn't it? To no end. None at all. I had forgotten what such freedom felt like. You realize, don't you, that the Tiste Edur will conquer this kingdom?"
'Our forces were divided before, First Consort.'

'So were theirs, Finadd.'

Brys studied the man before him, wondering what was so strange about him, this vague air of indifference and... what? 'Why did she want this war, Turudal Brizad?'

He shrugged. 'The Letherii motive was, is and shall ever be but one thing. Wealth. Conquest as opportunity. Opportunity as invitation. Invitation as righteous claim. Righteous claim as preordained, as destiny.' Something dark glittered in his eyes. 'Destiny as victory, victory as conquest, conquest as wealth. But nowhere in that perfect scheme will you find the notion of defeat. All failures are temporary, flawed in the particular. Correct the particular and victory will be won the next time round.'

'Until a situation arises where there is no second opportunity.'

'And future scholars will dissect every moment of these days, assembling their lists of the particulars, the specifics from which no generalization threatening the prime assumptions can ever be derived. It is, in truth, an exquisite paradigm, the perfect mechanism ensuring the persistent survival of an entire host of terrible, brutal beliefs.'

'You do seem to have achieved objectivity, Turudal Brizad.'

'Do you know how the First Empire collapsed, Brys Beddict? I don't mean the revised versions every child is taught by tutors. I mean the truth. Our ancestors unleashed their own annihilation. Through a ritual run wild, the civilization tore itself apart. Of course, in our version, those who came afterwards to clean up were transformed into the aggressors, the outside agency that wrought such destruction as to obliterate the First Empire. And here is another truth: our colonies here were not immune to the effects of that unfettered ritual. Although we succeeded in driving away the threat, as far as we could, into the ice wastes. Where, we hoped, the bastards would die out. Alas, they didn't. And now, Brys Beddict, they're coming back.'

'Who? The Tiste Edur? We share nothing with them, Turudal—'

'Not the Tiste Edur, although much of their history – that of their path of sorcery in particular – is bound with the succession of disasters that befell the First Empire. No, Finadd, I am speaking of their allies, the savages from the ice wastes, the Jheck.'

'An interesting story,' Brys said after a moment, 'but I am afraid I do not comprehend its relevance.'

'I am offering explanation,' the First Consort said, pushing himself from the column and walking past Brys.

'For what?'

Without turning, he replied, 'For the imminent failure, Finadd, of my objectivity.'

Moroch Nevath slowed his lathered horse as he neared the gates. To either side of the raised road, what had once been a sprawling confusion of huts and shacks had been razed, leaving only mud, potsherds and slivers of wood. Stains on the city's wall were all that remained of the countless buildings that had leaned against it for support.

The crowds of refugees on the road had thinned the last few leagues, as Moroch outdistanced the leading edges. He'd seen deserters among them, and had struggled against an urge to deliver summary justice upon the cowards, but there would be time for that later. The gates ahead were open, a squad of soldiers from the Merchants' Battalion standing guard.

Moroch reined in before them. 'This road will be packed by dusk,' he said. 'You will need at least four more squads to manage the flow.'

A sergeant scowled up at him. 'And who in the Errant's name are you?'

'Another deserter,' muttered a soldier.
Moroch's uniform was covered in dust and patches of old blood. He was bearded, his hair filthy and unbound. Even so, he stared at the sergeant, shocked that he had not been recognized. Then he bared his teeth, 'There will be deserters, yes. They are to be pulled aside, and all those refugees of acceptable age and fitness are to be recruited. Sergeant, I am Finadd Moroch Nevath. I led the survivors from High Fort down to Brans Keep, where we were attached to the Artisan Battalion. I go now to report to the Preda.'

He was pleased at the sudden deference shown once he identified himself.

The sergeant saluted, then asked, 'Is it true, then, sir? The prince and the queen are prisoners of the Edur?'

'A miracle that they survived at all, sergeant.'

A strange expression flitted across the sergeant's features, quickly disguised, yet Moroch had understood it. *Why didn't you fall defending them, Finadd? You ran, like all the others ...*

'We will get them back, sir,' the sergeant said after a moment.

'Send for your reinforcements,' Moroch said, kicking his horse into motion once more. *You're right, I should have died. But you were not there, were you?*

He rode into the city.

Champion Ormly and Chief Investigator Rucket were sitting on the steps of the Rat Catchers' Guild, sharing a bottle of wine. Both scowled when they saw Bugg, who approached to stand before them.

'We know all about you now,' Rucket said. She sneered, but added nothing more.

'Well,' said Bugg, 'that's a relief. What more have you heard from your agents in the occupied cities?'

'Oh,' Ormly said, 'and we're to reveal all our intelligence to you, simply because you ask for it?'

'I don't see why not.'

'He has a point, the bastard,' Rucket said to the Champion.

Who looked at her in disbelief. 'No he doesn't! You're smitten, aren't you? Tehol and his manservant – both of them!'

'Don't be absurd. It's in the contract, Ormly. We share information—'


'You're drunk.'

Bugg said, 'You haven't heard anything.'

'Of course we have!' Ormly snapped. 'Peace reigns. The shops are open once more. Coins roll, the sea lanes are unobstructed.'

'Garrisons?'

'Disarmed. Including local constabulary. All protection and enforcement is being done by the Edur. Empty estates have been occupied by Edur families – some kind of nobility exists with them, with those tribes. Not so different after all.'

'Curious,' Bugg said. 'No resistance?'

'Their damned shades are everywhere. Even the rats don't dare cause trouble.'

'And how close to Letheras are the Edur armies?'
'That we don't know. Days away, maybe. The situation is pretty chaotic in the countryside north of here. I'm not answering any more questions and that's that.' Ormly took the bottle from Rucket and drank deep.

Bugg looked round. The street was quiet. 'Something in the air ...'

'We know,' Rucket said.

The silence lengthened, then Bugg rubbed at the back of his neck. Without another word, he walked away.

A short time later, he approached the Azath tower. As he began crossing the street towards the front gate, a figure emerged from a nearby alley. Bugg halted.

'Surprised to see you here,' the man said as he drew nearer to the manservant. 'But a momentary surprise. Thinking on it, where else would you be?'

Bugg grunted, then said, 'I wondered when you'd finally stir yourself awake. If.'

'Better late than never.'

'Here to give things a nudge, are you?'

'In a manner of speaking. And what about you?'

'Well,' Bugg considered, 'that depends.'

'On?'

'You, I suppose.'

'Oh, I'm just passing through,' the man said.

Bugg studied him for a long moment, then cocked his head and asked, 'So, how much of you was at the heart of this mess, I wonder? Feeding the queen's greed, the prince's estrangement from his father. Did the notion of the Seventh Closure simply amuse you?'

'I but watched,' the man replied, shrugging. 'Human nature is responsible, as ever. That is not a burden I am willing to accept, especially from you.'

'I but watched,' the man replied, shrugging. 'Human nature is responsible, as ever. That is not a burden I am willing to accept, especially from you.'

'All right. But here you are, about to take a far more active role ...'

'This goes back, old man. Edur or human, I do not want to see a revisiting of the T'lan Imass.'

After a moment, Bugg nodded. 'The Pack. I see. I have never liked you much, but this time I am afraid I have to agree with you.'

'That warms my heart.'

'To be so benignly judged? I suppose it would at that.'

He laughed, then, with a careless wave, walked past Bugg.

The problem with gods, Bugg decided, was the way they ended up getting dragged along. Wherever their believers went. This one had vanished from memory everywhere else, as extinct as the Holds themselves.

So. T'lan Imass, the Pack, and the coming of the Jheck. Soletaken worshippers of their ancient lord, and, from the potential resurrection of that ancient cult, a possible return of the T'lan Imass, to expunge the madness.

What had driven him to act now, then? In this particular matter? The answer came to Bugg, and he smiled without humour. It's called guilt.

A metallic tapping woke Tehol Beddict. He sat up, looked round. It was nearing late afternoon. The tapping was repeated and he glanced over to see his bodyguard, weapon drawn, standing at the roof's edge on the alley
Climbing gingerly from the rickety bed, Tehol tiptoed to the bodyguard's side.

Down in the alley below a shape was crawling along beneath a stained tarp of some sort. Slow but steady progress towards the corner.

'I admit,' Tehol said, 'it's a curious thing. But sufficient cause to wake me up? Ah, there I have doubts. The city is full of crawling things, after all. Well, on a normal day, that is. Here we are, however, so perhaps it might be amusing if we follow its tortured journey.'

The shape reached the corner, then edged round it.

Tehol and his companion tracked it from above. Along the wall, then into the aisle leading to the entrance to Tehol's house.

'Ah, it is paying us a visit. Whatever it's selling, I'm not sure I want any. We are facing a conundrum, my friend. You know how I hate being rude. Then again, what if it is selling some horrible disease?'

It reached the doorway, slipped inside.

The bodyguard walked to the hatch and looked down. After a moment, Tehol followed. As he peered over he heard a familiar voice call up.

'Tehol. Get down here.'

'Shurq?'

A gesturing shape in the gloom.

'Best wait here,' Tehol said to his guard. 'I think she wants privacy. You can keep an eye on the entrance from up here, right? Excellent. I'm glad we're agreed.' He climbed down the ladder.

'I have a problem,' she said when he reached the floor.

'Anything I can do for you, Shurq, I shall. Did you know you have a spike of some sort in your forehead?'

'That's my problem, you idiot.'

'Ah. Would you like me to pull it out?'

'I don't think that's a good idea, Tehol.'

'Not worse, surely, than leaving it there.'

'The issue is not as clear as it appears to be,' Shurq said. 'Something is holding it. It's not nearly as loose as one would hope.'

'Are you concentrating on it?'

She said nothing.

He hastily added, 'Maybe it's bent or something.'

'It goes through to the back of my skull. There may be a flange of some sort.'

'Why not push it right through?'

'And leave the back of my head in pieces?'

'Well, the only other possibility I can think of at the moment, Shurq, is to pull it out a little bit, saw it off, then push what's left back in. Granted, you'd have a hole, but you could take to wearing a bandanna or head-
scarf, at least until we visit Selush.'

'Not bad. But what if it starts clunking around in my head? Besides, bandannas are pathetically out of date as far as fashion goes. I would be mortified to be seen in public.'

'Selush might well have a solution to that, Shurq. A stopper with a diamond in it, or a patch of skin sewn over the hole.'

'A diamond-studded plug. I like that.'

'You'll launch a new trend.'

'Do you think Ublala will like it, Tehol?'

'Of course he will. As for the clunking, well, that's a definite problem. But it seems evident that you're not using your brain. I mean, that physical stuff in there. Your soul is simply making use of the body, right? Probably out of a sense of familiarity. Given that, maybe we could pull it out—'

'No. I like the idea of sawing it. And the diamond stopper. That sounds good. Now, can you bring Selush here?'

'Right now?'

'Well, as soon as possible. I don't like walking around with it the way it is. Tell her I will pay for the inconvenience.'

'I'll try.'

'Needless to say, I'm miserable.'

'Of course you are, Shurq.'

'And I want Ublala. I want him now.'

'I understand—'

'No you don't. I said I want him now. But that's impossible. So you'll have to do.'

'Me? Oh dear. Does it bite?'

'Only one way to find out, Tehol Beddict. Get out of those stupid clothes.'

'So long as you don't poke my eye out.'

'Don't make me – oh, right. I'll be careful. I promise.'

'Just so long as you understand, Shurq, I normally don't do this with my employees. Especially dead ones.'

'I don't see why you had to bring that up. It's not like I can help it.'

'I know. But it's, uh, well…'

'Creepy?'

'You're lovely and all that, I mean, Selush was brilliant – the best work she's ever done.'

'Think how I feel, Tehol? Errant knows, you're no Ublala.'

'Why, thank you.'

'Now, take your clothes off. I'm sure it won't take long anyway.'

The street was mostly unobstructed, allowing Moroch Nevath to make good time on his approach to the old
palace. His horse would probably never fully recover from the journey down from High Fort. There was a Bluerose trainer in the palace, he had heard – although he had never seen the man – who was said to heal horses. If he found the time, he might hunt him down.

A figure stepped into the street ahead.

Recognizing the man, Moroch reined in. 'Turudal Brizad.'

'Finadd. I barely recognized you.'

'You're not alone in that, First Consort. Now, I am off to report to the Preda.'

'You will find her in the throne room. Finadd, I may have need of you shortly.'

Moroch scowled. 'For what?'

The man smiled. 'Specifically, your skill with the sword.'

'Who do you want me to kill, Brizad? Some irate husband, an outraged wife? I think Gerun Eberict would better suit your requirements in such matters.'

'I wish it were that simple, Finadd. Ideally, I would seek out Brys Beddict, but he has other tasks before him —'

'So do I.'

'The Preda will assign you to protection of the Royal Household, such as it is—'

'That is the task of the King's Champion.'

'Yes. Meaning you will find yourself with some time on your hands.'

Moroch's scowl deepened. 'I intend to accompany the Preda when she marches, First Consort.'

Turudal sighed. 'You are no longer trusted, Finadd. You failed both the prince and the queen. It would have been preferable had you died in the endeavour at High Fort.'

'I was injured. Separated from my charges. I could not even find them once the battle commenced—'

'Tragic, Finadd, but such stones make no splash on a frozen lake. What I offer you is an opportunity for redemption, for your name to be hailed in history. I am certain, Moroch Nevath, that you will receive no comparable offer from anyone else.'

The Finadd studied the man standing before him. He'd always made Moroch's skin crawl. Too slick, too perfumed. Too smug. Now more than ever. 'There is nothing you can offer me—'

'Finadd, I want you to kill a god.'

Moroch sneered, said nothing.

Turudal Brizad smiled, then said, 'The god of the Jheck. And where can you find this god? Why, here in the city. Waiting for the arrival of its savage worshippers.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Kill the god, Moroch Nevath, and the Tiste Edur will lose their allies.'

'We will speak more on this,' the Finadd said in a growl. 'But for now, I must go.'

'Of course. You have my sympathies, by the way. I know you could have done nothing to save Quillas or Janall—'
'Save your breath, First Consort.' Moroch snapped the reins, sending his horse forward, forcing Turudal Brizad to step aside hastily to avoid being knocked down.

Bugg found Kettle hunched against the door of the tower. She was shivering, knees drawn up, her head down.

'Child?'

A muffled reply. 'Go away.'

He crouched beside her. 'How bad is it?'

'I'm hungry. My stomach hurts. The bites itch.'

'You're alive, then. He saw her head nod. 'And you'd rather be dead.' Another nod. 'We need to get you some new clothes. Some food, and water. We need to find you shelter – you can't stay here any longer.'

'But I have to! He needs my help!'

Bugg rose. 'I think I'll walk the grounds.'

'Don't. It's too dangerous.'

'I'll be all right, lass. No need to worry about Grandfather Bugg. And then I'll come back here, and you and I will head to the Downs Market.'

She looked up then, regarded him with red-rimmed eyes that looked far older than the rest of her face. 'I have no money.'

'Me neither,' Bugg said, smiling. 'But a lot of people owe me.'

He headed into the grounds. The earth was hot beneath his worn sandals. Most of the insects had died or moulted, their bodies crunching underfoot. Withered roots had been pushed to the surface, split and peeling. Stained fragments of bone were visible, pieces of skull and fractured long-bones, the occasional oversized vertebra. The crumpled remains of barrows were on all sides.

So much history had been lost, destroyed beneath this steaming earth. A good thing, too, since most of it was unpleasant. Unfortunately, a few hoary nightmares remained. The meanest of the lot, in fact.

And one of them had sworn to help. Against the others.

All in all, Bugg decided, not a promising situation.

'A stranger among us.'

He halted, frowning. 'Who speaks?'

'My brothers welcome you. I welcome you. Come closer. Hold out your hand, draw us forth. Your rewards will be endless.'

'So will my regret. No, I'm afraid I cannot oblige you, Toblakai.'

'You have taken one step too many, stranger. It is too late. You we shall use—'

A surge of power, rushing into Bugg's mind, seeking domination – then gone.

'No. Not you. Come no closer.'

'I am sorry you found me so unpalatable.'

'Go away.'

'You and your brothers are in for a fight,' Bugg said. 'You know that, don't you?'
'We cannot be defeated.'

'Oh, how often those words are spoken. How many of your fellow prisoners said much the same, at one time or another? Always the conceit of the moment.'

'None of this is your concern.'

'You are right, none of it is. But you should be warned, the child, Kettle, is not to be harmed.'

'She is nothing to us.'

'Good. Make sure it stays that way.'

'Be careful with your threats, stranger.'

'Ah. You don't understand, do you? Attack the child, and the one hiding within her will awaken. And that one will annihilate you, and probably everyone else just for good measure.'

'Who is it that hides within the child?'

'Its name? I don't know. But it is Forkrul Assail.'

'You are lying.'

The manservant shrugged, swung about and made his way back to where Kettle waited. There was time still, he decided, to go shopping.

* * *

King Ezgara Diskanar sat on his throne, motionless, pale as dusted marble, the lids of his eyes half lowered as he regarded First Eunuch Nifadas. The scene belonged to an artist, Brys decided. Heavy with gravitas, the colours dark and saturated, a great fall imminent. All here, in this frozen moment. The Eve before the Seventh Closure, the painter might call it, with quiet pleasure at the multitude of meanings hidden in the title.

But there was no artist, no vulture to sit on the wings of civilization's tottering construct, red-eyed and clucking. The audience consisted of Brys, First Concubine Nisall, Preda Unnutal Hebaz and four of the King's Guard.

The sun had dropped low enough outside to send shafts of lurid light through the stained glass panels set in the dome, brushing the motes with ugly hues. The air smelled of sweat and lantern smoke.

'And this,' King Ezgara finally said, 'is what awaits my people.'

The First Eunuch's small eyes blinked. 'Sire, the soldiers do not welcome the notion of new overlords. They will fight to defend you.'

'I have seen scant evidence of that thus far, Nifadas.'

The Preda spoke to that. 'Sire, it quickly became evident that we could not match the enemy in the traditional manner, given the sorcery available to them. It was tactically incumbent that we withdraw, avoiding engagement—'

'But now our backs are to the city's wall, Preda.'

'With time to prepare, as we have been doing since the first unit arrived at Brans Keep. Sire, we have never before fielded such a large army as that which is assembling there right now. Over two thousand trebuchets, fifteen hundred mangonels and three hundred triple-mounted Dresh ballistae. We have dug pits, trenches, traps. The mages have woven rituals across the entire battlefield. Our auxiliaries alone number over ten thousand—'

'Untrained fodder, Preda. A terrible waste of citizenry. Are they even armed?'

'Spears and shields, sire. Leather armour.'
The king leaned back. 'Nifadas. Still no word on the fate of my wife and son?'

'Ours emissaries do not return, sire.'

'What does he want with them?'

'I am at a loss to answer that,' the First Eunuch admitted. 'This Tiste Edur emperor is ... unpredictable. Sire, despite the Preda's confidence, I believe it would be wise to begin plans for your temporary displacement—'

'My what?'

'Leaving Letheras, sire. Southeast, perhaps. Tallis on the Isle, or Truce.'

'No.'

'Sire—'

'Nifadas, if I am to fall, then it will be here. I shall not bring destruction upon other cities, for it is destruction my presence will invite. The protectorates, should I be usurped, will fall in line. Peacefully, with no loss of life. This Tiste Edur emperor shall have his empire. For myself, if I must die, it will be here, on this very throne. Or, rather,' he said with a wry smile, 'on the one in the Eternal Domicile.'

Silence. Then the Preda turned slowly to face Brys.

He returned her regard dispassionately. The king had made his wishes known. If he would die on his throne, then his Champion would of necessity already be dead. There was no other path to Ezgara Diskanar, after all.

'It is my intention, sire,' Unnutal said, 'that the situation you describe does not arise. The Tiste Edur will be thrown back. Beaten and broken.'

'As you say,' the king replied.

These were not new considerations for Brys. Ever since the first defeats up north, he had been thinking about a final stand before his king. The passage leading into the throne room in the Eternal Domicile was relatively narrow. With four of his best guards he felt he could hold it for some time. But without relief his death would be inevitable. The least palatable thought of all, however, was the possibility of dying beneath sorcery. Against which he had no defence. The Ceda's seeming descent into madness was the most painful blow of all. Should the enemy reach the palace, the loss of Kuru Qan would be decisive.

Brys wanted to die honourably, but he was helpless to choose, and that stung.

The doors opened behind him and he turned to see a guard step inside.

'What now?' the king asked.

'Finadd Gerun Eberict, my lord,' the guard announced.

'Very well.'

The man entered and bowed before the king. 'Sire, I apologize for arriving late. There were household affairs to attend to—'

'Taking precedence over an audience with your king, Finadd?'

'Sire, in my absence my estate was broken into.'

'I am grieved to hear that.'

'A substantial portion of my wealth was stolen, sire.'

'Careless, Gerun. It is never wise to hoard your coin.'
'My security measures were extreme—'

'Yet insufficient, it seems. Have you any clues regarding the brazen thief?'

Gerun Eberict's eyes flicked to Brys, then away again. 'I have, sire. I believe I shall recover my losses shortly.'

'I trust said activity will not prove too messy.'

'I am confident, sire.'

'And to what extent will this interfere with your duties here in the palace, Finadd?'

'None whatsoever, sire. I am able to resume command of my company.'

'Good. They have been busy quelling riots.'

'I intend to bring an end to those riots, sire. You will have peace in Letheras by this evening.'

'That leaves you little time, Gerun. Off you go, then, but be warned. I do not want a bloodbath.'

'Of course, sire.' Gerun Eberict bowed again, saluted the Preda, then left.

The doors shut, then Ezgara said, 'Brys Beddict, ready two hundred of your soldiers as clean-up crews. Expect at least one bloodbath before the twelfth bell tonight.'

'At once, sire—'

'Not yet. Why did Gerun glance to you when I enquired about the thief who struck his estate?'

'I do not know, sire. I was wondering that myself.'

'I trust your resident brother has not fallen to new depths.'

'I do not believe so.'

'Because Gerun Eberict is a formidable enemy.'

Brys nodded his agreement.

'Sire,' the Preda said, 'it is time for me to join my army.'

'Go then, and may the Errant touch you with mercy.'

As Unnutal bowed and strode towards the doors, Brys said to the king, 'I beg my leave as well, sire.'

'Go on, Champion. Once you have detailed your soldiers return here. I want you close, from now on.'

'Yes, sire.'

In the hall outside the throne room, Unnutal Hebaz was waiting. 'He suspects Tehol.'

'I know.'

'Why?'

Brys shook his head.

'You had better warn him, Brys.'

'Thank you for your concern, Preda.'

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. 'I admit to a certain fondness for Tehol.'
'I was not aware of that,' Brys said.

'He needs some bodyguards.'

'He has them, Preda. The Shavankrats.'

Her brows lifted. 'The triplets?' Then she frowned. 'I've not seen them about for some time, come to think of it. Meaning you have anticipated Gerun Eberict, which in turn suggests you know more than you revealed to the king.'

'My concern was not regarding Eberict, Preda.'

'Ah, I see. Well, you need not inform those brothers to be extra vigilant, since I don't think that is possible.'

'Agreed, Preda.'

She studied him briefly, then said, 'Would that you could join us on the field of battle, Brys.'

'Thank you for that, Preda. Errant be with you.'

'I'd rather the Ceda,' she said, then added, 'I apologize. I know he was your friend.'

'He still is,' Brys said.

She nodded, then departed, her boots echoing in the hallway.

Brys stared after her. In a few days from now she might be dead.

So might I.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Betrayer stands in the shadow of the Empty Throne. That is why it is empty.

The mass of refugees had forced them from the main road, but Seren Pedac was familiar with all the old tracks winding through the countryside, the herder paths, quarry and logging roads, the smugglers' trails. They were skirting an overgrown limestone quarry four leagues north from Brous as the sun sank behind the trees on their right.

The Acquitor found herself riding alongside the mage, Corlo. 'I have been wondering,' she said. 'The sorcery you use. I have never heard of magic that steals the will from its victims, that reaches into their minds.'

'Not surprised,' he said in a grunt. 'Here in this backwater, all the sorcery is raw and ugly. No subtlety, no refinement of the powers. Yours is a land where most of the doors are closed. I doubt there's been any innovation in the study of sorcery in the past ten thousand years.'

'Thank you for those admiring sentiments, Corlo. Maybe you'd care to explain things for my ignorant self.'

He sighed. 'Where to start?'

'Manipulating people's minds.'

'Mockra. That's the warren's name.'

'All right, bad idea. Go back further. What's a warren?'

'Well, even that's not easy to answer, lass. It's a path of magic. The forces that govern all existence are aspected. Which means—'

'Aspected. In the way the Holds are aspected?'

'The Holds.' He shook his head. 'Sitting in a wagon with square wheels and complimenting each other on the smooth ride. That's the Holds, Acquitor. They were created in a world long gone, a world where the forces were rougher, wilder, messier. The warrens, well, those are wheels without corners.'

'You're not helping much here, Corlo.'

He scratched at his beard. 'Damned fleas. All right. Paths of aspected magic. Like forces and unlike forces. Right? Unlike forces repel, and like forces hold together, you see. Same as water in a river, all flowing the same way. Sure, there's eddies, draws and such, but it all heads down eventually. I'll talk about those eddies later. So, the warrens are those rivers, only you can't see them. The current is invisible, and what you can see is only the effect. Watch a mob in a square, the way the minds of every person in it seem to melt into one. Riots and public executions, or battles, for that matter, they're all hints of Mockra, they're what you can see. But a mage who's found a way into the warren of Mockra, well, that mage can reach deeper, down into that water. In fact, that mage can jump right in and swim with the current. Find an eddy and step back out, in a different place from where he started.'

'So when you say "path" you mean it in a physical sense.'

'Only if you choose to use it that way. Mockra's not a good example; the eddies take you nowhere, mostly. Because it's sorcery of the mind, and the mind's a lot more limited than we'd care to think. Take Meanas -- that's another warren. It's aspected to shadows and illusion, a child of Thyr, the warren of Light. Separate but related. Open the warren of Meanas, and you can travel through shadows. Unseen, and fast as thought itself, nearly. And illusions, well, that reveals the sisterhood to Mockra, for it is a kind of manipulation of the mind, or, at
least, of perception, via the cunning reshaping of light and shadow and dark.'

'Do the Tiste Edur employ this Meanas?' Seren asked.

'Uh, no. Not really. Theirs is a warren not normally accessible to humans. Kurald Emurlahn. It's Shadow, but Shadow more as a Hold than a warren. Besides, Kurald Emurlahn is shattered. In pieces. The Tiste Edur can access but one fragment and that's all.'

'All right. Mockra and Meanas and Thyr. There are others?'

'Plenty, lass. Rashan, Ruse, Tennes, Hood—'

'Hood. You use that word when you curse, don't you?'

'Aye, it's the warren of Death. It's the name of the god himself. But that's the other thing about warrens. They can be realms, entire worlds. Step through and you can find yourself in a land with ten moons overhead, and stars in constellations you've never seen before. Places with two suns. Or places filled with the spirits of the dead – although if you step through the gates in Hood's Realm you don't come back. Or, rather, you shouldn't. Anyway, a mage finds a warren suited to his or her nature, a natural affinity if you like. And through enough study and discipline you find ways of reaching into it, making use of the forces within it. Some people, of course, are born with natural talent, meaning they don't have to work as hard.'

'So, you reach into this Mockra, and that gets you into the minds of other people.'

'Sort of, lass. I make use of proclivities. I make the water cloudy, or fill it with frightening shadows. The victim's body does the rest.'

'Their body? What do you mean?'

'Say you take two cows to slaughter. One of them you kill quick, without it even knowing what's about to happen. The other, well, you push it down a track, in some place filled with the stench of death, with screams of other dying animals on all sides. Until, stupid as that cow is, it knows what's coming. And is filled with terror. Then you kill it. Cut a haunch from each beast, do they taste identical?'

'I have no idea.'

'They don't. Because the frightened cow's blood was filled with bitter fluids. That's what fear does. Bitter, noxious fluids. Makes the meat itself unhealthy to eat. My point is, you trick the mind to respond to invisible fears, unfounded beliefs, and the blood goes foul, and that foulness makes the fear worse, turns the belief into certainty.'

'As if the slaughterhouse for the second cow was only an illusion, when in truth it was crossing pasture.'

'Exactly.'

Seren studied the back of Iron Bars where he rode ahead, and was silent.

'All right,' Corlo said after a time, 'now tell me what you're really on about, lass.'

She hesitated, then asked, 'Corlo, can you do anything about memories?' She looked across at him. 'Can you take them away?'

In front of them, Iron Bars half turned in his saddle, regarded Seren a moment, then swung back round.

'Ah,' Corlo said under his breath. 'You sure you want that?'

'Can you?'

'I can make you blind and senseless to them, but it'll be in your nature to fret about that strange emptiness. As if you're always on the edge of realization, but never able to reach it. It could drive you to distraction, Acquitor. Besides, the body remembers. You'll react to things you see, smell, taste, and you won't know why. It'll gnaw
away at you. Your whole personality will change.'

'You've done it before, haven't you?'

He nodded. Then hesitantly ventured, 'There's another option, lass.'

'What?'

'It's not the memories that are hurting, Acquitor. It's how you feel about them. It's the you, now, warring with the you, then. Can't explain it any better—'

'No, I understand you.'

'Well, I can make you feel, uh, differently about it.'

'How do you mean?'

'End the war, lass.'

'What would I feel, Corlo?'

'I could make you cry it out. All out, Seren.' He met her eyes. 'And when that was done, you'd feel better. Not much better, but some. You release it all, but only once, I promise. There's a risk with crying it all out, mind you. Could be as traumatic as the rape itself. But you won't fall into the trap of cycling through it over and over again. Release gets addictive, you see. It becomes a fixed behaviour, as destructive as any other. Keep repeating the exercise of grief and it loses meaning, it becomes rote, false, a game of self-delusion, self-indulgence. A way of never getting over anything, ever.'

'This sounds complicated, Corlo.'

'It is. You stop the war all in one shot, and afterwards the memory leaves you feeling... nothing. A little remorse, maybe. The same as you feel for all the mistakes you left behind you during your whole life. Regrets, but no self-recrimination, because that's your real enemy. Isn't it? A part of you feeling like you somehow deserved it.'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

'Making you want to punish yourself.'

Another nod.

Corlo raised his voice. 'Avowed, we might—'

'Aye,' he said, lifting a gauntleted hand.

The troop halted.

Corlo's hands were there, helping her down from the horse. She glared at him. 'You've started, haven't you?'

'No, lass. You did. Remember what I said about natural talent? You've got it by the bucketful.'

'I never cry,' she said as he led her off the trail into the adjacent forest.

'Of course not,' he replied. 'You've got the warren right there in your head, and you've spent most of your life manipulating it like a High Mage. Anything to keep going, right?'

She pulled up, looked behind them.

Iron Bars was just visible at the trail's edge, watching.

'Don't mind him, he's just worried, lass. He won't be there when you—'
'No,' she said. 'He comes with us.'

'Acquitor?'

'If I start beating on your chest, Corlo, I'm liable to break a rib or two. He's tougher.'

The mage's eyes widened, then he smiled. 'Avowed! Stop hovering, if you please.'

Warrens. It occurred to Seren Pedac, much later, that they were a thing not easily defined, yet simply understood. Forces of nature, proclivities and patterns. Corlo's explanations had worked to illuminate for her those mostly hidden forces, somewhat, but in the end it was the knowledge already within her that offered revelation.

In a simplistic world, four elements are commonly identified, and things are left at that. As if the universe could be confined to four observable, apposite manifestations. But Corlo had mentioned others, and once that notion was accepted, then it was as if the world opened out, as if new colours rose sudden and startling in their terrible beauty.

Time was such an element, she now believed. The stretch of existence between events, consisting of countless other events, all strung together in complex patterns of cause and effect, all laid out like images sewn onto a tapestry, creating a sequence of scenes that, once one stood back, was revealed to be co-existing. Present all at once.

She had been repeating scenes. A grim realization. Repeating scenes for most of her life. She had imposed her own pattern, bereft of nuance, and had viewed her despair as a legitimate response, perhaps the only legitimate response. A conceit of being intelligent, almost preternaturally aware of the multitude of perspectives that was possible in all things. And that had been the trap, all along, the sorcerous incantation called grief, her invitation to the demons of self-recrimination, reappearing again and again on that tapestry – different scenes, the same leering faces.

Unravelling the ritual had proved frighteningly easy, like pulling a single thread. If it had been Corlo's work, then he had been subtle beyond belief, for it had seemed that the effort was entirely her own. He had sat across from her, there in the glade they'd found thirty paces from the trail, his expression both relaxed and watchful, and, oddly enough, she had felt no shame weeping in front of him.

Iron Bars had begun by pacing restlessly, but his motion stilled when her first tears arrived, and eventually she found herself in the half-embrace of one of his arms, her face pressed against his neck.

It might have been sordid, under other circumstances. The critical part of herself could well have sneered at the contrivance, as if the only genuine gestures were the small ones, the ones devoid of an audience. As if true honesty belonged to solitude, since to be witnessed was to perform, and performance was inherently false since it invited expectation.

In the exhausted aftermath of a surprisingly short period of release, when it seemed in truth that she was empty inside, hollowed-out calm, she could explore what was left, without the fetters of emotion. She had chosen to have faith in Buruk the Pale, believed – because it was easy – that he would not give up on life. She never did, after all. She had refused the evidence of his sudden ease, the strange freedom in his words to her during those last few days. When he'd already made up his mind. He'd seen the war coming, after all, and wanted to excise his own role in its making. Cut himself from this particular tapestry. But there had been sorcery in her own self-deceit, the path to grief and guilt, and there had been a comforting familiarity to the ritual.

From her failure sprang the requirement to be punished.

She had not invited the rape. No sane person would do that. But she had woven the scene and all its potential horror.

Not all things about oneself were likeable.

So she had wept for her flaws, for her weaknesses and for her humanity. Before two witnesses who no doubt
had their own stories, their own reasons to grieve.

But now it was done. There was no value in repeating this particular ritual. Exhaustion gave way to sleep, and when she awoke it was dawn. The squad had camped in the glade, and all were still asleep with the exception of Iron Bars, who was sitting before a small hearth, intent on stirring the flames to life once more.

A blanket had been thrown over her. The morning air was cool and damp. Seren sat up, drawing the wool about her shoulders, then rose and joined the Avowed at the smouldering fire.

He did not glance up. 'Acquiror. You are rested?'

'Yes, thank you. I don't know if I should apologize—'

'For what? I've been hearing horses, south of here.'

'That would be Brous. There's a garrison there, a small one.'

'Brous is a city?'

'A village, set in the midst of stone ruins. It was once a holy site for the Tarthenal, although they didn't build it.'

'How do you know?'

'The scale is all wrong for Tarthenal.'

'Too small?'

'No, too big.'

He looked up, squinted, then rose. 'Time to prepare a meal, I think.'

'You're a strange officer, Iron Bars,' Seren said, smiling. 'Cooking every breakfast for your soldiers.'

'I always wake up first,' he replied, dragging close a food pack.

She watched him working, wondering how often he had done this. How many glades like this one, how many mornings the first to rise among snoring soldiers. So far from anything resembling home. In a way, she understood him in that regard. There were two manifestations in the Empty Hold that spoke to that nature. Walker and Wanderer, the distinction between them a subtle one of motivation.

The Avowed, she realized, was an easy man to watch.

Coughing, the mage Corlo clawed free of his blanket and stumbled over. 'Where's that tea?'

'Almost ready,' Iron Bars replied.

'Got a headache,' Corlo said. 'Something's up.'

'Heard horses earlier,' the Avowed said. 'Screaming.'

'That's brewed enough for me.'

The Avowed dipped a ladle into the pot, filled the tin cup Corlo held out.

Seren saw the mage's hand trembling.

'May need the diadem today, sir.'

'Uh, rather not. Let's try to avoid that if we can.'

'Aye.'
'The diadem?' Seren asked. 'The one you used to open that path in Trate?'

Corlo shot her a sharp look, then nodded. 'But not for that. There's other rituals woven into it. Forty of 'em, in fact. The one we might have to use speeds us up, makes us faster than normal. But we go that way as rarely as we can, since it leaves us with the shakes -- and those shakes get worse the more we use it.'

'Is that why you're trembling now?'

He glanced down at his hand after taking a sip of the herbal brew. 'No. That's something else.'

'Whatever's happening right now at Brous.'

'I guess.'

'Wake up the others, Corlo,' Iron Bars said. 'Acquitor, should we be avoiding Brous?'

'Hard to do. There's a ridge of hills to the east of here. No tracks to speak of across them. We'd lose a day, maybe two, if we went that way.'

'All right.'

'I'll see to the horses,' Seren said after a moment.

The Avowed nodded. 'Then come back and eat.'

'Aye, sir.'

She was pleased at the answering smile, slight though it was.

They were among the ruins well before the village came into view. Most were half buried, rising in humps from the forest floor. Ancient roots gripped the stone, but had clearly failed in forcing cracks into the strange rock. Causeways that had once been raised now formed a crazed web of roads through the forest, littered in dead leaves but otherwise defying intrusion. Reaching the edge of the wood, they could see a scattering of domed buildings in the clearing ahead, and beyond it the palisade wall of Brous, over which woodsmoke hung in a sullen wreath of grey.

The ancient domed buildings possessed formal entrances, a projecting, arched corridor with doorways as wide as they were tall -- three times the height of a man.

'Hood's breath,' Corlo hissed, 'these dwarf even K'Chain Che'Malle tombs.'

'Can't say I've ever seen those--' Seren began.

But the mage interrupted. 'Then I'm surprised, since there are plenty of remnants in these lands. They were something between lizards and dragons, walking on two legs. Lots of sharp teeth -- Trate's markets had the occasional stall selling the old teeth and bones. K'Chain Che'Malle, lass, ruled this entire continent, once. Long before humans arrived. Anyway, their tombs look something like these ones, only smaller.'

'Oh. It's been assumed that those were Tarthenal. Nothing was ever found inside them.'

'The K'Chain Che'Malle never got the chance to use them, that's why. Most of them, anyway.'

They fell silent as they rode past the first structure, and saw, on the near side of the village, a hundred or more soldiers and workers gathered. It appeared they were excavating into a small, longish hill. A barrow. Capstones had been dragged from the top of the barrow by teams of horses, and crowds of diggers were attacking the sides.

'Don't want to be a part of that, sir,' Corlo said.

They reined in.

'What's in there?' Iron Bars asked.
'Nothing that has anything to do with these ruins, I don't think.'

'Picking up the dock-rat version of our language doesn't serve you well, you know,' Seren said.

'Fine,' Corlo rasped. 'What I meant was, the low barrows belong to something else. And the interment was messy. Lots of wards. There's a mage in that company, Avowed, who's been busy dismantling them.'

'All of them?'

'Almost. Left a couple in place. I think he means to bind whatever's in there.'

'We've been noticed,' Seren said.

A troop of mounted soldiers was riding towards them, an officer in the lead.

'Recognize him?' the Avowed asked her.

'Finadd Arlidas Tullid,' she replied. 'He commands the Brous garrison.'

Iron Bars glanced at her. 'And?'

'He's not a nice man.'

The Finadd's troop comprised sixteen riders. They reined in, and Arlidas nodded at Seren. 'Acquitor. Thought I recognized you. You come from where?'

'Trate.'

'That's a long ride. I take it you left before it fell.'

She did not contradict him.

The Finadd scanned the Crimson Guardsmen, and apparently did not like what he saw. 'Your arrival is well timed,' he said. 'We're recruiting.'

'They have already been recruited,' Seren said, 'as my escort. I am riding to Letheras, for an audience with the king.'

Arlidas scowled. 'No point in that, Acquitor. The man just sits there, cowering on his throne. And the Ceda's lost his mind. That is why I decided to declare our independence. And we intend to defend ourselves against these damned grey-skins.'

Seren's laugh was sudden, instantly regretted. 'Independence, Finadd? The village of Brous? With you in charge? As what, its emperor?'

'You have entered our territory, Acquitor, meaning you and your escort are now subject to me. I am pleased to see you all armed, since I have few spare weapons.'

'You are not recruiting us,' Iron Bars said. 'And I suggest you do not make an issue of it, Finadd, or in a short while you will find yourself with a much smaller army.'

Arlidas sneered. 'The six of you and an Acquitor——'

'Finadd.' A rider nudged his horse from the troop to halt alongside Arlidas. Round, hairy, small-eyed and filthy from crawling tunnels of dirt. 'That one's a mage.' He pointed at Corlo.

'So are you, you damned Nerek halfling,' the Finadd snapped.

'Tell him,' Corlo said to the other mage. 'Your name's Urger, isn't it? Tell your Finadd, Urger.'

The half-Nerek licked his lips. 'He'll kill us all, sir. Every one of us. He won't even break a sweat. And he'll start with you, Finadd. He'll pluck your brain out and drop it in a cauldron of boiling oil.'
Corlo said, 'You'd best return to that barrow, Urger. Your demon's trying to get out, and it just might succeed. You'll lose your chance to bind it.'

The mage twisted round in his saddle. 'Errant take me, he's right! Finadd, I must go! No waiting!' With that he wheeled his horse and drove heels into its flanks.

Arlidas glared at Seren, Iron Bars and Corlo in turn, then he snarled wordlessly and gestured to his soldiers. 'Back to the barrow. Back, damn you!'

They rode off.

Seren looked over at Corlo. 'You made yourself pretty scary, didn't you?'

The mage smiled.

'Let's get going,' the Avowed said, 'before they gather their wits.'

'I'd like to learn how you do that, Corlo.'

His smile broadened. 'You would, would you?'

'There is always something ominous in dust rising from a distant road, do you not think?'

Trull Sengar squinted eastward until he spied the telltale smear. 'Nothing to worry about, Lilac,' he said. 'It's a column from my father's army, I suspect. A portion of it occupied the Manse not long ago.'

'There was fighting there,' the demon said, then sighed. 'Two of my kin fell.'

'I am sorry for that,' Trull said.

They were camped on the outskirts of Thetil, preparing for the fast, extended march down to First Reach, where their army would join up with the emperor's before striking southeast to Letheras. Tomad's army would march down Mappers' Road to approach the capital city from the north. The Letherii forces were fleeing before them along every approach. Even so, one more battle lay ahead, probably outside the walls of Letheras.

Trull glanced over at his company. A dozen or so warriors were gathered round Sergeant Canarth, who was in the midst of a gesture-filled tirade of some sort. Trull's captain, Ahlrada Ahn, stood nearby, apart yet listening.

Since Trull had acquired his demon bodyguard, the other warriors had kept their distance, the squad leaders reluctant to stand still even when Trull approached with orders. There was something wrong, clearly, with singling out a demon, with making it obvious that the creature was intelligent, an individual. Understandable, given the usual treatment of the Kenyll'r'rah by their Tiste Edur masters. But, he well knew, there was more to it than that.

During their march down from High Fort, Trull Sengar had found himself mostly shunned by his warrior kin and by the women. No official sanction had yet been pronounced, but silent judgement had already occurred, and it was these unspoken forms of punishment that maintained the necessary cohesion of the Edur tribes – rejection of aberrant behaviour must be seen, the punishment one of public participation, the lesson clear to all who might harbour similar dangerous impulses. Trull understood this well enough, and did not rail against it. Without the demon at his side, it would have been far more painful, far more lonely, than it was. Yet even with Lilac, there was a truth that stung. The demon was not free, and had it been so it would not now be here, at his side. Thus, the premise of companionship was flawed, and Trull could not delude himself into believing otherwise.

Fear had not spoken to him once since High Fort. Orders were conveyed through B'nagga, who was indifferent to, or unaware of, the tensions swirling about Trull.

Nearby sat their two charges, the queen and her son, for whom Trull and his company had provided escort down from High Fort. They had been carried by ox-drawn wagon, the prince's minor wounds tended to by a
Letherii slave, the queen provided with a female slave of her own to cook meals and do other chores as required. An indulgence permitting the king's wife to resume her haughty demeanour. Even so, the two prisoners had said little since their capture.

Ahlrada Ahn made his way over.

Trull spoke first. 'Captain. What has Sergeant Canarth so animated?'

The dark-skinned warrior frowned. 'You, Trull Sengar.'

'Ah, and you've come to warn me of insurrection?'

The suggestion clearly offended him. 'I am not your ally,' he said. 'Not in this matter. Canarth intends to approach Fear and request a new commander.'

'Well, that would be a relief,' Trull said. 'What is it you want, then?'

'I want you to excuse yourself before Canarth delivers his request.'

Trull looked away. Southward, the sprawl of farms on the other side of Thetil. No livestock, no workers in the fields. The rains had been kind, and all was a luscious, deep green. 'A Bluerose slave, wasn't she? Your mother. Which was why you were always apart from the rest of us.'

'I am ashamed of nothing, Trull Sengar. If you are seeking to wound me—'

He met Ahlrada's hard gaze. 'No, the very opposite. I know you do not like me. Indeed, you never have – long before I struck ... a woman. Oddly enough, I have always admired you. Your strength, your determination to rise above your birth—'

'Rise above?' Ahlrada's grin was cold. 'I suffered under no such compulsion, Trull Sengar. Before she died, my mother told me many secrets. The Bluerose are the survivors, from a war in which it was supposed there were no survivors. It was believed the Edur had killed them all, you see. It was necessary to believe that.'

'You have lost me, Ahlrada Ahn,' Trull said. 'What war are you speaking of?'

'I am speaking of the Betrayal. When the Edur and the Andii fought as allies against the K'Chain Che'Malle. The Betrayal, which was not as the Edur histories would have it. The Andii were the ones betrayed, not the Edur. Scabandari Bloodeye stabbed Silchas Ruin. In the back. All that you learned as a child and hold true to this day, Trull Sengar, was a lie.' His smile grew colder. 'And now you will accuse me of being the liar.'

'The Bluerose are Tiste Andii?'

'The blood is thinned, but it remains.'

Trull looked away once more. After a time, he slowly nodded to himself. 'I see no reason, Ahlrada Ahn, to call you a liar. Indeed, your version makes more sense. After all, had we been the ones betrayed, then we should have been as the Andii today – mere remnants of a broken people—'

'Not as broken as you think,' Ahlrada said.

'You do not think Bluerose will capitulate? Is it not already a protectorate of the Letherii? A nation of subjugated people?'

'They have been waiting for this, Trull Sengar. After all, the truth cannot be hidden – once the Edur occupy Bluerose, it will be discovered that its ruling class possess Andii blood.'

'Probably.'

They were silent for a time, then Ahlrada Ahn said, 'I hold no particular hatred for you, Trull Sengar. My hatred is for all the Tiste Edur.'
'I understand.'

'Do you? Look upon the shadow wraiths. The ghosts who have been bound to the Edur, who are made to fight this war. To find oblivion beneath swords of Letherii steel, the fatal iron against which they have no defence. They are Tiste Andii, the shades of those who fell in that betrayal, long ago.'

The demon, Lilac, spoke. 'It is true, Trull Sengar. The wraiths are compelled, as much as we Kenyll'rah. They are not your ancestors.'

'To all of this,' Trull said, 'I can do nothing.'

Without another word, he strode away. Through the camp, deftly avoided by all, his path appearing before him devoid of any obstruction, as if by the hand of sorcery. Trull was not immune to regret. He would have liked to have taken back that moment when he'd lost control, when his outrage had broken through. The woman had been right, he supposed. The wounded Edur must be healed first and foremost. There was no time for demons. He should not have struck her.

No-one cared for his reasons. The act was inexcusable, as simple as that.

He approached the command tent.

And saw that the riders they'd seen earlier on the road had arrived. Among them, Uruth, his mother.

She was standing beside her horse.

Fear emerged from the tent and strode to her.

Uruth was speaking as Trull arrived. '... I can barely stand. Should we run low on food on our march south, allow me to be the first to suggest we slaughter the horses.' She noted Trull and faced him. 'You have made terrible mistakes, my son. None the less, this over-reaction on the part of the women in this camp will not be tolerated. It is for me to sanction you, not them.' She returned her attention to Fear. 'Are the warriors naught but children? Grubby hands on their mother's skirts? Did your brother Trull reveal cowardice on the field of battle?'

'No,' Fear replied, 'there was no question of his courage—'

'For you and your warriors, Fear, nothing else obtains. I would have thought better of you, my eldest son. Your brother sought the healing of a fallen comrade—'

'A demon—'

'And did not demons fight at High Fort? Did not many of them give their lives to win victory? Healers are to accede to the wishes of the warriors after a battle. They are not to make judgements on who is worthy of healing. Had I been here, I myself might well have struck her for her impudence. Shall every Edur woman now assume the flaws of our Empress Mayen? Not if I have a say in the matter. Now, Fear, you will correct your warriors' attitudes. You will remind them of Trull's deeds during the journey to retrieve the emperor's sword. You will tell them to recall his delivery of the news of the Letherii harvest of the tusked seals. Most importantly, Fear, you will not turn away from your brother. Do you challenge my words?'

It seemed a vast weight lifted from Fear, as he straightened with a wry smile. 'I would not dare,' he said.

Trull hesitated, then said, 'Mother, Fear's anger with me has been over my disagreement with the necessity of this war. I have been careless in voicing my objections—'

'A crisis of loyalty to the emperor is a dangerous thing,' Uruth said. 'Fear was right to be angry, nor am I pleased by your words. Only the emperor has the power to halt this conquest, and he will not do that. Neither Fear nor I, nor anyone else, Trull, are capable of responding to your doubts. Do you not see that? Only Rhulad, and he is not here.'

'I understand,' Trull said. He looked to Fear. 'Brother, I apologize. I shall save my words for Rhulad—'

'He is not interested in hearing them,' Fear said.
'None the less.'

They studied each other.

Uruth sighed. 'Enough of this. Trull, is that the demon in question?'

Trull swung round to where Lilac stood, five paces back. 'Yes.'

His mother approached the demon. 'Kenyll'rah, do your kin still rule over you in your home realm?'

A deferential nod. 'The tyrants remain, mistress, for the war continues.'

'Yet you were not a soldier.'

Lilac shrugged. 'Even the Kenryll'ah must eat, mistress.'

'We found few soldiers among those we summoned,' Uruth said.

'We are losing the war. Four of the Kenryll'ah towers have fallen. Korvalahrai ships were seen far up the Chirahd River.'

'I must leave to join the emperor tomorrow morning,' Uruth said. 'Which leaves us this night.'

'For what?' Trull asked.

'A conversation with a Kenryll'ah tyrant,' she replied, her regard still on the demon. 'Perhaps the time has come for a formal alliance.'

Lilac spoke. 'They are not pleased with your thefts, Tiste Edur.'

Uruth turned away. 'You are a peasant, demon. All I need from you is the path into your realm. Keep your opinions to yourself.'

Trull watched his mother stride into the command tent. He glanced at Fear and saw his brother staring at him.

'Did you come here to speak to me about something?'

Trull hesitated, then said, 'My warriors are about to come to you seeking a new commander. I thought to anticipate them by resigning.'

Fear smiled. "Resigning." I suppose we are indeed an army now. In the Letherii fashion. Sergeants, lieutenants, captains.'

'And commanders.'

'There will be no resignations, Trull.'

'Very well. Expect Canarth to request an audience soon.'

'And he shall have one, although he will not leave pleased.' Fear stepped close. 'We will soon be joining our brothers. I know you will have words you will want to say to Rhulad. Be careful, Trull. Nothing is at it once was. Our people have changed.'

'I can see that, Fear.'

'Perhaps, but you do not understand it.'

'Do you?' Trull challenged.

Fear shrugged, made no reply. A moment later, he walked back to his command tent.

'Your mother,' Lilac said, 'would play a dangerous game.'
'This is the emperor's game, Lilac,' Trull said. He faced the demon. 'Your people are at war in your home realm?'

'I am a caster of nets.'

'Yet, should the need arise, your tyrant masters could call you into military service.'

'The Kenryll'ah have ruled a long time, Trull Sengar. And have grown weak with complacency. They cannot see their own impending demise. It is always the way of things, such blindness. No matter how long and perfect the succession of fallen empires and civilizations so clearly writ into the past, the belief remains that one's own shall live for ever, and is not subject to the indomitable rules of dissolution that bind all of nature.' The small, calm eyes of the demon looked down steadily upon Trull. 'I am a caster of nets. Tyrants and emperors rise and fall. Civilizations burgeon then die, but there are always casters of nets. And tillers of the soil, and herders in the pastures. We are where civilization begins, and when it ends, we are there to begin it again.'

A curious speech, Trull reflected. The wisdom of peasants was rarely articulated in such clear fashion. Even so, claims to truth were innumerable. 'Unless, Lilac, all the casters and tillers and herders are dead.'

'I spoke not of ourselves, Trull, but of our tasks. Kenyll'rah, Edur, Letherii, the selves are not eternal. Only the tasks.'

'Unless everything is dead.'

'Life will return, eventually. It always does. If the water is foul, it will find new water.'

'My mother said she would make use of you, to fashion a path,' Trull said. 'How will this be done?'

'I will be sacrificed. My blood shall be the path.'

'I did not have you healed only to have you sacrificed, Lilac.'

'There is nothing you can do, Trull Sengar.'

'There must be. Is there no way of setting you free?'

The demon was silent for a moment, then it said, 'Your blood can create a new binding. Myself to you, in exclusion of all else. Then you could command me.'

'To do what? Return to your realm?'

'Yes.'

'And could you then be summoned again?'

'Only by you, Trull Sengar.'

'You would have me as your master, Lilac?'

'The alternative is death.'

'Which you said earlier you'd prefer to slavery.'

'Between the choices of fighting this war or dying, yes.'

'But returning home ...'

'That is preferable to all else, Trull Sengar.'

The Tiste Edur drew out his knife. 'What must I do?'

Trull entered the command tent a short while later. He found Fear and Uruth in the centre chamber. 'Mother.'
She turned, frowned. 'What have you done?'

'I sent my demon away. You will have to find another.'

Her gaze dropped to his left hand, narrowed on the broad, still dripping cut across the palm. 'I see. Tell me, son, will your defiance never end?'

'I paid a high price to save that demon's life.'

'What of it?'

'You intended to use him to create your path into his realm—'

'And?'

'To do that, you would have to sacrifice it—'

'The demon told you that? It lied, Trull. In fact, killing it would have severed its link to its own world. It deceived you, son. But you are bound now, the two of you. You can summon it back, and deliver your punishment.'

Trull cocked his head, then smiled. 'You know, Mother, I think I would have done the same, were I in its place. No, I have sent it home, and there it shall stay.'

'Where it may well find itself fighting in another war.'

'Not for me to decide,' Trull said, shrugging.

'You are difficult to understand,' Uruth said, 'and the effort wearies me.'

'I am sorry,' Trull said. 'This alliance you will attempt with the demon tyrants – what is the emperor seeking from it? What does Rhulad plan to offer in return?'

'Are you truly interested, son?'

'I am.'

Uruth shot Fear a glance, then sighed. 'The Korvalahrai are seafarers. They are reaching into the Kenryll'ah lands via a vast river, and even now approach the heart in a fleet carrying all the Korvalahrai. Rhulad's power is such that he can divert that river, for a time. The invading fleet will be destroyed in the conflagration. Achieving such a thing would in turn serve Edur needs, as well. In return, we are given more demons for our war, perhaps a minor Kenyll'rah or two, who are far better versed in the arts of battle than their subject Kenyll'rah.' She turned to Fear. 'I will need another demon.'

'Very well.'

'And then, a place of solitude.'

Fear nodded. 'Trull, return to your company.'

As he was walking back to where his warriors were camped, Trull found himself smiling. Lilac's pleasure, moments before it vanished, had been childlike. Yet the demon's mind was not simple. It must have known there was a risk that, upon discovering the deception, Trull would summon it back in a fit of rage and inflict terrible punishment. For some reason, Lilac had concluded that such an event was unlikely.

My weakness, so plain and obvious even a demon could see it.

Perhaps he was not a warrior after all. Not a follower of commands, capable of shutting out all unnecessary thoughts in service to the cause. Not a leader, either, to stride ahead, certainty a blinding fire drawing all with him.

Worse yet, he was suspicious of Rhulad's transformation. Fear, in his youth, had displayed none of Rhulad's
strutting arrogance, his posing and posturing – all of which might well suit a leader of warriors, but not in the manner that Fear led warriors. Rhulad had been bluster, whilst Fear was quiet confidence, and Trull was not sure if that essential character trait had changed in Rhulad.

*I do not belong.*

The realization shocked him, slowed his steps. He looked around, feeling suddenly lost. Here, in the midst of his own people.

*The Tiste Edur have changed. But I haven't.*

** * * *

South, across the region known as the Swath, a deforested scrubland which had once been part of Outcry Wood, past the burnt-out town of Siege Place, and onto the slowly climbing Lookout Track towards the hills of Lookout Climb. Three days crossing the old hills – a range thoroughly denuded by wild goats – onto Moss Road. Marching northeast along the banks of the Moss River to the ford town of Ribs.

Retreating Letherii forces had stripped the countryside ahead of the emperor and his army. The military food and materiel caches that Hull Beddict knew of were all emptied. If not for the shadow wraiths, supplying the Tiste Edur army would have been impossible – the invasion would have stalled. Unacceptable, Rhulad had decided. The enemy was reeling. It was necessary to keep it so.

Udinaas remembered eating smoked eel from Moss River, one time when the trader ship had docked in Dresh. Delicious, once one got used to the furry skin, which was to be chewed but not swallowed. He had since heard, from another slave, that the eels had been transplanted into Dresh Lake, producing a strain that was both bigger and nastier. It had turned out that those eels captured in Moss River were juveniles, and few ever reached adulthood since there was a razor-jawed species of predatory fish resident in the river. No such fish in Dresh Lake. Adolescent swimmers from Dresh started disappearing before anyone realized the adult eels were responsible. Razor-jawed fish were netted from the river and tossed into the lake, but their behaviour changed, turning them into frenzy feeders. Adult swimmers from Dresh started vanishing. The slave who had been relating all this then laughed and finished with, 'So they poisoned the whole lake, killed everything. And now no-one can swim in it!'

From this, Udinaas surmised, various lessons could be drawn, should one be inclined to draw lessons from multiple acts of stupidity.

They had camped on the road, a day's march west of Ribs. The emperor was suffering from some kind of fever. Healers were tending to him, and the last Udinaas had heard, Rhulad was sleeping. It was late afternoon, and the sun's light was painting the river's surface red and gold.

Udinaas walked along the stony strand, flinging rocks out onto the water every now and then, shattering the lurid hues. At the moment, he was not feeling anything like a slave, or an Indebted. He marched in the shadow of the emperor, for all to see, for all to wonder at.

He heard boots crunching on pebbles and turned to see Hull Beddict scrambling down onto the strand. A big man, on whom every oversized muscle seemed to brood, somehow. There was fever in his eyes as well, but unlike Rhulad this heat had nothing to do with illness. 'Udinaas.'

The slave watched the man approach, fighting his instinctive urge towards deference. The time for that was past, after all. He just wasn't sure what belonged in its stead.

'I have been looking for you.'

'Why?'

'The emperor's condition ...'

Udinaas shrugged. 'A marsh fever, nothing more—'
'I was not speaking of that, slave.'

'I am not your slave, Hull Beddict.'

'I am sorry. You are right.'

Udinaas collected another stone. He wiped the grit from its underside before throwing it out over the water. They watched it splash, then Udinaas said, 'I understand your need to distinguish yourself from the other Letherii marching with this army. Even so, we are all bound to servitude, and the varying shades of that are not as relevant as they once were.'

'Perhaps you have a point, Udinaas, but I don't quite understand what you're getting at.'

He brushed the grit from his hands. 'Who better to teach the newly conquered Letherii than the Edur's original Letherii slaves?'

'You anticipate a new status for you and your fellow slaves, then?'

'Maybe. How are the Tiste Edur to rule? Much remains to be answered, Hull Beddict. I gather you intend to involve yourself in that particular reshaping, if you can.'

The man's smile was sour. 'It seems I am to have little or no role in much of anything, Udinaas.'

'Then the Errant looks kindly upon you,' Udinaas said.

'I am not surprised you might see it that way.'

'It is a waste of time, Hull Beddict, to fashion intricate plans for restitution. What you did before, all you did before – the mistakes, the bad decisions – they are dead, for everyone but you. None of it has purchased a future claim to glory, none of it has earned you anything.'

'Has not the emperor heeded my advice?'

'In this war? When it suited him. But I trust you are not expecting any consideration in return.' Udinaas turned, met Hull's eyes. 'Ah, I think you are.'

'Reciprocity, Udinaas. Surely the Tiste Edur understand that, since it is so essential within their own culture.'

'There is no reciprocity when you display expectation, Hull Beddict. Poof! It vanishes. And that was just my point earlier: there is much that we can teach the future conquered Letherii.'

'I am blood-bound to Binadas,' Hull said, 'yet you accuse me of insensitivity to the mores of the Tiste Edur.' His expression was wry. 'I am not often chastised in such things. You remind me of Seren Pedac.'

'The Acquitor who escorted you? I saw her, in Trate.'

Hull stepped close, suddenly intent. 'During the battle?'

Udinaas nodded. 'She was in bad shape, but alive. She'd found a worthy escort of her own – I have no doubt she still lives.'

'An escort of her own? Who?'

'I'm not sure. Foreigners. One of them killed Rhulad and his chosen brothers.' Udinaas collected another stone. 'Look at that, Hull Beddict, a river of gold. Flowing into the sunset.' He flung the stone, broke the mirrored perfection. Momentarily.

'You witnessed that killing.'

'I did. Whoever that foreigner was, he was terrifying.'

'More terrifying than Rhulad's return?'
Udinaas said nothing for a time, then he stepped away, down to the water's edge. He stared into the shallows, saw the muddy bottom swarming with newborn eels. 'Do you know what is coming, Hull Beddict?'

'No. Do you?'

'Dresh Lake. That's what's coming.'

'I don't understand.'

'Doesn't matter. Don't mind me, Hull Beddict. Well, I'd best return. The emperor is awake.'

Hull followed him up from the strand. 'Things like that,' he said. 'He's awake. How do you know?'

'A stirring in the shadows,' Udinaas said. 'Rhulad sets the world to a tremble. Well,' he amended, 'a small part of it. But it's growing. In any case, his fever has broken. He is weak, but alert.'

'Tell me,' Hull said as they walked into the vast camp, 'about Feather Witch.'

Udinaas grimaced. 'Why?'

'She is no longer Mayen's slave. She now serves the Edur healers. Was that your work?'

'The emperor's command, Hull Beddict.'

'You claim no influence on him? Few would believe that now.'

'Reciprocity.'

'And in return, you give Rhulad what?'

Friendship. 'I do not advise him, Hull Beddict. I do not seek to influence him. I cannot answer your question. Rather, I won't.'

'She affects to hold only hatred for you, Udinaas. But I am not convinced.'

'Oh, I am.'

'I think, perhaps, she has given her heart to you. Yet would fight it, for all the pointless prohibitions and prejudices of our people. What is the extent of your debt, Udinaas?'

'My debt? My father's debt. Seven hundred and twenty-two docks, from the day I was taken as a slave.'

Hull reached out and stopped him. 'That's it?'

'A Beddict might well say that. For most Letherii, that is insurmountable. Especially given the interest.'

Udinaas resumed walking.

Hull came up alongside him. 'Who holds it?'

'A minor lender in Letheras. Why are you asking?'

'The lender's name?'

'Huldo.'

'Huldo.' After a moment, Hull snorted.

'You find that amusing?'

'I do. Udinaas, my brother Tehol owns Huldo.'

'Maybe once. As I understand it, Tehol owns nothing these days.'
'Let me tell you a story about my brother. He was, I guess, around ten years old, when a family debt was purchased by a particularly unscrupulous lender. The plan was to force us to relinquish a certain holding, and so the debt was called. We couldn't pay, not all at once, and of course the lender knew it. Now, it was at the time assumed by all that Tehol was at school every day during this crisis, and indeed, that, young as he was, he had no idea of the trouble our parents were in. Only much later did certain facts come to light. The fact that Tehol had finessed a debt of his own, over his tutor. Nothing large, but he was able to coerce the tutor into saying nothing about his absences, whilst he operated a business venture of his own down at a flow-out on the river. Two employees, both Nerek, sifting sewage. This particular out-flow issued from an estate district – extraordinary what treasures could be recovered. Jewellery, mostly. Rings, earrings, pearls. In any case, it seemed there was a windfall, a necklace, and the result was Tehol and his two Nerek employees found themselves suddenly flush—'

'By selling the necklace?'

'Oh no, from the reward. Their business was returning lost items. Shortly thereafter, the lender pressuring our family received payment in full on our debt, and was then subsequently financially gutted when a host of holdings on him were called.'

Udinaas grunted. 'Grateful patrons, indeed.'

'Probably. We never found out. And Tehol never explained a damned thing. It took me over a year to piece some of it together. My point is, Udinaas, Tehol's genius is of the diabolical kind. Destitute? Not a chance. Retired from business dealings? Impossible. I am now quite skilled at tracking my brother, you see. Huldo's not the only lender Tehol owns.'

'So,' Udinaas said as they approached the emperor's tent, 'I am Indebted to the Beddicts.'

'Not any more,' Hull said. 'I am clearing it. Right now. I am sure Tehol will forgive me, assuming I ever get a chance to corner him.'

Udinaas looked over at the man. Then he nodded. 'I see. Reciprocity.'

'I am without expectation, Udinaas.'

'Good. I knew you were a fast learner.'

Hull Beddict halted outside the entrance. 'I enjoyed speaking to you,' he said.

Udinaas hesitated, then smiled.

Seated on his throne, sweat streaming down between and over the gold coins on his face, neck and chest, some horrible insight burning in his eyes, the emperor trembled as if rabid. 'Udinaas,' he croaked. 'As you can see, we are well.'

'These southlands, Emperor, hold strange diseases—' 'We were not sick. We were ... travelling.' They were alone in the chamber. Hannan Mosag was overseeing the warriors, where some old feuds between tribes were threatening to breach the unity. Mayen was cloistered among the women, for it was said that Uruth Sengar was coming, summoned via the K'risnan. The air in the tent smelled of sour sweat.

'A long and difficult journey, then,' Udinaas said. 'Do you wish some wine? Food?'

'No. Not yet. We have ... done something. A terrible thing. To achieve an alliance. When we strike the Letherii army outside Letheras, you shall see what has been won this day. We are ... pleased. Yes, pleased.'

'Yet frightened. By your own power.'

The eyes flickered, fixed on Udinaas. 'We can hide little from you, it seems. Yes, frightened. We ... I ... have drowned an entire world. A fragment of Kurrald Emurlahn, upon which our ships will soon travel. Seeking our lost kin. And ... champions.' He clawed at his face. 'I drowned a world.'
The subject needed deflection, Udinaas decided. 'Champions? I do not understand, Emperor.'

A moment to recover, then a nod. 'Worthy foes, Udinaas. Skilled fighters capable of killing us. They are needed.'

'For your power to grow yet stronger.'

'Yes. Stronger. It is necessary. So many things are necessary, now

Udinaas risked a glance away as he said, 'It is right to fear, then, Emperor.'

'It is? Explain.'

'Fear bespeaks of wisdom. Recognition of responsibility.'

'Wisdom. Yes, it must be so, mustn't it? We had not considered that before. We fear, because we are becoming wise.'

Oh, you poor lad. How can I do this? 'How will you incite these ... champions?'

Rhulad shivered, then raised the sword in his right hand. 'Who among them will turn away from such a challenge? Those who do are not worth fighting. Or, if they are yet reluctant, they will be compelled. This world is vast, Udinaas, far vaster than you might think. There are other lands, other empires. There are formidable peoples, races. We will search far. We will find those useful to us. And then, one day, we will conquer. Every kingdom. Every continent.'

'You will need to deceive those champions, Emperor. Into believing that killing you means their victory. You will have to make it seem that it is your ego that forces such challenges. They must know nothing of the sword's power, of its demands upon you.'

'Yes, you speak true, Udinaas. Together, we will shape the future. You will want for nothing.'

'Emperor, I want for nothing now. I need no promises. Please, I did not mean to offend by that. What I meant was, there is no need for promises.'

Sudden pain in Rhulad's dark eyes, a grief and sorrow that rent at Udinaas, somewhere deep inside. It was all he could do to continue meeting the emperor's gaze.

'We would have some wine, now, Udinaas.' A tone of profound sorrow. 'Two goblets, for you and me. We shall drink, and think of nothing. We shall talk, perhaps, of inconsequential matters.'

Udinaas strode to the table where sat a jug of Letherii wine. 'I visited Dresh, once,' he said as he poured out two cups full. 'And ate smoked Moss River eel. Would you like me to tell about Moss River eels, Emperor?' He carried the two goblets over to the Edur seated on the throne.

'Is it inconsequential?'

Udinaas hesitated, then nodded. 'It is.'

'Then, yes, Udinaas. We would.'

Seren Pedac and the Crimson Guardsmen rode at a canter. Half a league ahead was the town of Dissent. It had once been walled, but local builders had dismantled most of the stonework long ago. The town had since grown outward in a mostly chaotic manner, swallowing commons and nearby farms. But now Dissent was barely visible, devoured in turn by at least three encamped armies.

'Crimson Rampant Brigade,' Seren said, scanning the distant banners. 'Snakebelt Battalion, and the Riven Brigade.'

'Can we ride straight through?' Iron Bars asked.
She glanced across at him, then nodded. 'I think so. My apologies. I'm a little shocked, that's all. If this is all
that's left of the frontier armies ...'

'The ground ahead is not ideal for a battle,' the Avowed judged. 'I'd be surprised if the king intended to await
the Edur here. Can you think of anywhere else close by that might be better suited?'

'Brans Keep, in the hills a few leagues northeast of Dissent.'

'And Dissent is the nearest major town?'

'Apart from Letheras itself,' Seren said.

'Then this is temporary encampment. When the Tiste Edur draw closer, those three armies will march to
Brans Keep. Assuming the warlord commanding them has any wits at all. In any case, Acquitor, other Letherii
forces might already be waiting there, at Brans Keep. It's a question of logistics, keeping these ones here.'

'I hope you are right. Then again, I wonder if it will make any difference.'

'We're far from the sea, Seren,' Iron Bars said. 'That demon the Edur have chained can't reach here, and that
evens things some.'

A worthy try, Iron Bars. 'Another day to Outkeep, then we should reach Letheras the following day, well
before dusk.'

'Could we hasten that, Acquitor? These soldiers camped ahead, might they be prepared to exchange horses?'

'If I insist, yes.'

'Based on your desire to speak to the king.'

'Yes.'

'And will you? Speak to the king, that is.'

'No.'

He said nothing for a time, whilst she waited. Then, 'And in Letheras, what will you do once you've arrived?'

'I expect I will have some dusting to do.'

'Sorry?'

'My house is closed up. I've not had a chance to send a message to my staff – all two of them.'

'That doesn't sound very secure – no-one to guard your possessions.'

She smiled. 'I have nothing of value, Iron Bars. Thieves are welcome to it. Well, I'd prefer if they left me my
furniture – my neighbours are diligent enough, I suppose, to prevent anything like that.'

The Avowed stared ahead for a moment. 'We must needs depart your company, then, Acquitor. To make
contact with our new employer. Presumably, we'll be shipping out soon after.'

Before the city's occupied and sealed up. I imagine so.'

'There might be room aboard ...'

'I am Letherii, Iron Bars.' She shook her head. 'I am done with travelling for a time, I think.'

'Understandable. Anyway, the offer's open.'

'Thank you.' So here I run again.

Corlo, riding behind them, called out, 'Easy on that, lass. Mockra's dangerous when you don't control it.'
The Avowed turned his head, studied her.

She shrugged.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

An old man emerged from the ditch, a creature of mud and wild autumn winds capering. Like a hare across a bouldered field, across and through the stillness of time unhinged. That sprawls patient and unexpectant in the Place where battle lies spent, unmov ing and never again moving bodies strewn and death-twisted like lost languages tracking contorted glyphs on a barrow door, and he read well the aftermath, the disarticulated script. Rent and dissolute the pillars of self toppled like termite towers all spilled out round his dancing feet, and he shouted in gleeful revelation the truth he'd found, in these red-fleshed pronouncements – 'There is peace!' He shrieked. 'There is peace!' and it was no difficult thing, where I sat in the saddle above salt-rimmed horseflesh to lift my crossbow aim and loose the quarrel, skewering the madman to his proclamation. 'Now,' said I, in the silence that followed, 'Now, there is peace.'

*The Lay of Skinner*

Fisher kel Tath

On facing hills, the smouldering ruins of first reach in the low, flat floodplain between, the two armies of the Tiste Edur came within sight of one another. Wraiths swarmed through the ashes, weapons were lifted high, triumphant cries piercing the still morning air.

The convergence was, of course, incomplete. The third, easternmost force, led by Tomad Sengar and Binadas, was still striking south down Mappers' Road towards White Point. It would join with these two armies, Trull knew, somewhere close to Brans Keep, and there the fate of Lether, and indeed of the Edur empire, would be decided in a single battle.

He stood leaning on his spear, feeling no inclination to join his voice to the fierce tumult buffeting him from all sides. Just north of the ruins in the floodplain below, a hundred or more starlings cavorted and wheeled, their own cries drowned out, a detail that somehow transformed their dance into a fevered, nightmarish display.

In the distant line of warriors opposite, a space was clearing, a single dominant standard bobbing forward, beneath it a figure flashing gold, holding high a sword.

The warcries redoubled.

Trull flinched at the deafening sound. He pulled his gaze away from Rhulad on that far hilltop and saw fear approaching.

'Trull! B'nagga, you and I – horses await us – we ride now to our emperor!'

He nodded, uneasy with the ferocity evident in Fear's eyes. 'Lead on, brother.'

The ride across to Rhulad's army was a strange experience. Trull did not like horses that much, and liked riding them even less. He was jolted again and again, jarring the scene on all sides. They rode across burnt ground, heaps of the remains of butchered livestock lining the tracks approaching the town. And the roaring of the warriors was a wave at their backs, pushing them onwards.

Then, halfway across, the sensation shifted, spun entirely round, as the voices of the warriors in the emperor's army engulfed them. Their horses balked, and it was a struggle to make them resume the approach.

As they climbed the slope, Trull could see his brother Rhulad more clearly. He was barely recognizable, hulking now beneath the weight of the coins. His forehead was exposed, revealing skin the colour of dirty snow, the contrast darkening the pits of his eyes. His teeth were bared, but it seemed as much a grimace of pain as anything else. Hannan Mosag stood on the emperor's left, the slave Udinaas on the right. Hull Beddict was positioned three paces behind the Warlock King. Mayen and Uruth were nowhere to be seen.

Arriving, they reined in and dismounted. Slaves appeared to lead the horses away.
Fear strode forward to kneel before the emperor. Across the valley, another surge of sound.

'My brother,' Rhulad said in his rasping, broken voice. 'Rise before us.' The emperor stepped close and settled a coin-backed hand on Fear's shoulder. 'There is much I must say to you, but later.'

'As you command, Emperor.'

Rhulad's haunted eyes shifted. 'Trull.'

He knelt and studied the ground before him. 'Emperor.'

'Rise. We have words for you as well.'

_No doubt._ 'Mother arrived safely?'

A flash of irritation. 'She did.' It seemed he would say something more to Trull, but then he changed his mind and faced B'nagga. 'The Jheck are well, B'nagga?'

A fierce grin. 'They are, Emperor.'

'We are pleased. Hannan Mosag would speak to you regarding the impending lie of battle. A tent has been prepared for such matters. Hull Beddict has drawn us detailed maps.'

B'nagga bowed, then walked to the Warlock King. The two departed, trailed by Hull Beddict.

'Our brothers,' Rhulad said, the sword shaking in his left hand. 'Come, we will take food and drink in our own tent. Udinaas, precede us.'

The slave strode into the mass of warriors. The Edur melted back before the nondescript Letherii, and into his wake walked the emperor, Fear and Trull.

They reached the command tent a short while later, after traversing an avenue walled in flesh, waving weapons and frenzied warcries. Wraiths stood guard to either side of the entrance. As soon as the slave and the three brothers entered, Rhulad spun round and halted Trull with one hand. 'How far do you intend to push me, Trull?'

He looked down at the hand pressed against his chest. 'It seems you are the one doing the pushing, Rhulad.'

A moment of taut silence, then his brother barked a laugh and stepped back. 'Words from our past, yes? As we once were, before ...' a wave of the sword, 'all this.' His ravaged gaze fixed on Trull for a moment. 'We have missed you.' He smiled at Fear. 'Missed you both. Udinaas, find us some wine!'

'A Letherii drink,' Fear said.

'I have acquired a taste for it, brother.'

Trull and Fear followed Rhulad into the inner chamber, where the slave was already pouring three cups of dark wine into Letherii-made goblets of silver and gold. Trull felt unbalanced, the sudden breach in Rhulad's façade shocking him, hurting him somewhere inside for reasons he could not immediately fathom.

Eschewing the throne dominating the centre of the room, the emperor settled down in a leather-slung tripod chair near the food-laden table along one wall. Two identical chairs flanked him. Rhulad gestured. 'Come, brothers, sit with us. We know, we understand well, it seemed all we were was but ashes, and the love we shared, as brothers, was so sadly strained, then.'

Trull could see that even Fear was stunned, as they sat down in the low chairs.

'We must not run from our memories,' Rhulad said, as Udinaas brought him his cup. 'The blood of kin need not always burn, brothers. There must be times when it simply ... warms us.'

Fear cleared his throat. 'We have ... missed you as well, Emperor—'
'Enough! No titles. Rhulad, so our father named me, as he named all his sons, each in turn from the host of ancestors of the Sengar line. It is too easy to forget.'

Udinaas set a cup into Fear's hand. Fingers closed of their own accord.

Trull glanced up as the slave approached him with the last cup. He met the Letherii's eyes, was startled by what he saw in them. He reached out and accepted the wine. 'Thank you, Udinaas.'

A flinch from Rhulad. 'He is mine,' he said in a tight voice.

Trull's eyes widened. 'Of course, Rhulad.'

'Good. Yes. Fear, I must tell you of Mayen.'

Slowly leaning back, Trull studied the wine trembling in the cup in his hands. The slave's gaze, the message it seemed to convey. All is well.

'I did not,' Fear ventured hesitantly, 'see her earlier ...'

'No, nor our mother. Mayen has been unwell.' Rhulad shot Fear a nervous glance. 'I am sorry, brother. I should not have ... should not have done that. And now, well, you see ...' He drained his wine in a single motion. 'Udinaas, more. Tell him. Explain, Udinaas, so that Fear understands.'

The slave refilled the cup, then stepped back. 'She is with child,' he said, meeting Fear's gaze. 'There is no doubt, now, that her heart belongs to you. Rhulad would have wished otherwise. At first, in any case. But not now. He understands. But the child, that has made matters difficult. Complicated.'

The cup in Fear's hand had not visibly moved, but Trull could see that it was close to spilling, as if a numbness was stealing the strength of the limb. 'Go on,' Fear managed.

'There is no precedent, no rules among your people,' Udinaas resumed. 'Rhulad would relinquish his marriage to her, he would undo all that has been done. But for the child, do you see, Fear Sengar?'

'That child will be heir—'

Rhulad interrupted with a harsh laugh. 'No heir, Fear. Ever. Don't you see? The throne shall be my eternal burden.'

_{Burden. By the Sisters, what has awakened you, Rhulad? Who has awakened you? Trull snapped his gaze back to Udinaas, and mentally reeled in sudden realization. Udinaas? This ... this slave?}_

Udinaas was nodding, eyes still on Fear's own. 'The warrior that raises that child will be its father, in all things but the naming. There will be no deception. All will know. If there is to be a stigma ...'

'It will be for me to deal with,' Fear said. 'Should I choose to stand beside Mayen, once wife to the emperor, with a child not my own to raise as my wife's first-born.'

'It is as you say, Fear Sengar,' Udinaas said. Then he stepped back.

Trull slowly straightened, reached with one hand and gently righted the cup in Fear's grip. Startled, his brother looked at him, then nodded. 'Rhulad, what does Mother say to all this?'

'Mayen has been punishing herself with white nectar. It is not an easy thing to defeat, such ... dependency. Uruth endeavours ...'

A soft groan from Fear, as he closed his eyes.

Trull watched Rhulad stretch out as if to touch Fear, watched him hesitate, then glance across to Trull.


A momentary contact, that seemed to shoot through Fear, snapping his eyes open.
'Brother,' Rhulad said, 'I am sorry.'

Fear studied his youngest brother's face, then said, 'We are all sorry, Rhulad. For... so much. What has Uruth said of the child? Is it well?'

'Physically, yes, but it knows its mother's hunger. This will be ... difficult. I know, you do not deserve any of this, Fear—'

'Perhaps, Rhulad, but I will accept the burden. For Mayen. And for you.'

No-one spoke after that, not for some time. They drank their wine, and it seemed to Trull that something was present, some part of his life he'd thought – not long gone, but non-existent in the first place. They sat, the three of them. Brothers, and nothing more.

Night descended outside. Udinaas served food and still more wine. Some time later, Trull rose, the alcohol softening details, and wandered through the chambers of the tent, his departure barely noticed by Rhulad and Fear.

In a small room walled in by canvas, he found Udinaas.

The slave was sitting on a small stool, eating his own supper. He looked up in surprise at Trull's sudden arrival.

'Please,' Trull said, 'resume your meal. You have earned it, Udinaas.'

'Is there something you wish of me, Trull Sengar?'

'No. Yes. What have you done?'

The slave cocked his head. 'What do you mean?'

'With ... him. What have you done, Udinaas?'

'Not much, Trull Sengar.'

'No, I need an answer. What are you to him?'

Udinaas set down his plate, drank a mouthful of wine. 'A subject who's not afraid of him, I suppose.'

'That's... all? Wait, yes, I see. But then I wonder, why? Why are you not afraid of him?'

Udinaas sighed, and Trull realized how exhausted the slave was. 'You, all the Edur, you see the sword. Or the gold. You see ... the power. The terrifying, brutal power.' He shrugged. 'I see what it takes from him, what it costs Rhulad. I am Letherii, after all,' he added with a grimace. 'I understand the notion of debt.' He looked up. 'Trull Sengar, I am his friend. That is all.'

Trull studied the slave for a half-dozen heartbeats. 'Never betray him, Udinaas. Never.'

The Letherii's gaze skittered away. He drank more wine.

'Udinaas—'

'I heard you,' the man said in a grating voice.

Trull turned to leave. Then he paused and glanced back. 'I have no wish to depart on such terms. So, Udinaas, for what you have done, for what you have given him, thank you.'

The slave nodded without looking up. He reached down to retrieve his plate.

Trull returned to the central chamber to find that Hannan Mosag had arrived, and was speaking to Rhulad.

'... Hull believes it lies near a town downriver from here. A day's journey, perhaps. But, Emperor, a necessary
'A K'risnan,' the Warlock King said, 'and our new demonic allies, the two Kenryll'ah.'

'Very well, those as well. We shall meet you at Brans Keep.'

'What is it?' Trull asked. 'What has happened?'

'Something has been freed,' Hannan Mosag said. 'And it must be dealt with.'

'Freed by whom, and for what purpose?'

The Warlock King shrugged. 'I know not who was responsible. But I assume it was freed to fight us.'

'A demon of some sort?'

'Yes. I can only sense its presence, its will. I cannot identify it. The town is named Brous.'

Trull slowly nodded. 'Would that Binadas were with us,' he said.

Rhulad glanced up. 'Why?'

Trull smiled, said nothing.

After a moment, Fear grunted, then nodded.

Rhulad matched Trull's smile. 'Yes,' he said, 'would that he were.'

Hannan Mosag looked at the three of them in turn. 'I do not understand.'

The emperor's laugh was harsh, only slightly bitter. 'You send us on another quest, Warlock King.'

Hannan Mosag visibly blanched.

Seeing that, Rhulad laughed again, this time in pure amusement.

After a moment, both Fear and Trull joined him, whilst Hannan Mosag stared at them all in disbelief.

They had drunk too much wine, Trull told himself later. That was all. Far too much wine.

Seren Pedac and the Crimson Guardsmen guided their horses down from the road, across the ditch, and drew rein at the edge of a green field. The vanguard of the Merchants' Battalion had emerged from the city's gates, and the Acquitor could see Preda Unnutal Hebaz at the forefront, riding a blue-grey horse, white-maned, that tossed its head in irritation, hooves stamping with impatience.

'If she's not careful,' Iron Bars observed, 'that beast will start bucking. And she'll find herself on her arse in the middle of the road.'

'That would be an ill omen indeed,' Seren said.

After a moment, the Preda managed to calm the horse.

'I take it we have something of a wait before us,' Iron Bars said.

'King's Battalion and Merchants' Battalion at the very least. I don't know what other forces are in Letheras. I wouldn't think the south battalions and brigades have had time to reach here, which is unfortunate.' She thought for a moment, then said, 'If we cross this field, we can take the river road and enter through Fishers' Gate. It will mean crossing two-thirds of the city to reach my home, but for you, Avowed, well, presumably the ship you're signed on with will be close by.'
Iron Bars shrugged. 'We're delivering you to your door, Acquitor.'

'That's not necessary—'

'Even so, it is what we intend to do.'

'Then, if you don't mind ...'

'Fishers' Gate it shall be. Lead on, Acquitor.'

The rearguard elements of the King's Battalion had turned in the concourse before the Eternal Domicile and were now marching up the Avenue of the Seventh Closure. King Ezgara Diskanar, who had stood witness on the balcony of the First Wing since his official despatch of the Preda at dawn, finally swung about and made his way inside. The investiture was about to begin, but Brys Beddict knew he had some time before his presence was required.

Four of his own guard were on the balcony with him. Brys gestured one over. 'Find me a messenger.'

'Yes, sir.'

Brys waited, staring out over the city. The air was oppressive with more than just humidity and heat. After the passing of the battalion's rearguard, few citizens ventured into its wake. The battle at Brans Keep was still days away, but it seemed that most of the city's residents – those who remained – had elected to stay in their homes as much as possible.

The messenger arrived, a woman he had employed often and one he knew he could trust.

'Deliver a missive to my brother, Tehol, at his home.'

'He will be on his roof?'

'I expect so, and that is the message – he is to stay there. Now, an additional message, to the Shavankrat brother guarding Tehol. A name. Gerun Eberict. That is all.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Go, then.'

She quickly left. Brys strode into the narrow corridor that tracked the length of the wing on the second tier. At the far end steps descended to an antechamber that was part of the central dome complex. There, he found Finadd Moroch Nevath, sitting on a stone bench.

'Brys, I have been waiting for you.'

'Not too long, I hope. What do you wish of me, Finadd?'

'Do you believe in gods?'

Startled, Brys was silent for a moment, then said, 'I am afraid I do not see the relevance of that question.'

Moroch Nevath reached into a pouch at his hip and withdrew a battered tile, such as might be found among market readers. 'When did you last speak with Turudal Brizad?'

'The First Consort has not been in the palace – either palace, since yesterday,' Brys said. 'First Eunuch Nifadas ordered an extensive search, and it has been concluded that Turudal has fled. Not entirely surprising—'

Moroch tossed him the tile. Instinctively, Brys caught it in his left hand. He looked down at the ceramic plaque. Yellowed at the edges, latticed with cracks, the illustration reduced to a series of stylized scratches that Brys none the less recognized. 'The tile of the Errant. What of it, Moroch?'

The soldier rose to his feet. He'd lost weight, Brys noted, and seemed to have aged ten years since joining the treaty delegation. 'He's been here. All along. The bastard's been right under our noses, Brys Beddict.'
'What are you talking about?'
'The Errant. The First Consort. Turudal Brizad.'
'That is ... ridiculous.'
'I have a somewhat harsher word for it, Brys.'

The Champion glanced away from the man standing before him. 'How did you come to this extraordinary conclusion, Moroch?'

'There have been Turudal Brizads every generation – oh, different names, but it's him. Scenes on tapestries, paintings. Walk the royal collection, Brys – everything's out in the hallway, about to be moved. It was right there, for anyone to see, should they find reason to look.'

'And what reason did you have, Moroch?'
A grimace. 'He asked me to do something for him.'

Brys grunted. 'He's a god.' Supposedly. 'Why should he need your help?'

'Because he says you will be too busy.'

Brys thought back to his last conversation with Turudal Brizad.... the end of my objectivity. Something like that, as the man was walking away. 'I admit to some ... scepticism, Moroch Nevath.'

'Set it aside for the moment, Brys. I am here to ask your advice. Assume the worst.'

'A god asks for your help? I suppose one must consider possible motivations, and the consequences of accepting or rejecting the request.'

'Yes.'

'Will doing as he asks be to the benefit of Lether?'

'He says it will.'

'Where is he now?'

'In the city, somewhere. He was watching the last of the refugees allowed in this morning, on the wall, or so one of my guards reported.'

'Then, I would think, Moroth, that you must do as he asks.'

'Over the duty of protecting the king?'

'I imagine the god assumes that task will be mine.'

'We are almost equal, you and I, Brys.'

'I know.'

'You may believe that you are the better between us. I believe otherwise.'

'The decision was not ours to make, Moroch.'

Moroch studied him for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, 'I thank you for the advice, Finadd.'

'I hesitate to say it, Moroch Nevath, but the Errant be with you.'

'Not funny,' the swordsman muttered as he strode away.

Brys made his way into the dome complex. He came to the main corridor, halting to study the layout once
Sighing, Brys approached Kuru Qan. 'Ceda.'

The old man made a sound, then turned over so that his back was to Brys.

'Wake up, Ceda. Please.'

Head lifting, Kuru Qan groped for the twin lenses lying on the floor nearby, drew them to his face. 'Who calls?'

'It is Brys Beddict.'

'Ah, Finadd.' Kuru Qan twisted round and peered up. 'You look well.'

You do not.

'You insist that he step to one side on his approach? Ceda, you risk the king's anger—'...

'Relevant? Not in the least.' His fingers scrabbled on the stone. 'This is mine. Warn him, Finadd. Warn the king.'

'About what?'

'I will not be moved. Any who would try will be blasted into ashes. Ashes, Brys Beddict.'

Brys glanced around. A small crowd had gathered to listen to the exchange. The Finadd scowled. 'Be on your way, all of you.' People scrambled.

Temporarily alone once more, Brys crouched down before the Ceda. 'You had paints and brushes with you last time. What happened to them?'

'Paints and brushes?' The eyes blinked behind the lenses. 'Gone. Gone away. The king wants you now, Finadd. He is ready to begin the procession. Nifadas is coming – he will complain, but no matter. It will be a small audience, won't it. Relevant? Oh yes. Best the king ignore me – explain that to him, Brys.'

The Finadd straightened. 'I shall, Ceda.'

'Excellent. Now, be on your way.'

'This doesn't smell right.'

Trull looked over at the Kenryll'ah demon that had spoken. It was taller than the Tiste Edur on their horses. A face of sharper features than those on Lilac, black as chiselled basalt, the upper and lower canines protruding and glinting silver. A fur-lined collar, a vest of bronze scales, salt-rimed and dark with patination. A heavy leather belt on which was slung a huge scabbarded tulwar. Leather leggings, grey and supple. The other demon, standing at its side, differed only in the choice of weapons, a massive matlock gripped in two gauntleted hands.

This second Kenryll'ah bared its teeth. 'Making me hungry.'

'Split bones,' the other said. 'Marrow.'

The stench the two were referring to was that of rotting corpses. They had reached the edge of the clearing, beyond which was the palisade wall of the town of Brous. In the field were barrows, and one long excavated trench. There was no-one in sight.

'Brothers,' the emperor said, 'dismount and ready your weapons.'
Trull swung down from his horse. He turned. 'K'risnan, can you sense anything?'

The young Arapay warlock's face was sickly. He nodded. 'In the town, I think. It knows we're here.'

Rhulad closed both hands on the grip of his sword and raised it to centre guard position. 'Udinaas, remain with the horses. Fear, on my left. Trull, my right. K'risnan, stay behind us five paces. Demons, out to either side.'

'Can't we eat first?'

'Or pee? I need to pee.'

'You should have thought of that before we left,' the first demon said.

'And you should have eaten. We've plenty of spare horses, you know.'

The emperor hissed. 'Silence, both of you. We've had to listen to you the entire journey. No more, lest I decide to kill you first.'

'That wouldn't be wise,' the second Kenryll'ah said. 'I smell more than meat, I smell the one thing still alive in there, and it isn't pleasant.'

'I taste it,' the first demon said. 'And it makes me want to retch.'

'You should have thought of retching before we left,' the second one said.

'I think of retching every time I look at you.'

'Enough!'

'I apologize for my brother,' the first demon said.

'And I for mine,' the second one added.

Strange tyrants. Trull unslung his spear and strode to Rhulad's side.

They made their way across the clearing. Reaching the pit, they saw the first of the bodies. Broken and tossed at the base of the deep, ragged excavation, like an open mass burial. Workers and soldiers. Flesh dark and bloating in the heat. Flies swarmed.

They skirted the pit and approached the town. The gates opposite them had been knocked down, inward, the heavy doors shattered. Somewhere in the town a dog was barking.

The street was strewn with corpses just inside the wall. The doors of every house and building within sight had been stoved in. Ahead and to the right, two horses stood yoked to a wagon that had been knocked over. Exhaustion and the strain of the yokes had driven one of the beasts into an awkward sitting position. Trull hesitated, then walked over to them, drawing the knife at his belt. The others paused and watched as he cut the horses loose. Neither animal was in any condition to flee, but they slowly made their way outside on trembling, uncertain legs.

Trull returned to his position beside Rhulad.

'It's coming,' the first demon said.

Further down the main street a flock of starlings swirled into view, spinning between the buildings. In a mass of black, the birds seemed to boil towards the Tiste Edur and the Kenryll'ah. Striding in the midst of the birds, a tall figure, spectral, its skin white, its hair pallid yellow and hanging in limp strands. It was wearing a leather harness that looked wrinkled and blackened with rot. There was something strange about its limbs.

'He is unarmed,' Fear said.

'Yet,' the K'risnan hissed behind them, 'he is the one.'
The starlings spun higher, alighting on roof edges to either side, as the figure halted ten paces away.

'Peaceful,' it said in Letherii, 'is it not?'

Rhulad spoke. 'I am Emperor Rhulad of the Tiste Edur. Who, and what, are you, stranger?'

'I am Forkrul Assail. I am named Serenity.'

'You are a demon, then?'

The head cocked. 'I am?'

'This is not your world.'

'It isn't?'

Rhulad half turned. 'K'risnan, banish him.'

'I cannot, Emperor.'

'The tumult of your presence invites discord,' Serenity said.

Watching the Forkrul Assail's movements, Trull realized that it possessed extra joints in the arms and the legs, and there was some kind of hinge across the creature's breastbone. Its motion was oddly loose.

'Discord?' Rhulad asked.

'I desire peace once more.'

Fear spoke. 'If it is peace you seek, Serenity, then you need only turn and walk away. Leave.'

'To leave here is to arrive elsewhere. I cannot retreat from disorder, for it shall surely follow. Peace must be asserted where one finds oneself. Only when discord is resolved will there be peace.' The Forkrul Assail then stepped forward.

"Ware!' one of the demons snarled.

Serenity surged closer, even as the starlings exploded skyward once more.

Trull's weapon possessed the greatest reach, but he did not attempt to stab the creature. Its arms were lifted to fend off the attack, and Trull chose to batter at those with a high sweep of the spear shaft. Like a serpent, Serenity's right arm writhed around the shaft, binding the weapon. A sudden flex and the Blackwood cracked, then splintered, the red core welling into view down the length of the split. Trull had little time to feel shock, as Serenity's left hand lashed out.

Two fingertips touched Trull's temple—

He was already pitching himself to the side, but at the contact he felt his neck wrenched round. Had he remained standing, had he resisted, his neck would now be broken. As it was,ducking, shoulder dipping, he was flung downward, thrown off his feet.

Fear had charged in low, a beat behind Trull's high attack, slashing diagonally down and in to take the Forkrul Assail at the knee.

But the leg folded back, the knee reversing its angle, whilst at the same time Serenity reached down with his left hand and grasped the sword-blade. The Forkrul Assail plucked it from Fear's hand, fingers clenching, crushing the iron.

For all their failures, Trull and Fear had done what was demanded of them. Their flank attacks had preceded Rhulad's, with the intention of opening Serenity to the emperor's attack. Rhulad's mottled sword was a blur, whistling in the air – yet not once making contact, as the Forkrul Assail seemed to simply flow around it.
Flinging Fear's bent sword aside, Serenity stepped in.

And plunged his fingers like spikes into Rhulad's chest, pushing past the coins, sliding between ribs, and piercing his heart, then snapping back out.

The emperor crumpled.

Serenity swung to face Fear.

Then leapt back, eight paces or more through the air, narrowly avoiding a matlock that struck the dirt of the street and sank deep.

Serenity back-pedalled further as the other demon pursued, the massive tulwar dancing like a dagger in its hands.

Trull scrambled to his feet. He spun, intending to collect another spear from the cache he'd left strapped to his horse—

—and found Udinaas rushing towards him, the weapons cradled in his arms.

Trull pulled one free, then turned once more, leaping over Rhulad's body. Ahead, the Forkrul Assail had darted to the left, ducking beneath a slash of the tulwar, hands lashing out even as the demon kicked it hard in the side.

Serenity was thrown by the blow, thudded on the ground and rolled, twice, before regaining its feet.

But Trull had heard the crack of ribs in that kick.

The demon closed once more from the Forkrul Assail's right.

A moment before they closed, Trull launched his spear.

Serenity did not see it coming. Struck solidly just below the left collarbone, the creature was spun round by the impact. The demon's tulwar chopped down into its right thigh, ringing as it bit into bone. The demon wrenched it loose.

Trull reached back and another spear was placed in his hand. He moved closer.

Staggering back, the Forkrul Assail had plucked the spear from its shoulder and was fending off the tulwar slashes with its hands, pushing against the flat of the blade. The other demon was rushing in from the other side, matlock raised high.

Pale bluish blood streaming from the two wounds – which seemed to be closing even as Trull watched – Serenity leapt back once more, then turned and ran.

The Kenryll'ah prepared to pursue.

'Halt!' Trull shouted. 'Leave it!'

Udinaas was standing above Rhulad's body. A few paces away stood the K'risnan, his young face frozen into an expression of terror. He was shaking his head in denial, again and again.

'K'risnan.'

Wild eyes fixed on Trull. 'It ... threw me back. My power ... when the emperor died ... all, flung back ...'

The demons approached.

'Leave it to us,' the first one said, whipping blood from the tulwar.

'Yes,' nodded the other. 'We've never before heard of these Forkrul Assail, but we've decided.'
'We don't like them,' the first demon said.

'Not in the least.'

'We will hunt it down and tell it so.'

Fear spoke. 'Udinaas, how long ...' His eyes were on Rhulad.

'Not long,' the slave replied.

'Do we wait?'

'It would be best, I think,' said Udinaas.

Rubbing at his face, Fear walked over to his sword. He picked it up, examined it, then tossed it aside. He looked across at Trull.

Trull said, 'It broke Blackwood.'

A grimace. 'I saw. That second spear, that was well thrown, brother.'

Still, the brothers knew. Without the Kenryll'ah, they would now be dead.

The first demon spoke. 'May we pursue now?'

Fear hesitated, then nodded. 'Go.'

The two Kenryll'ah swung round and headed up the street.

'We can eat on the way.'

'Good idea, brother.'

Somewhere in the town, the dog was still barking.

'We have to help him,' Sandalath Drukorlat said.

Withal glanced over at her. They were standing on the sward's verge overlooking the beach. The Tiste Edur youth was curled up in the sand below. Still shrieking. 'It's not his first visit,' Withal said.

'How is your head?' she asked after a moment.

'It hurts.'

The Tiste Edur fell silent, shuddering, then the youth's head jerked up. He stared at Withal and the Tiste Andii woman standing beside the Meckros weaponsmith. Then back again. 'Withal!'

The smith's brows rose, although the motion made him wince, and he said, 'He normally doesn't talk to me much.' To the youth, 'Rhulad. I am not so cruel as to say welcome.'

'Who is she? Who is that... betrayer!'

Sandalath snorted. 'Pathetic. This is the god's sword-wielder? A mistake.'

'If it is,' Withal said in a low voice, 'I have no intention of telling him so.'

Rhulad clambered to his feet. 'It killed me.'

'Yes,' Withal replied. 'It did, whatever "it" was.'

'A Forkrul Assail.'

Sandalath stiffened. 'You should be more careful, Edur, in choosing your enemies.'
A laugh close to hysteria, as Rhulad made his way up from the beach. 'Choose, woman? I choose nothing.'

'Few ever do, Edur.'

'What is she doing here, Withal?'

'The Crippled God thought I needed company. Beyond three insane Nachts.'

'You are lovers?'

'Don't be absurd,' Sandalath said, sneering.

'Like she said,' Withal added.

Rhulad stepped past them. 'I need my sword,' he muttered, walking inland.

They turned to watch him.

'His sword,' Sandalath murmured. 'The one the god had you make?'

Withal nodded. 'But I am not to blame.'

'You were compelled.'

'I was.'

'It's not the weapon that's evil, it's the one wielding it.'

He studied her. 'I don't care if you crack my skull again. I am really starting to hate you.'

'I assure you my sentiments are identical regarding you.'

Withal turned away. 'I'm going to my shack.'

'Of course you are,' she snapped behind him. 'To beg and mumble to your god. As if it'd bother listening to such pathetic mewling.'

'I'm hoping,' Withal said over his shoulder, 'that it'll take pity on me.'

'Why should it?'

He did not reply, and wisely kept his answering smile to himself.

Standing ten paces to the side of the throne, Brys Beddict watched as King Ezgara Diskanar walked solemnly into the domed chamber. Distracted irritation was on the king's face, since his journey had required a detour around the prone, shivering form of the Ceda, Kuru Qan, but that was behind him now, and Brys saw Ezgara slowly resume his stern expression.

Awaiting him in the throne room was a handful of officials and guards. First Eunuch Nifadas was positioned to the right of the throne, holding the Lether crown on a blood-red pillow. First Concubine Nisall knelt at the foot of the dais, on the left side. Along with Brys and six of his guardsmen, Finadd Gerun Eberict was present with six of his own soldiers of the Palace Guard.

And that was all. The investiture on this, the day of the Seventh Closure – or close enough since no-one could agree on that specific date – was to be witnessed by these few. Not as originally planned, of course. But there had been more riots, the last one the bloodiest of them all. The king's name had become a curse among the citizenry. The list of invitations had been truncated as a matter of security, and even then, Brys was nervous about Gerun Eberict's presence.

The king neared the dais, his robes sliding silken on the polished marble floor in his wake.

'This day,' Nifadas intoned, 'Lether becomes an empire.'
The guards executed the salute reserved for the royal line and held it, motionless as statues.

Ezgara Diskanar stepped up onto the dais and slowly turned round.

The First Eunuch moved to stand before him and raised the pillow.

The king took the crown and fitted it onto his head.

'This day,' Nifadas said, stepped back, 'Lether is ruled by an emperor.' He turned. 'Emperor Ezgara Diskanar.'

The guards released their salute.

And that is it.

Ezgara sat on the throne.

Looking old and frail and lost.

The windows were shuttered tight. Weeds snarled the path, vines had run wild up the walls to either side of the stepped entrance. From the street behind them came the stench of smoke, and a distant roar from somewhere in the Creeper Quarter inland, beyond Settle Lake, indicated that yet another riot had begun.

From the Fishers' Gate, Seren Pedac and the Crimson Guardsmen had walked their horses down littered streets. Signs of looting, the occasional corpse, a soldier's dead horse, and figures scurrying from their path into alleys and side avenues. Burnt-out buildings, packs of hungry feral dogs drawn in from the abandoned farmlands and forests, refugee families huddled here and there, the King's City of Lether seemed to have succumbed to depraved barbarity with the enemy still leagues beyond the horizon.

She was stunned at how swiftly it had all crumbled, and more than a little frightened. For all her disgust and contempt for the ways of her people, there had remained, somewhere buried deep, a belief in its innate resiliency. But here, before her, was the evidence of sudden, thorough collapse. Greed and savagery unleashed, fear and panic triggering brutality and ruthless indifference.

They passed bodies of citizens who had been long in dying, simply left in the street while they bled out.

Down one broad avenue, near the canal, a mob had passed through, perhaps only half a day earlier. There was evidence that soldiers had battled against it, and had been pushed back into a fighting withdrawal. Flanking buildings and estates had been trashed and looted. The street was sticky with blood, and the tracks of dozens of wagons were evident, indicating that here, at least, the city's garrison had returned to take away corpses.

Iron Bars and his Guardsmen said little during the journey, and now, gathered before her home, they remained on their horses, hands on weapons and watchful.

Seren dismounted.

After a moment, Iron Bars and Corlo did the same.

'Don't look broken into,' the mage said.

'As I said,' Seren replied, 'nothing inside is worth taking.'

'I don't like this,' the Avowed muttered. 'If trouble comes knocking, Acquitor ...'

'It won't,' she said. 'These riots won't last. The closer the Edur army gets, the quieter things will become.'

'That's not what happened in Trate.'

'True, but this will be different.'

'I don't see why you'd think so,' Iron Bars said, shaking his head.

'Go find your ship, Avowed,' Seren said. She turned to the others. 'Thank you, all of you. I am honoured to
have known you and travelled in your company.'

'Go safe, lass,' Corlo said.

She settled a hand on the mage's shoulder. Held his eyes, but said nothing.

He nodded. 'Easy on that.'

'You heard?'

'I did. And I've the headache to prove it.'

'Sorry.'

'Try to remember, Seren Pedac, Mockra is a subtle warren.'

'I will try.' She faced Iron Bars.

'Once I've found our employer and planted my squad,' he said, 'I'll pay you another visit, so we needn't get all soft here and now.'

'All right.'

'A day, no longer, then I'll see you again, Acquitor.'

She nodded.

The Avowed and his mage swung themselves back into their saddles. The troop rode off.

Seren watched them for a moment, then turned about and walked up the path. The key to the elaborate lock was under the second flagstone.

The door squealed when she pushed it back, and the smell of dust swept out to engulf her. She entered, shutting the door.

Gloom, and silence.

She did not move for a time, the corridor stretching before her. The door at its end was open, and she could see into the room beyond, which was lit by cloth-filtered sunlight coming from the courtyard at the back. A high-backed chair in that far room faced her, draped in muslin cloth.

One step, then another. On, down the corridor. Just before the entrance to the room, the mouldering body of a dead owl, lying as if asleep on the floor. She edged round it, then stepped into the room, noting the slight breeze coming from the broken window where the owl had presumably entered from the courtyard.

Ghostly furniture to either side, but it was the chair that held her gaze. She crossed to it, then, without removing the cloth, she sat down, the muslin drawing inward as she sank down into the seat.

Blinking, Seren looked about.

Shadows. Silence. The faint smell of decay. The lump of the dead owl lying just beyond the threshold.

'Seren Pedac's ... empire,' she whispered.

And she had never felt so alone.

In the city of Letheras, as companies of Gerun Eberict's soldiers cut and chopped their way through a mass of cornered citizens who had been part of a procession of the king's loyalists, on their way to the Eternal Domicile to cheer the investiture, citizens whose blood now spread on the cobbles to mark this glorious day; as starlings in their tens of thousands wheeled ever closer to the old tower that had once been an Azath and was now the Hold of the Dead; as Tehol Beddict – no longer on his roof – made his way down shadowy streets on his way to Selush, at the behest of Shurq Elalle; as the child, Kettle, who had once been dead but was now very much
alive, sat on the steps of the old tower singing softly to herself and plaiting braids of grass; as the rays of the
sun lengthened to slant shafts through the haze of smoke, the bells began ringing.

  Pronouncing the birth of the empire.

  The end of the Seventh Closure.

  But the scribes were in error. The Seventh Closure had yet to arrive.

  Two more days.

  Leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, near the old palace, the First Consort, Turudal Brizad, the god
known as the Errant, looked skyward at the cloud of starlings as the bells sounded, low and tremulous.

  'Unpleasant birds,' he said to himself, 'starlings ...'

  Two more days.

  A most tragic miscalculation, I fear.

  Most tragic.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A vast underground cavern yawned beneath the basin, the crust brittle and porous. Could one have stood in that ancient cave, the rain would have been ceaseless. Even so, eleven rivers fed into the marshlands that would one day be the city of Letheras, and the process of erosion that culminated in the collapse of the basin and the catastrophic draining of the rivers and swamps, was a long one. Thus, modest as Settle Lake is, it is worth reminding oneself of its extraordinary depth. The lake is, indeed, like a roof hatch with the enormous cavern the house beneath. So, the pulling down into the deep of Burdos' fishing boat – the sole fisher of Settle Lake – nets and all, should come as no surprise. Nor should the fact that since that time, when so many witnessed Burdos' demise, no other fishing boat has plied the waters of Settle Lake. In any case, I was, I believe, speaking of the sudden convergence of all those rivers, the inrush of the swamp's waters, said event occurring long before the settlement of the area by the colonists. Fellow scholars, it would have been a dramatic sight, would it not?

Excerpt from The Geologic History of Letheras, a lecture given by Royal Geographer Thula Redsand at the Cutter Academy 19th Annual Commencement (moments before the Great Collapse of the Academy Ceiling)
Comments recounted by sole survivor, Ibal the Dart

There was nothing natural in the dust that loomed like a behemoth above the Edur armies as they came down from the north and began moving into positions opposite Brans Keep. The ochre cloud hovered like a standing wave in a cataract, fierce winds whipping southward to either side, carrying ashes and topsoil in a dark, ominous onslaught against the waiting Letherii armies and the barren hills behind them.

The emperor of the Tiste Edur had found the glory of rebirth yet again. Every death was a tier in his climb to unassailable domination. Resurrection, Udinaas now understood, was neither serene nor painless. It came in screams, in shrieks that rent the air. It came in a storm of raw trauma that tore at Rhulad's sanity as much as it would anyone's suffering the same curse. And there was no doubt at all in the slave's mind, the sword and its gift were cursed, and the god behind it – if it was a god in truth – was a creature of madness.

This time, Rhulad's brothers had been there to witness his awakening. Udinaas had not been surprised at the horror writ on their faces with the emperor's first ragged scream, the convulsions racking Rhulad's body of smudged gold and dried blood, the cold unearthly light blazing anew in his terrible eyes. He had seen them frozen, unable to draw closer, unable to flee, standing witness to the dreadful truth.

Perhaps, afterwards, when they had thawed – when their hearts started beating once more – there was sympathy. Rhulad wept openly, with only the slave's arm across his shoulders for comfort. And Fear and Trull had looked on, the K'risnan sitting hunched and mute on the ground behind them, until such time as the emperor found himself once more, the child and brother and newly blooded warrior he'd once been – before the sword found his hands – discovered, still cowering but alive within him.

Little had been said on the return journey, but they had ridden their horses into the ground in their haste, and for all but Udinaas the ride had been a flight. Not from the Forkrul Assail and its immutable fascination for the peace of cold corpses, but from the death, and the rebirth, of the emperor of the Tiste Edur.

They rejoined the army five leagues from Brans Keep, and received Hannan Mosag's report that contact had been established with the K'risnan in the other two armies, and all were approaching the fated battlefield, where, shadow wraiths witnessed, the Letherii forces awaited them.

Details, the trembling skein of preparation, Udinaas was indifferent to them, the whisper of order in seeming chaos. An army marched, like some headless migration, each beast bound by instinct, the imperatives of violence. Armies marched from complexity into simplicity. It was this detail that drove them onward. A field waited, on which all matters could be reduced, on which dust and screams and blood brought cold clarity. This was the secret hunger of warriors and soldiers, of governments, kings and emperors. The simple mechanics of victory and defeat, the perfect feint to draw every eye, every mind lured into the indulgent game. Focus on the
scales. Count the measures and mull over balances, observe the stacked bodies like stacked coins and time is devoured, the mind exercised in the fruitless repetition of the millstone, and all the world beyond was still and blurred for the moment ... so long as no-one jarred the table.

Udinaas envied the warriors and soldiers their simple lives. For them, there was no coming back from death. They spoke simply, in the language of negation. They fought for the warrior, the soldier, at their side, and even dying had purpose – which was, he now believed, the rarest gift of all.

Or so it should have been, but the slave knew it would be otherwise. Sorcery was the weapon for the battle to come. Perhaps it was, in truth, the face of future wars the world over. Senseless annihilation, the obliteration of lives in numbers beyond counting. A logical extension of governments, kings and emperors. War as a clash of wills, a contest indifferent to its cost, seeking to discover who will blink first – and not caring either way. War, no different an exercise from the coin-reaping of the Merchants' Tolls, and thus infinitely understandable.

The Tiste Edur and their allies were arraying themselves opposite the Letherii armies, the day's light growing duller, muted by the hovering wave of suspended dust. In places sorcery crackled, shimmered the air, tentative escapes of the power held ready by both sides. Udinaas wondered if anyone, anyone at all, would survive this day. And, among those who did, what lessons would they take from this battle?

_Sometimes the game goes too far._

She was standing beside him, silent and small and wrapped in a supple, undyed deerhide. She had said nothing, offered no reason for seeking him out. He did not know her mind, he could not guess her thoughts. Unknown and profoundly unknowable.

Yet now he heard her draw a shuddering breath.

Udinaas glanced over. 'The bruises are almost gone,' he said.

Feather Witch nodded. 'I should thank you.'

'No need.'

'Good.' She seemed to falter at her own vehemence. 'I should not have said that. I don't know what to think.'

'About what?'

She shook her head. 'About what, he asks. For Errant's sake, Udinaas, Lether is about to fall.'

'Probably. I have looked long and hard at the Letherii forces. I see what must be mages, standing apart here and there. But not the Ceda.'

'He must be here. How could he not be?'

Udinaas said nothing.

'You are no longer an Indebted.'

'And that matters?'

'I don't know.'

They fell silent. Their position was on a rise to the northwest of the battlefield. They could make out the facing wall of Brans Keep itself, a squat, formidable citadel leaning up against a cliff carved sheer into a hillside. Corner towers flanked the wall, and on each stood large fixed mangonels with their waiting crews. There was also a mage present on each tower, arms raised, and it was evident that a ritual was under way binding the two on their respective perches. Probably something defensive, since the bulk of the King's Battalion was positioned at the foot of the keep.

To the west of that battalion a ridge reached out from the hills a short distance, and on its other side were positioned elements of the king's heavy infantry, along with the Riven Brigade. West of that waited companies
of the Snakebelt Battalion with the far flanking side protected by the Crimson Rampant Brigade, who were backed to the westernmost edge of the Brans Hills and to the course of the Dissent River to the south.

It was more difficult to make out the array of Letherii forces east of the King's Battalion. There was an artificial lake on the east side of the keep, and north of it, alongside the battalion, was the Merchants' Battalion. Another seasonal river or drainage channel wound northeast on their right flank, and it seemed the Letherii forces on the other side of that intended to use the dry ditch as a line of defence.

In any case, Rhulad's own army would present the western body of the Edur advance. Central was Fear's army, and further to the east, beyond an arm of lesser hills and old lake beds, approached the army of Tomad and Binadas Sengar, on their way down from the town of Five Points.

The rise Udinaas and Feather Witch stood on was ringed in shadow wraiths, and it was clear to Udinaas that protective sorcery surrounded them. Beyond the rise, out of sight of the facing armies, waited the Edur women, elders and children. Mayen was somewhere among them, still cloistered, still under Uruth Sengar's direct care.

He looked once more at Feather Witch. 'Have you seen Mayen?' he asked.

'No. But I have heard things ...'

'Such as?'

'She is not doing well, Udinaas. She hungers. A slave was caught bringing her white nectar. The slave was executed.'

'Who was it?'

'Bethra.'

Udinaas recalled her, an old woman who'd lived her entire life in the household of Mayen's parents.

'She thought she was being kind,' Feather Witch continued. Then shrugged. 'There was no discussion.'

'I imagine not.'

'One cannot be denied all white nectar,' she said. 'One must be weaned. A gradual diminishment.'

'I know.'

'But they are concerned for the child she carries.'

'Who must be suffering in like manner.'

Feather Witch nodded. 'Uruth does not heed the advice of the slaves.' She met his eyes. 'They have all changed, Udinaas. They are as if... fevered.'

'A fire behind their eyes, yes.'

'They seem unaware of it.'

'Not all of them, Feather Witch.'

'Who?'

He hesitated, then said, 'Trull Sengar.'

'Do not be deceived,' she said. 'They are poisoned one and all. The empire to come shall be dark. I have had visions ... I see what awaits us, Udinaas.'

'One doesn't need visions to know what awaits us.'

She scowled, crossed her arms. Then glared skyward. 'What sorcery is this?'
'I don't know,' Udinaas replied. 'New.'

'Or ... old.'

'What do you sense from it, Feather Witch?'

She shook her head.

'It belongs to Hannan Mosag,' Udinaas said after a moment. 'Have you seen the K'risnan? Those from Fear Sengar's army are... malformed. Twisted by the magic they now use.'

'Uruth and the other women cling to the power of Kurald Emurlahn,' Feather Witch said. 'They behave as if they are in a war of wills. I don't think—'

'Wait,' Udinaas said, eyes narrowing. 'It's beginning.'

Beside him, Ahlrada Ahn bared his teeth. 'Now, Trull Sengar, we stand in witness. And this is what it means to be an Edur warrior today.'

'We may do more than wait,' Trull said. We may also die.

The dark dust was spiralling upward in thick columns now, edging forward towards the killing field between the armies.

Trull glanced behind him. Fear stood in the midst of Hiroth warriors. Two K'risnan were before him, one a mangled, hunched survivor from High Fort, the other sent over from Rhulad's army. Grainy streams of what seemed to be dust were rising from the two sorcerors, and their faces were twisted in silent pain.

The crackle of lightning came from the other side of the killing field, drawing Trull's attention round once more. Coruscating waves of blinding white fire were building before the arrayed Letherii mages, wrought through with flashes of lightning that arced among them.

Far to the right, Rhulad began moving the mass of his warriors forward, forming a broad wedge formation at the very edge of the killing field. Trull could see his brother, a hazy, blurred figure of gold. Further right was Hannan Mosag and his companies, and beyond them, already moving south alongside the basin's edge, were thousands of Soletaken Jheck and at least a dozen Kenryll'ah, each leading a score of their peasant subjects. The route they were taking had been noted, and the flanking Crimson Rampant Brigade was manoeuvring round to face the threat.

There would be nothing subtle in this battle. No deft brilliance displayed by tactical geniuses. The Letherii waited with their backs to the steep hills. The Tiste Edur and their allies would have to come to them. Such were the simple mechanics, seemingly incumbent, and inevitable.

But sorcery spoke with a different voice.

The spiralling pillars of dust towered into the sky, each one keening, the wind shrieking so loud that Edur and Letherii alike began to cower.

The Letherii white fire surged upward, forming its own standing wall of bridled mayhem.

Trull was finding it difficult to breathe. He saw a hapless raven that had made the mistake of flying over the killing field tumble and flutter to the ground, the first casualty of the day. It seemed a pathetic harbinger to his mind. Rather a thousand. Ten thousand ravens, caterwauling through the sky.

The pillars leaned, staggered, lurched forward.

And began toppling.

A rush of wind from behind battered Trull and his fellow warriors, blessedly rich and humid, in the wake of the advancing columns of dust. Faint shouts on all sides, as weapons were readied.
The spiralling pillars were a long time in coming down. Shadow wraiths were suddenly flowing across the ground, a dark, low flood. Udinaas could feel their terror, and the dread compulsion that drove them forward. *Fodder.* It was too early to launch an attack. They would be beneath the clash of sorcery.

As the columns toppled, the wave of Letherii fire rose to meet them.

Feather Witch hissed. 'The Empty Hold. The purest sorcery of the Letherii. Errant, I can feel it from here!'

'Not enough,' Udinaas muttered.

* * *

Positioned with the King's Battalion, Preda Unnutal Hebaz saw the day's light fade as the shadows of the falling pillars swept over the soldiers. She saw her men and women screaming, but could not hear them, as the roar of the dust thundered ever closer.

The Letherii ritual was suddenly released, the spitting, hissing fire sweeping over the heads of the cowering ranks, the tumbling froth surging upwards to meet the descending pillars.

Rapid concussions, shaking the earth beneath them, tearing fissures up the hillsides, and from Brans Keep a dull groaning. Unnutal spun round even as she was pushed to the ground. She saw, impossibly, the lake beside the keep lift in a mass of muddy water and foam. Saw, as the front wall of the keep bowed inward, pulling away from the flanking towers, dust shooting outward like geysers, and vanishing back into a billowing cloud.

Then the east tower swayed, enough to pitch from the edge the mangonel atop it, taking most of the crew with it. And the mage, Jirrid Attaract. All, plunging earthward.

The west tower leaned back. Its enormous foundation stones pushed outward, and suddenly it vanished into a cloud of its own rubble. The mage Nasson Methuda disappeared with it.

Twisting, Unnutal glared skyward.

To see the white fire shattering, dispersing. To see the pillars plunge through, sweeping the Letherii sorcery aside.

One struck the centre of the Merchants' Battalion, the dark dust billowing out to the sides and rolling up against the hill.

For a moment, she could see nothing, then the pillar began to re-form. Yet not as it had been. Now it was not dust that began spiralling upward, but living soldiers.

Whose flesh blackened like rot even as she watched.

They were screaming as they were lifted skyward, screaming as their flesh peeled away. Screaming—

The shadow above Unnutal Hebaz deepened. She looked up.

And closed her eyes.

Whirling in a frenzy, a huge fragment of Letherii sorcery slanted off the side of a collapsing pillar, plunged down and tore a bloody swath through the core of the Merude warriors a thousand paces to Trull's left.

The warriors died where they stood, in red mist.

The white fire, now stained pink, rolled through the press towards the K'risnan on that side. The young sorceror raised his hands at the last moment, then the magic devoured him.

When it dwindled, wavered, then vanished, the K'risnan was gone, as were those Edur who had been standing too close. The ground was blackened and split.
On the other side of the killing field, columns were rising once more filled with spinning bodies. Higher, the mass of writhing flesh dimming into a muddy hue, then giving way to white bone and polished iron. The pillars rose still higher, devouring more and more soldiers, entire companies torn from the entrenchments and dragged into the twisting maw.

Ahlrada Ahn reached out and pulled Trull close. 'He must stop this!'

Trull pulled savagely away, shaking his head. 'This is not Rhulad! This is the Warlock King!' 

Harmon Mosag, do you now vie for insanity's throne?

Around them, the world was transformed into madness. Seething spheres of Letherii magic were thundering down here and there, tearing through ranks of Tiste Edur, devouring shadow wraiths by the hundreds. One landed in the midst of a company of demons and incinerated every one of them, including the Kenryll'ah commanding them.

Another raced across the ground towards the rise to the west of the emperor's forces. There was nothing to oppose it as it swept up the slope, and struck the encampment of the Edur women, elders and children.

Trull staggered in that direction, but Ahlrada Ahn dragged him back.

Letherii soldiers, nothing now but bones, spun in the sky above the hills. The Merchants' Battalion. The Riven Brigade. The Snakebelt Battalion. The King's Battalion. All those lives. Gone.

And the columns had begun moving, each one on an independent path, eastward and westward, plunging into the panicked ranks of more soldiers. Devouring, the hunger unending, the appetite insatiable.

War? This is not war—

'We're moving forward!'

Trull stared at Ahlrada Ahn.

The warrior shook him. 'Forward, Trull Sengar!'

Udinaas watched the deadly sorcery cut through the shadow wraiths, then roll towards the rise where he stood with Feather Witch. There was nowhere to run. No time. It was perfect—

A cold wind swept over him from behind, an exhalation of shadows. Rushing forward, colliding with the Letherii magic twenty paces downslope. Entwining, the shadows closing like a net, trapping the wild fire. Then shadow and flame vanished.

Udinaas turned.

Uruth and four other Edur women were standing in a line fifteen paces back. As he stared, two of the women toppled, and Udinaas could see that they were dead, the blood boiled in their veins. Uruth staggered, then slowly sank to her knees.

All right, not so perfect.

He faced the battlefield once more. The emperor was leading his warriors across the blistered, lifeless basin. The enemy positions on the hillsides opposite looked virtually empty. To either side, however, the slave could see fighting. Or, rather, slaughter. Where the pillars had yet to stalk, Letherii lines had broken of their own accord, and soldiers were fleeing, even as Soletaken Jheck dragged them to the ground, as demons ran them down, and squads of Edur pursued with frenzied determination. To the east, the dry river gully had been overrun. To the west, the Crimson Rampant Brigade was routed.

Hannan Mosag's terrible sorcery continued to rage, and Udinaas began to suspect that it was, like the Letherii magic, out of control. Pillars were spawning smaller kin. For lack of flesh, they began tearing up the ground, earth and stones spinning ever higher. Two bone-shot columns clashed near what was left of Brans Lake, and seemed to lock in mutual obliteration that sent thunderous concussions that visibly battered the hills beyond.
Then they tore each other apart.

The bases of many of the pillars broke contact with the ground, and this triggered an upward plunge that ended in their dissolution into white and grey clouds.

All at once, even as ragged companies of Tiste Edur crossed the killing field, bones and armour began raining down. Limbs, polished weapons, helms, skulls, plummeting in murderous sweeps across the basin. Warriors died beneath the ghastly hail. There was panic, figures running.

Sixty paces ahead and below, along the very edge of the slope, walked Hull Beddict. He held a sword in one hand. He looked dazed.

A helm-wrapped skull, minus the lower jaw, thumped and bounded across Hull's path, but it seemed he did not notice, as he stumbled on.

Udinaas turned to Feather Witch. 'For Errant's sake,' he snapped, 'see what you can do for Uruth and the others!'

She started, eyes wide.

'They just saved our lives, Feather Witch.' He added nothing more, and left her there, making his way down to Hull Beddict.

Bones were still falling, the smaller pieces – fingers, rib fragments. Teeth rained down thirty paces ahead, covering the ground like hailstones, a sudden downpour, ending as quickly as it had begun.

Udinaas moved closer to Hull Beddict.

'Go no further, Hull!' he shouted.

The man halted, slowly turned, his face slack with shock. 'Udinaas? Is that you? Udinaas?'

The slave reached him, took his arm. 'Come. This is done, Hull Beddict. A sixth of a bell, no more than that. The battle is over.'

'Battle?'

'Slaughter, then. A squalid investment, wouldn't you say? Training all those soldiers. Those warriors. All that armour. Weapons. I think those days are over, don't you?' He was guiding the man back up the slope. 'Tens of thousands of dead Letheren; no point in even burying what's left of them. Two, maybe three thousand dead Tiste Edur. Neither had the chance to even so much as lift their weapons. How many shadow wraiths obliterated? Fifty, sixty thousand?'

'We must... stop. There is nothing ...'

'No stopping now, Hull. Onward, to Letheras, like a rushing river. There will be rearguards to cut down. Gates to shatter. Streets and buildings to fight over. And then, the palace. And the king. His guard – they'll not lay down their weapons. Even if the king commands it. They serve the kingdom, after all, not Ezgara Diskanar. Letheras, Hull Beddict, will be ugly. Not ugly the way of today, here, but in some ways worse, I would—'

'Stop, slave. Stop talking, else I kill you.'

'That threat does not bother me much, Hull Beddict.'

They reached the rise. Feather Witch and a half-dozen other slaves were among the Edur women, now. Uruth was lying prone, suffering convulsions of some sort. A third woman had died.

'What's wrong, Hull Beddict?' Udinaas asked, releasing the man's arm. 'No chance to lead a charge against your foes? Those press-ganged Indebteds and the desperate fools who'd found dignity in a uniform. The hated enemy.'
Hull Beddict turned away. 'I must find the emperor. I must explain ...'

Udinaas let the man go. The rain of bones had ceased, finally, and now only dust commanded the sky. The ruined keep was burning, heaving black smoke that would be visible from the walls of Letheras.

The slave strode over to Feather Witch. 'Will Uruth live?'

She looked up, her eyes strangely flat. 'I think so.'

'That was Kurald Emurlahn, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

Udinaas turned away. He studied the basin, the masses of Edur wandering here and there among the burnt bodies of their kin, amongst the bright white bones and shining iron. A bloodless battlefield. Soletaken Jheck ranged the distant hillsides, hunting stragglers, but those who had not already fled were corpses or mere remnants of corpses. A few score wraiths drifted here and there.

He saw Rhulad, surrounded by warriors, marching back across the field. Towards Hannan Mosag's position. The slave set off to intercept the emperor. Words were about to be exchanged, and Udinaas wanted to hear them.

Trull and his company stood at the edge of the dry river gully. The bodies of soldiers littered the other side all the way to the ridge of hills paralleling the course. Fifteen hundred paces to their left, the lead elements of Tomad and Binadas Sengar's army were approaching. There were signs that they had seen battle. In the traditional manner, sword against sword.

'They have captured the Artisan Battalion's standard,' Ahlrada Ahn said, pointing.

Trull looked back to the field east of the gully. 'Who was here, then?'

'Whitefinder and Riven, I think. They broke when they witnessed the fate of Merchants' and the King's, and the pillars began moving towards them.'

Feeling sick, Trull looked away – but there was no direction available to ease him. On all sides, the slowly settling ashes of madness.

'The Tiste Edur,' said Ahlrada Ahn, 'have won themselves an empire.'

His words were heard by Sergeant Canarth, who strode up to them. 'You deny half your blood, Ahlrada? Do you find this victory bitter? I see now why you stand at Trull Sengar's side. I see now – we all see' – he added with a gesture encompassing the warriors behind him – 'why you so defend Trull, why you refuse to side with us.' Canarth's hard eyes fixed on Trull. 'Oh yes, Trull Sengar, your friend here possesses the blood of the Betrayers. No doubt that is why the two of you are such close friends.'

Trull unslung the spear at his back. 'I am tired of you, Canarth. Ready your weapon.'

The warrior's eyes narrowed, then he grinned, reaching for his own spear. 'I have seen you fight, Trull. I know your weaknesses.'

'Clear a space,' Trull said, and the others moved back, forming a ring.

Ahlrada Ahn hesitated. 'Do not do this. Trull – Canarth, retract your accusations. They are unfounded. It is forbidden to provoke your commander—'

'Enough,' Canarth snapped. 'I will kill you next, Betrayer.'

Trull assumed a standard stance, then settled his weight and waited.

Canarth shifted his grip back a hand's width, then probed out, the iron tip at throat-level.
Ignoring it for the moment, Trull slid his hands further apart along the shaft of his spear. Then he made contact, wood against wood, and held it as he stepped in. Canarth disengaged by bringing the iron point down and under, perfectly executed, but Trull was already inside, forcing Canarth to pull his weapon back, even as the sergeant swung the butt-end upward to block an expected up-sweep—which did not come. Instead, Trull lifted his spear high and horizontal, and drove it forward to crack against Canarth's forehead.

The sergeant thumped onto his back.

Trull stood over him, studying the man's dazed expression, the split skin of his forehead leaking tendrils of blood.

The other warriors were shouting, expressing disbelief with Trull's speed, with the stunning, deceptive simplicity of the attack. He did not look up.

Ahlrada Ahn stepped close. 'Finish him, Trull Sengar.'

All of Trull's anger was gone. 'I see no need for that—'

'Then you are a fool. He will not forget—'

'I trust not.'

'Fear must be told of this. Canarth must be punished.'

'No, Ahlrada Ahn. Not a word.' He raised his gaze, looked northward. 'Let us greet Binadas and my father. I would hear tales of bravery, of fighting.'

The dark-skinned warrior's stare faltered, flickered away. 'Sisters take me, Trull, so would I.'

There were no old women to walk this field, cutting rings from fingers, stripping lightly stained clothing from stiffening corpses. There were no vultures, crows and gulls to wheel down to the vast feast. There was nothing to read of the battle now past, no sprawl of figures cut down from behind—not here, in the centre of the basin—no last stands writ in blood-splashed heaps and encircling rings of bodies. No tilted standards, held up only by the press of cold flesh, with their sigils grinning down. Only bones and gleaming iron, white teeth and glittering coins.

The settling dust was a soft whisper, gently dulling the ground and its random carpet of human and Edur detritus.

The emperor and his chosen brothers were approaching the base of the slope as Udinaas reached them. Their crossing of the field had stirred up a trail of dust that hung white and hesitant in their wake. Rhulad held his sword in his left hand, the blade wavering in the dim light. The uneven armour of gold was dark-tracked with sweat, the bear fur on the emperor's shoulders the muted silver of clouds.

Udinaas could see in Rhulad's face that the madness was close upon him. Frustration created a rage capable of lashing out in any direction. Behind the emperor, who began climbing up the slope to where Hannan Mosag waited, scrambled Theradas and Midik Buhn, Choram Irard, Kholb Harat and Matra Brith. All but Theradas had been old followers of Rhulad, and Udinaas was not pleased to see them. Nor, from the dark looks cast in his direction, were they delighted with the slave's arrival.

Udinaas almost laughed. Just like the palace in Letheras, the factions take shape.

As Udinaas moved to catch up to Rhulad—who'd yet to notice him—Theradas Buhn stepped into his path as if by accident, then straight-armed the slave in the chest. He stumbled back, lost his footing, and fell onto the slope, sliding back down to its base.

The Edur warriors laughed.

A mistake. The emperor spun round, eyes searching, recognizing Udinaas through the clouds of dust. It was not difficult to determine what had just happened. Rhulad glared at his brothers. 'Who struck down my slave?'
No-one moved, then Théras said, 'We but crossed paths, sire. An accident.'

'Udinaas?'

The slave was picking himself up, brushing the dust from his tunic. 'It was as Théras Buhn said, Emperor.'

Rhulad bared his teeth. 'A warning to you all. We will not be tried this day.' He wheeled round and resumed his climb.

Théras glared at Udinaas, and said in a low voice, 'Do not believe I now owe you, slave.'

'You will discover,' the slave said, moving past the warrior, 'that the notion of debt is not so easily denied.'

Théras reached for his cutlass, then let his hand drop with a silent snarl.

Rhulad reached the crest.

Those still below heard Hannan Mosag's smooth voice. 'The day is won, Emperor.'

'We found no-one left to fight!'

'The kingdom lies cowering at your feet, sire—'

'Thousands of Edur are dead, Warlock King! Demons, wraiths! How many Edur mothers and wives and children will weep this night? What glory rises from our dead, Hannan? From this ... dust?'

Udinaas reached the summit. And saw Rhulad advancing upon the Warlock King, the sword lifting into the air.

Sudden fear in Hannan Mosag's red-rimmed eyes.

'Emperor!'

Rhulad whirled, burning eyes fixing upon Udinaas. 'We are challenged by our slave?' The sword-blade hissed through the air, although ten paces spanned the distance between them.

'No challenge,' Udinaas said quietly as he approached. Until he stood directly in front of the emperor. 'I but called out to inform you, sire, that your brothers are coming.' The slave pointed eastward, where figures were crossing the edge of the basin. 'Fear, Binadas and Trull, Emperor. And your father, Tomad.'

Rhulad squinted, blinking rapidly as he studied the distant warriors. 'Dust has blinded us, Udinaas. It is them?'

'Yes, Emperor.'

The Edur wiped at his eyes. 'Yes, that is well. Good, we would have them with us, now.'

'Sire,' Udinaas continued, 'a fragment of Letherii sorcery sought out the encampment of the women during the battle. Your mother and some others defeated the magic. Uruth is injured, but she will live. Three Hiroth women died.'

The emperor lowered the sword, the rage flickering in his frantic, bloodshot eyes, flickering, then fading. 'We sought battle, Udinaas. We sought... death.'

'I know, Emperor. Perhaps in Letheras ...'

A shaky nod. 'Yes. Perhaps. Yes, Udinaas.' Rhulad's eyes suddenly bored into the slave's own. 'Those towers of bone, did you see them? The slaughter, their flesh ...'

The slave's gaze shifted momentarily past the emperor, found Hannan Mosag. The Warlock King was staring at Rhulad's back with dark hatred. 'Sire,' Udinaas said in a low voice, 'your heart is true, to chastise Hannan Mosag. When your father and brothers arrive. Cold anger is stronger than hot rage.'
'Yes. We know this, slave.'

'The battle is over. All is done,' Udinaas said, glancing back over the field. 'Nothing can be ... taken back. It seems the time has come to grieve.'

'We know such feelings, Udinaas. Grief. Yes. Yet what of cold anger? What of...' The sword flinched, like a hackle rising, like lust awakened, and the slave saw nothing cold in Rhulad's eyes.

'He has felt its lash already, Emperor,' Udinaas said. 'All that remains is your disavowal ... of what has just passed. Your brothers and your father will need to hear that, as you well know. From them, to all the Edur. To all the allies. To Uruth.' He added, in a rough whisper, 'They would complicate you, sire – those gathered and gathering even now about you and your power. But you see clear and true, for that is the terrible gift of pain.'

Rhulad was nodding, staring now at the approaching figures. 'Yes. Such a terrible gift. Clear and true ...'

'Sire,' Hannan Mosag called out.

A casual wave of the sword was Rhulad's only response. 'Not now,' he said in a rasp, his gaze still fixed on his father and brothers.

Stung, face darkening with humiliation, the Warlock King said no more.

Udinaas turned and watched the warriors of the Sengar line begin the ascent. Do not, slave, deny your own thoughts on this. That bastard Hannan Mosag needs to be killed. And soon.

Theradas Buhn, standing nearby, then said, 'A great victory, sire.'

'We are pleased,' Rhulad said, 'that you would see it so, Theradas Buhn.'

Errant take me, the lad learns fast.

Reaching the crest, Binadas moved ahead and settled to one knee before Rhulad. 'Emperor.'

'Binadas, on this day were you ours, or were you Hannan Mosag's?'

Clear and true.

A confused expression as Binadas looked up. 'Sire, the army of Tomad Sengar has yet to find need for sorcery. Our conquests have been swift. The battle this morning was a fierce one, the decision uncertain for a time, but the Edur prevailed. We suffered losses, but that was to be expected – though no less regretted for that.'

'Rise, Binadas,' Rhulad said, sighing heavily beneath his gold armour.

Udinaas now saw that Hull Beddict was approaching in the wake of the Sengar warriors. He looked no better than before, walking like a man skull-cracked and half senseless. Udinaas felt some regret upon seeing his fellow Letherii, for he'd been hard on the man earlier.

Tomad spoke. 'Emperor, we have word from Uruth. She has recovered—'

'We are relieved,' Rhulad cut in. 'Her fallen sisters must be honoured.'

Tomad's brows rose slightly, then he nodded.

The emperor strode to Fear and Trull. 'Brothers, have the two Kenryll'ah returned?'

'No, sire,' Fear replied. 'Nor has the Forkrul Assail appeared. We must, I think, assume the hunt continues.'

This was good, Udinaas decided. Rhulad choosing to speak of things few others present knew about – reinforcing once more all that bound him to Fear and Trull. A display for Tomad, their father. For Binadas, who must now be feeling as if he stood on the narrowest of paths, balanced between Rhulad and the Warlock King. And would soon have to choose.
Errant save us, what a mess awaits these Tiste Edur.

Rhulad set a hand on Trull's shoulder, then stepped past. 'Hull Beddict, hear us.'

The Letherii straightened, blinking, searching until his gaze found the emperor. 'Sire?'

'We grieve this day, Hull Beddict. These ... ignoble deaths. We would rather this had been a day of honourable triumph, of courage and glory revealed on both sides. We would rather, Hull Beddict, this day had been ... clean.'

Cold anger indeed. A greater mercy, perhaps, would have been a public beating of Hannan Mosag. The future was falling out here and now, Udinaas realized. And was that my intention? Better, I think, had I let Rhulad cut the bastard down where he stood. Clean and simple – the only one fooled into believing those words is Rhulad himself. Here's two better words: vicious and subtle.

'We would retire, until the morrow,' the emperor said. 'When we march to claim Letheras, and the throne we have won. Udinaas, attend me shortly. Tomad, at midnight the barrow for the fallen shall be ready for sanctification. Be sure to see the burial done in all honour. And, Father,' he added, 'those Letherii soldiers you fought this day, join them to the same barrow.'

'Sire—'

'Father, the Letherii are now our subjects, are they not?'

Udinaas stood to one side, watching various Edur departing the hilltop. Binadas spoke with Hannan Mosag for a time, then strode to Hull Beddict for the formal greeting of the blood-bound. Then Binadas guided the Letherii away.

Fear and Tomad departed to arrange the burial details. Theradas Buhn and the other chosen brothers set off for the Hiroth encampments.

In a short time, there were only two left. Udinaas, and Trull Sengar.

The Edur was studying the slave from about fifteen paces away, with sufficient intent to make the slave begin to feel nervous. Finally, Udinaas casually turned away, and stared out towards the hills to the south.

A dozen heartbeats later, Trull Sengar came to stand beside him.

'It seems,' the Edur said after a time, 'that you, for all that you are a slave, possess talents verging on genius.'

'Master?'

'Enough of this "master" shit, Udinaas. You are now a... what is the title? A chancellor of the realm? Principal Adviser, or some such thing?'

'First Eunuch, I think.'

Trull glanced over. 'I did not know you'd been—'

'I haven't. Consider it symbolic.'

'All right, I understand, I think. Tell me, are you so certain of yourself, Udinaas, that you would stand between Rhulad and Hannan Mosag? Between Rhulad and Theradas Buhn and those rabid pups who are the chosen brothers of the emperor? You would stand, indeed, between Rhulad and his own madness? Sister knows, I'd thought the Warlock King arrogant...'

'It is not arrogance, Trull Sengar. If it was, I'd be entirely as sure of myself as you seem to think I am. But I am not. Do you believe I have somehow manipulated myself into this position? By choice? Willingly? Tell me, when have any of us last had any meaningful choices? Including your young brother?'

The Edur said nothing for a while. Then he nodded. 'Very well. But, none the less, I must know your
intentions.'

Udinaas shook his head. 'Nothing complicated, Trull Sengar. I do not want to see anyone hurt more than they already have been.'

'Including Hannan Mosag?''

'The Warlock King has not been hurt. But we have seen, this day, what he would deliver upon others.'

'Rhulad was... distressed?'

'Furious.' But not, alas, for admirable reasons – no, he just wanted to fight, and die. The other, more noble sentiments had been borrowed. From me.

'That answer leaves me feeling... relief, Udinaas.'

Which is why I gave it.

'Udinaas.'

'Yes?'

'I fear for what will come. In Letheras.'

'Yes.'

'I feel the world is about to unravel.'

Yes. 'Then we shall have to do our best, Trull Sengar, to hold it all together.'

The Tiste Edur's eyes held his, then Trull nodded. 'Beware your enemies, Udinaas.'

The slave did not reply. Alone once more, he studied the distant hills, the thinning smoke from the fires somewhere in the belly of the fallen keep rising like mocking shadows from earlier this day.

All these wars...
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Five wings will buy you a grovel,
There at the Errant’s grubby toes
The eternal domicile crouching low
In a swamp of old where rivers ran out
And royal blood runs in the clearest stream
Around the stumps of rotted trees
Where forests once stood in majesty
Five roads from the Empty Hold
Will lay you flat on your back
With altar knives and silver chased
The buried rivers gnawing the roots
All aswirl in eager caverns beneath
Where kingly bones rock and clatter
In the silts, and five are the paths
To and from this chambered soul
For all you lost hearts bleeding out
Into the wilderness.

Day of the Domicile
Fintrothas (the Obscure)

The fresh, warm water of the river became the demon's blood, a vessel along which it climbed, the current pushing round it. Somewhere ahead, it now knew, lay a heart, a source of power at once strange and familiar. Its master knew nothing of it, else he would not have permitted the demon to draw ever closer, for that power, once possessed, would snap the binding chains.

Something waited. In the buried courses that ran ceaselessly beneath the great city on the banks of the river. The demon was tasked with carrying the fleet of ships – an irritating presence plying the surface above – to the city. This would be sufficient proximity, the demon knew, to make the sudden lunge, to grasp that dread heart in its many hands. To feed, then rise, free once again and possessing the strength of ten gods. To rise, like an elder, from the raw, chaotic world of long ago. Dominant, unassailable, and burning with fury.

Through the river's dark silts, clambering like a vast crab, sifting centuries of secrets – the bed of an ancient river held so much, a multitude of tales written in layer upon layer of detritus. Muddy nets snagged upon older wreckage, sunken ships, the sprawl of ballast stones, ragged rows of sealed urns still holding their mundane riches. Bones rotting everywhere, gathered up in sinkholes where the currents swirled, and deeper still, in silts thick and hardening and swallowed in darkness, bones flattened by pressures and transformed into crystalline lattices, arrayed in skeletons of stone.

Even in death, the demon understood, nothing was still. Foolish mortals, short-lived and keen with frenzy, clearly believed otherwise, as they scrambled swift as thought above the patient dance of earth and stone. Water, of course, was capable of spanning the vast range of pace among all things. It could charge, out-running all else, and it could stand seemingly motionless. In this it displayed the sacred power of gods, yet it was, of itself, senseless.

The demon knew that such power could be harnessed. Gods had done so, making themselves lords of the seas. But it was the river that fed the seas. And springs from the layers of rock. The sea-gods were, in truth, subservient to those of the rivers and inland pools. The demon, the old spirit-god of the spring, intended to right the balance once more. With the power awaiting it beneath the city, even the gods of the sea would be made to kneel.

It savoured such thoughts, strange with clarity as they were – a clarity the demon had not possessed before.
The taste of the river, perhaps, these bright currents, the rich seep from the shores. Intelligence burgeoning within it.

Such pleasure.

'Nice stopper.'

She turned and stared, and Tehol smiled innocently.

'If you are lying, Tehol Beddict...'

Brows lifted. 'I would never do that, Shurq.' Tehol rose from where he'd been sitting on the floor and began pacing in the small, cramped room. 'Selush, you have a right to be proud. Why, the way you tucked in the skin around the gem, not a crease to be seen—'

'Unless I frown,' Shurq Elalle said.

'Even then,' he replied, 'it would be a modest... pucker.'

'Well,' Shurq said, 'you'd know.'

Selush hastened to pack her supplies back into the bag. 'Oh, don't I know what's coming? A spat.'

'Express your gratitude, Shurq,' Tehol said.

Fingertips probing the gem in its silver setting in her forehead, Shurq Elalle hesitated, then sighed. 'Thank you, Selush.'

'Not the spat I was talking about,' the wild-haired woman said. 'Those Tisteans. They're coming. Lether has been conquered, and I dread the changes to come. Grey skin, that will be the new fashion – mark my words. But I must maintain my pragmatism,' she added, suddenly brightening. 'I'm already mixing a host of foundations to achieve that ghastly effect.' A pause, a glance over at Shurq Elalle. 'Working on you was very helpful, Shurq. I thought I'd call the first line Dead Thief of the Night.'

'Cute.'

'Nice.'

'But don't think that means you're taking a cut of my profits, Shurq.'

'I wouldn't dream of it.'

'I have to be going now,' Selush said, straightening with her bag slung over one shoulder. 'I intend to be hiding in my basement for the next few days. And I would advise the same for you two.'

Tehol looked round. 'I don't have a basement, Selush.'

'Well, it's the thought that counts, I always say. Goodbye!'

A swish of curtain and she was gone.

Shurq Elalle asked, 'How late is it?'

'Almost dawn.'

'Where's your manservant?'

'I don't know. Somewhere, I would think.'

'Really?'

Tehol clapped his hands. 'Let's head onto the roof. We can see if my silent bodyguard changes expression
upon seeing your beauty.'

'What has he been doing up there all this time?'

'Probably standing directly above the doorway here, in case some unwelcome visitor arrived – which, fortunately, did not happen. Brys's messenger girl hardly qualified.'

'And what could he have done about some attacker from up there?'

'I imagine he would have flung himself straight down in a flurry of swords, knives and clubs, beating the intruder senseless in an instant. Either that, or he'd shout then run back to the ladder, climb down and exact revenge over our corpses.'

'Your corpse. Not mine.'

'You're right, of course. My mistake.'

'I am not surprised you are confused now, Tehol,' Shurq said, sweeping back her hair with both hands, the gesture admirably flinging out her chest. 'Given the pleasure you discovered in my wares earlier.'

'Your "wares" indeed. A good term to use, since it could mean virtually anything. Now, shall we head up to greet the dawn?'

'If you insist. I can't stay long. Ublala will be getting worried.'

'Harlest will advise him how the dead have no sense of time, Shurq. No need to fret.'

'He was muttering about dismembering Harlest just before I left them.'

They walked to the ladder, Shurq taking the lead.

'I thought he was trapped in a sarcophagus,' Tehol pointed out.

'We could still hear him. Dramatic hissing and scratching on the underside of the lid. It was, even for me, somewhat irritating.'

'Well, let's hope Ublala did nothing untoward.'

They climbed.

The sky was paling to the east, but a chill remained in the air. The bodyguard stood facing them until he had their attention, then he pointed towards the river.

The Edur fleet crowded the span, hundreds of raider craft and transports, a dark sweep of sails. Among the lead ships, oars had appeared, sliding out from the flanks of the hulls. The landings would begin within the bell.

Tehol studied them for a moment, then he faced north-west. The white columns of the battle the day before were gone, although a stain of dark smoke from the keep lingered, lit high above the horizon by the sun's first shafts. Above the west road was a streak of dust, drawing closer as the sun rose.

It was some time before either Tehol or Shurq spoke, then the latter turned away and said, 'I have to go.'

'Stay low,' Tehol said.

She paused at the top of the ladder. 'And you, Tehol Beddict, stay here. On this roof. With that guard standing close.'

'Sound plan, Shurq Elalle.'

'Given the chance, Gerun Eberict will come for you.'

'And you.'
From the far west gate, a raucous flurry of bells announced the approach of the Edur army.

The thief disappeared down through the hatch.

Tehol stood facing west. His back grew warmer, and he knew that this day would be a hot one.

One of her hands rested on the king's shoulder, but Brys could see that Nisall was near collapse. She had stood vigil over Ezgara Diskanar most of the night, as if love alone could guard the man against all dangers. Exhaustion had taken the king into sleep, and he now sat the throne like a corpse, slumped, head lolling. The crown had fallen off some time in the night and was lying beside the throne on the dais.

The Chancellor, Triban Gnol, had been present earlier but had left with the last change of guards. Ghost-like since the loss of the queen and the prince, and Turudal Brizad, he had grown suddenly ancient and withered, drifting down corridors speaking to no-one.

Finadd Moroch Nevath had disappeared, although Brys trusted that the swordsman would arrive when the time came. For all that he had suffered, he was a brave man and none of the rumours concerning his conduct at High Fort were, to Brys's mind, worth the spit needed to utter them.

First Eunuch Nifadas, along with Brys Beddict, had assumed the responsibility for what remained of the soldiers in the palace. Each wing entranceway was now barricaded by at least thirty guards, with the exception of the King's Path, where the Ceda in his madness had forbidden anyone to remain, barring himself. In the city beyond, Finadd Gerun Eberict and the city garrison were positioned throughout Letheras, their numbers insufficient to hold the gates or walls yet prepared to fight none the less – at least, Brys assumed that was the case, since he had not left the throne room in some time, and Gerun had not reappeared since the man assumed command of the garrison.

Spelled by Nifadas, the King's Champion had rested on a bench near the throne room's grand entrance, managing a half-dozen bells of surprisingly sound sleep. Servants had awakened him with breakfast, beginning the day to come with surreal normality. Chilled in sweat-damp clothes beneath his armour, Brys quickly ate, then rose and walked to where Nifadas sat at the bench opposite.

'First Eunuch, it is time for you to rest.'

Champion, there is no need for that. I have done very little and am not in the least fatigued.'

Brys studied the man's eyes. They were sharp and alert, quite unlike the usual sleepy regard with which Nifadas commonly presented. 'Very well,' he said.

The First Eunuch smiled up at him. 'Our last day, Finadd.'

Brys frowned. 'There is no reason to assume, Nifadas, that the Edur will see cause to take your life. As with the Chancellor, your knowledge will be needed.'

'Knowledge, yes. A worthy assumption, Finadd.'

The First Eunuch added nothing more.

Brys glanced back at the throne, then strode towards it. He came close to Nisall. 'First Concubine, he will sleep a while yet.' He took her arm. 'Don't worry,' he said as she began to resist, 'just to that bench over there. No further.'

'How, Brys? How could it all collapse? So fast? I don't understand.'

He remembered back to the secret meetings, where Nisall and Unnutil Hebaz and Nifadas and the king planned their moves and countermoves in the all-devouring games of intrigue within the Royal Household. Her confidence then had seemed unassailable, the cleverness bright in her eyes. He remembered how the Letherii saw the Tiste Edur and their lands, a pearl ripe for the plucking. 'I don't know, Nisall.'

She let him guide her down from the dais. 'It seems so ... quiet. Has the day begun?'
'The sun has risen, yes.'

'He won't leave the throne.'

'I know.'

'He is... frightened.'

'Here, Nisall, lie down here. Use these cushions. Not ideal, I know—'

'No, it's fine. Thank you.'

Her eyes closed as soon as she settled. Brys stared down at her for a moment. She was already sleeping.

He swung round and walked down to the grand entrance, strode into the low-ceilinged corridor where he intended to make his stand. Just beyond, the Ceda was lying, curled up in sleep, on the centre tile.

And standing near Kuru Qan was Gerun Eberict. With sword in hand. Staring down at the Ceda.

Brys edged closer. 'Finadd.'

Gerun looked up, expressionless.

'The King's Leave does not absolve you from all things, Gerun Eberict.'

The man bared his teeth. 'He has lost his mind, Brys. It would be a mercy.'

'Not for you to judge.'

Gerun cocked his head. 'You would oppose me in this?'

'Yes.'

After a moment, the Finadd stepped back, sliding his sword back into the scabbard at his hip. 'Well timed, then. Ten heartbeats later...'

'What are you doing here?' Brys asked.

'My soldiers are all in position. What else would you have me do?'

'Command them.'

A whistling snort from him, then, 'I have other tasks awaiting me this day.'

Brys was silent. Wondering if he should kill the man now.

It seemed Gerun guessed his thoughts, for his scarred sneer broadened. 'Recall your responsibilities, Brys Beddict.' He gestured and a dozen of his own estate guards strode into the chamber. 'You are supposed to die defending the king, after all. In any case,' he added as he slowly backed away, 'you have just confirmed my suspicions, and for that I thank you.'

Blood or honour. 'I know what you believe, Gerun Eberict. And so I warn you now, you will not be permitted the Leave in this.'

'You speak for the king? Brys Beddict, that is rather presumptuous of you, don't you think?'

'The king expects you to command the garrison in defence of the city – not abandon your responsibilities in order to conduct your own crusade.'

'Defence of the city? Don't be an idiot, Brys. If the garrison seeks heroic final stands it is welcome to them. I intend to survive this damned conquest. The Tiste Edur do not frighten me in the least.' He turned about then and, surrounded by his guards, left the chamber.
Blood or honour. I have no choice in this, Tehol. I'm sorry.

Bugg was not entirely surprised to find himself virtually alone on the wall. His ascent had not been challenged, since it seemed all the garrison guards had withdrawn to various choke-points in the city. Whether those soldiers would rise to stubborn defence remained to be seen, of course. In any case, their presence had kept the streets empty for the most part.

The manservant leaned on a merlon and watched the Edur army approach down the west road. An occasional glance to his left allowed him to monitor the closing of the fleet, and the vast, deadly demon beneath it – a presence spanning the width of the river and stretching back downstream almost half a league. A terrible, brutal creature straining at its sorcerous chains.

The west gate was open and unguarded. The lead elements of the Edur army had closed to within a thousand paces, advancing with caution. Ranging to either side of the column, in the ditches and across the fields, the first of the Soletaken wolves came into view.

Bugg sighed, looked over at the other occupant along the wall. 'You will have to work fast, I think.'

The artist was a well-known and easily recognized figure in Letheras. A mass of hair that began on his head and swept down to join with the wild beard covering jaw and neck, his nub of a nose and small blue eyes the only visible features on his face. He was short and wiry, and painted with agitated capering – often perched on one leg – smearing paint on surfaces that always seemed too small for the image he was seeking to capture. This failing of perspective had long since been elevated into a technique, then a legitimate style, in so far as artistic styles could be legitimate. At Bugg's comment he scowled and rose up on one leg, the foot of the other against the knee. 'The scene, you fool! It is burned into my mind, here behind this eye, the left one. I forget nothing. Every detail. Historians will praise my work this day, you'll see. Praise!'

'Are you done, then?'

'Very nearly, very very nearly, yes, nearly done. Every detail. I have done it again. That's what they will say. Yes, I have done it again.'

'May I see?'

'Sudden suspicion.

Bugg added, 'I am something of an historian myself.'

'You are? Have I read you? Are you famous?'

'Famous? Probably. But I doubt you've read me, since I've yet to write anything down.'

'A lecturer!'

'A scholar, swimming across the ocean of history.'

'I like that. I could paint that.'

'So, may I see your painting?'

A grand gesture with a multicoloured hand. 'Come along, then, old friend. See my genius for yourself.'

The board perched on its easel was wider than it was high, in the manner of a landscape painting or, indeed, a record of some momentous vista of history. At least two arm-lengths wide. Bugg walked round for a look at the image captured on the surface.

And saw two colours, divided in a rough diagonal. Scratchy red to the right, muddy brown to the left. 'Extraordinary,' Bugg said. 'And what is it you have rendered here?'

'What is it? Are you blind?' The painter pointed with a brush. 'The column! Those approaching Edur, the vast army! The standard, of course. The standard!'
Bugg squinted across the distance to the tiny patch of red that was the vanguard’s lead standard. ‘Ah, of course. Now I see.’

‘And my brilliance blinds you, yes?’

‘Oh yes, all comprehension has been stolen from my eyes indeed.’

The artist deftly switched legs and perched pensively, frowning out at the Edur column. ‘Of course, they’re closer now. I wish I’d brought another board, so I could elaborate yet further on the detail.’

‘Well, you could always use this wall.’

Bushy brows arched. ‘That’s ... clever. You are a scholar indeed.’

‘I must be going, now.’

‘Yes, yes, stop distracting me. I need to focus, you know. Focus.’

Bugg quietly made his way down the stone stairs. ‘A fine lesson,’ he muttered under his breath as he reached street level. Details ... so many things to do this day.

He walked deserted streets, avoiding the major intersections where barricades had been raised and soldiers moved about in nervous expectation. The occasional furtive figure darted into and out of view as he went on.

A short time later the manservant rounded a corner, paused, then approached the ruined temple. Standing near it was Turudal Brizad, who looked over as Bugg reached his side.

‘Any suggestions?’ the god known as the Errant asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The mortal I requested for this task has not appeared.’

‘Oh. That’s not good, since the Jheck are at the gates even as we speak.’

‘And the first Edur from the ships have disembarked, yes.’

‘Why not act for yourself?’ Bugg asked.

‘I cannot. My aspect enforces certain ... prohibitions.’

‘Ah, the nudge, the pull or the push.’

‘Yes, only that.’

‘You have been about as direct as you can be.’

The Errant nodded.

‘Well, I see your dilemma,’ Bugg said.

‘Thus my query – do you have any suggestions?’

The manservant considered for a time, whilst the god waited patiently, then he sighed and said, ‘Perhaps. Wait here. If I am successful, I will send someone to you.’

‘All right. I trust you will not be overlong.’

‘I hope not. Depends on my powers of persuasion.’

‘Then I am encouraged.’

Without another word, Bugg headed off. He quickened his pace as he made his way towards the docks.
Fortunately, it was not far, and he arrived at Front Street to see that only the main piers had been commandeered by the landing warriors of the Tiste Edur. They were taking their time, he noted, a sign of their confidence. No-one was opposing their landing. Bugg hurried along Front Street until he came to the lesser berths. Where he found his destination, a two-masted, sleek colt of a ship that needed new paint but seemed otherwise relatively sound. There was no-one visible on its deck, but as soon as he crossed the gangway he heard voices, then the thump of boots.

Bugg had reached the mid-deck when the cabin door swung open and two armed women emerged, swords out.

Bugg halted and held up his hands.

Three more figures appeared once the two women stepped to either side. A tall, grey-maned man in a crimson surcoat, and a second man who was clearly a mage of some sort. The third arrival Bugg recognized.

'Good morning, Shand. So this is where Tehol sent you.'

'Bugg. What in the Errant's name do you want?'

'Well said, lass. And are these fine soldiers Shurq Elalle's newly hired crew?'

'Who is this man?' the grey-haired man asked Shand.

She scowled. 'My employer's manservant. And your employer works for my employer. His arrival means there's going to be trouble. Go on, Bugg, we're listening.'

'First, how about some introductions, Shand?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Iron Bars—'

'An Avowed of the Crimson Guard,' Bugg cut in, smiling. 'Forgive me. Go on, please.'

'Corlo—'

'His High Mage. Again, forgive me, but that will have to do. I have very little time. I need these Guardsmen.'

'You need us for what?' Iron Bars asked.

'You have to kill the god of the Soletaken Jheck.'

The Avowed's expression darkened. 'Soletaken. We've crossed paths with Soletaken before.'

Bugg nodded. 'If the Jheck reach their god, they will of course protect it—'

'How far away?'

'Just a few streets, in an abandoned temple.'

Iron Bars nodded. 'This god, is it Soletaken or D'ivers?'

'D'ivers.'

The Avowed turned to Corlo, who said, 'Ready up, soldiers, we've some fighting ahead.'

Shand stared at them. 'What do I tell Shurq if she shows up in the meantime?'

'We won't be long,' Iron Bars said, drawing his sword.

'Wait!' Shand swung to Bugg. 'You! How did you know they'd be here?'

The manservant shrugged. 'Errant's nudge, I suppose. Take care, Shand, and say hello to Hejun and Rissarh for me, won't you?'
Fifty paces' worth of empty cobbled road between them and the yawning gates of Letheras. Trull Sengar leaned on his spear and glanced over at Rhulad.

The emperor, fur-shouldered and hulking, was pacing like a beast, eyes fixed on the gateway. Hannan Mosag and his surviving K'risnan had advanced ten paces in the midst of shadow wraiths, the latter now sliding forward.

The wraiths reached the gate, hovered a moment, then swept into the city.

Hannan Mosag turned and strode back to where the emperor and his brothers waited. 'It is as we sensed, Emperor. The Ceda's presence is nowhere to be found. There are but a handful of minor mages among the garrison. The wraiths and demons will take care of them. We should be able to carve our way through the barricades and reach the Eternal Domicile by noon. A fitting time for you to ascend the throne.'

'Barricades,' Rhulad said, nodding. 'Good. We wish to fight. Udinaas!'

'Here.' The slave stepped forward.

'This time, Udinaas, you will accompany the Household, under Uruth's charge.'

'Emperor?'

'We shall not risk you, Udinaas. Should we fall, however, you will be sent to us immediately.'

The slave bowed and stepped back.

Rhulad swung to where stood his father and three brothers. 'We shall enter Letheras now. We shall claim our empire. Ready your weapons, blood of ours.'

They began moving forward.

Trull's gaze held on Hannan Mosag for a moment longer, wondering what the Warlock King was hiding, then he followed his brothers.

Hull Beddict was among the second company to enter Letheras, and twenty paces in from the gate he stepped to one side and halted, watching as the wary Edur marched on. None paid him any attention. From the nearby buildings, pallid faces looked down from windows and through slightly parted shutters. From out over the docks gulls wheeled and cried out in a cacophony of panic. Somewhere ahead, down the main avenue, the fighting began at the first barricade. There was a thump of sorcery, then screams.

A meaningless waste of life. He hoped not all the garrison soldiers would be so foolishly brave. There was no longer any reason for fighting. Lether was conquered. All that was left was to depose the ineffectual king and his treacherous advisers. The one truly just act of this war, as far as Hull Beddict was concerned.

His grieving for his brother Brys was done. Although Brys was not yet dead, his death was none the less as certain an outcome as could exist. The King's Champion would die defending the king. It was tragic, and unnecessary, but it would be the last tradition acted out by the Letherii, and nothing Hull or anyone else could do or say would prevent it.

All the ashes had settled in Hull's mind. The slaughter behind them, the murder waiting ahead of them. He had betrayed, to see an end to the corrupt insanity of his people. That the victory demanded the death of Brys offered the final layer of ash to shroud Hull's soul. There would be no absolution.

Even so, one responsibility remained with Hull. As the third company of Tiste Edur entered through the gates, he turned and made his way down a side alley.

He needed to speak to Tehol. To explain things. To tell his brother that he knew of the deceptions, the schemes. Tehol was, he hoped, the one man in Letheras who would not hate Hull for what he had done. He needed to speak to him.
He needed something like forgiveness.

For not being there to save their parents all those years ago.

For not being there to save Brys now.

Forgiveness, a simple thing.

Udinaas stood among the other slaves of the Sengar household, awaiting their turn to enter Letheras. Word had already come that there was fighting ahead, somewhere. Uruth stood nearby, and with her was Mayen, wrapped in a heavy cloak, her face looking ravaged, eyes like a thing hunted. Uruth remained close, as if fearing an escape attempt from the younger woman. Not out of compassion for Mayen, however. The child was all that mattered now.

Poor Mayen.

He knew how she felt. Something like a fever gripped him, an urgency in his blood. Sweat trickled down his body beneath his tunic. His skin felt on fire. He held himself still, on the edge, he feared, of losing control.

The sensation had come on suddenly, like an inner wave of panic, a faceless terror. Worsening—

Head spinning, it was a moment before he realized what was happening. Then horror flooded through Udinaas.

The Wyval.

It was coming to life within him.

B'nagga in the lead, the Jheck entered the city. Soletaken, loping with heads sunk low, one and all seeking the scent of their god. And finding it within the fear-sour currents drifting through Letheras, an impatience, a sentience consumed with rage.

Gleeful howls, rising to fill the city, reverberating down the streets, from over nine thousand wolves. Striking terror amongst cowering citizens. Nine thousand wolves, white-furred, racing on a score of convergent routes towards the old temple, an inward rush of bestial madness.

B'nagga joined his voice to the chilling howls, his heart filled with savage joy. The Pack awaited them. Demons, wraiths, Tiste Edur and damned emperors were as nothing now. Momentary allies of convenience. What would rise here in Letheras was the ascension of the Jheck. An empire of Soletaken, with a god-emperor upon the throne. Rhulad torn to pieces, every Edur sundered into bloody, sweet-tasting meat, rich marrow from split bones, skulls broken open, brains devoured.

This day would end in such slaughter that none who survived would forget.

This day, B'nagga told himself with a silent laugh, belonged to the Jheck.

Seventy-three of his company's finest soldiers formed a shield wall behind Moroch Nevath. They held the principal bridge crossing Main Canal, a suitable site for this pathetic drama. Best of all, the Third Tiers were arrayed behind them, on which citizens had now appeared. Spectators – a Letherii talent. No doubt wagers were being made, and at least Moroch Nevath would have an audience.

The hooded looks, the rumours of his cowardice at High Fort, would cease this day. It wasn't much, but it would suffice.

He recalled he had promised to do something for Turudal Brizard, but the man's outrageous claims had not quite convinced Moroch. Tales of gods and such, coming from a painted consort at that, well, that would have to wait another day, another lifetime. Leave the foppish lover of the lost queen and that obnoxious chancellor to fight his own battles. Moroch wanted to cross blades with the Tiste Edur.

If they let him. A squalid death beneath a wave of sorcery was more likely.
A grunt from one of his soldiers.

Moroch nodded, seeing the first of the Edur approaching from the main avenue. 'Hold that shield wall,' he said in a growl, moving to stand five paces in front of it. 'It's a small company – let's send their souls to the Errant's piss-hole.'

In answer to his bold words, shouts from the soldiers, voices made ugly with blood-lust. Swords hammering shield-rims.

Moroch smiled. *They've seen us.* 'Look at them, comrades – see how they hesitate.'

Bellowed challenges from the soldiers.

The Tiste Edur resumed their march. In their lead, a warrior draped in gold.

Whom Moroch had seen before. 'Errant bless me,' he whispered, then spun round. 'The emperor! The one in gold!' And turned back, taking four more strides until he was at the very edge of the bridge. Raising his sword. 'Rhulad of the Edur!' he shouted. 'Come and face me, you damned freak! Come forward and die!'

Bugg pointed down the street. 'See that man? That's Turudal Brizad. That is who you are doing this favour for. If he's not grateful, give him an earful. I have to get going, but I will be back shortly—'

The air filled suddenly with howling, coming from the north and west.

'Oh, damn,' Bugg said. 'You'd better get going. And I'd better stay too,' he added, heading off towards the Errant.

'Corlo,' Iron Bars snapped as they followed the manservant.

'Oh, it's befuddled, some, Avowed. Can't hear a thing besides.'

Iron Bars nodded. 'Weapons ready. We're wasting no time on this. How many in there, Corlo?'

'Six, their favourite number.'

'Let's go.'

Bugg had moved ahead and was fifteen paces from Turudal, who had turned to face him, when the Avowed and his squad thumped past, gaining speed.

As they closed on the Errant the god, brows lifting, pointed towards the entrance to the ruined temple.

The Crimson Guardsmen shifted course, reaching full sprint as they passed Turudal Brizad.

Bugg heard Iron Bars say to the god, 'Pleased-to-meet-you-see-you-later,' and then the Avowed and his soldiers were past. Straight for the dark entrance, then plunging inside.

Bestial screams, human shouts, the deafening thunder of sorcery—

'He's mine!' Rhulad said in a snarl, lifting his sword and stalking towards the lone Letherii swordsman at this end of the bridge.

Hannan Mosag called, 'Emperor! Leave these to my K'risnan—'

Rhulad spun round. 'No!' he shrieked. 'We shall fight! We are warriors! These Letherii deserve to die honourably! We will hear nothing more from you!' The emperor swung back. 'This, this brave swordsman. I want him.'

Beside Trull, Fear muttered, 'He wants to be killed by him. I recognize that Letherii. He was with the delegation.'

Trull nodded. The Finadd, a Letherii captain and bodyguard to Prince Quillas – he could not recall the man's
name.

It was clear that Rhulad had not recognized him.

Mottled sword held at the ready, the emperor approached.

Moroch Nevath smiled. Rhulad Sengar, who had died, only to return. If the rumours were true, he had died again in Trate. But this time, I will make him stay dead. I will cut him to pieces. He waited, watching the emperor's approach.

Favouring the right side, the right foot edging ahead of the other, a detail telling Moroch that Rhulad had been trained to use a single-handed sword, rather than this two-handed monstrosity now wavering about before him like an oversized club.

The sudden charge was not unexpected, only the speed of that weapon as the blade whirled towards Moroch's head. He barely managed to avoid getting his skull sliced in half, ducking and pitching to his right. A deafening clang, the shock ripping through him as the sword bit into his helmet, caught, then tore it from his head.

Moroch sprang back, staying as low as possible, then straightened once more. The top third of his own sword was slick with blood. He had met the charge with a stop-hit.

Opposite him, Rhulad staggered back, blood pulsing from his right thigh.

The lead leg was always vulnerable.

Let's see you dance now, Emperor.

Moroch shook off the numbing effects of the blow to his head. Muscles and tendons in his neck and back were screaming silent pain, and he knew that he had taken damage. For the moment, however, neither arm had seized in answer to the trauma.

A shriek, as Rhulad attacked once more.

Two-handed thrust, broken timing – a moment's hesitation, sufficient to avoid Moroch's all-too-quick parry – then finishing in a full lunge.

The Finadd twisted his body in an effort to avoid the sword-point. Searing fire above his right hip as the mottled blade's edge sawed deep. A wet, red rush, spraying out to the side. Now inside the weapon's reach, Moroch drove his own sword in from a sharp angle, stabbing the tip into the emperor's left armpit. The bite of gold coin, the grating resistance of ribs, then inward, gouging along the inside of Rhulad's shoulder blade, striving for the spine.

The mottled sword seemed to leap with a will of its own, reversing grip, hands lifting high, point down. A diagonal thrust, entering above Moroch's right hip bone, down through his groin.

Rhulad pushed down from the grip end, the point chewing through the Finadd's lower intestines, until the pommel clunked on the paving stones beneath them, then the emperor straightened, pushing the weapon back up, through Moroch's torso, alongside his heart, through his left lung, the point bursting free just behind his clavicle on that side.

Dying, Moroch threw the last of his strength against his own weapon, seeing Rhulad bow around its embedded point. Then a snap, as the emperor's spine broke.

Crimson smile broadening, Moroch Nevath sagged to the slick stones, even as Rhulad pitched down.

Another figure loomed over him, then. One of Rhulad's brothers.

Who spoke as if from a long distance away. 'Tell me your name, Finadd.'

Moroch sought to answer, but he was drowning in blood. I am Moroch Nevath. And I have killed your
damned emperor.

'Are you the King's Champion in truth? Your soldiers on the bridge seem to be yelling that – King's Champion ... is that who you are, Finadd?'

No.

You bastards have not met him yet.

With that pleasing thought, Moroch Nevath died.

So swift the healing, so terribly swift the return of life. Surrounded by the wolf howls reverberating through Letheras in a chorus of the damned, the emperor voiced a scream that tore the air.

The company of soldiers on the bridge were silenced, staring as Rhulad, sheathed in blood, staggered upright, tugging the sword from the Finadd's body, then skidding with a lurch as he stepped to one side. Righting himself, his eyes filled with madness and terror.

'Udinaas!'

Desperately alone. A soul writhing in agony.

'Udinaas!'

Two hundred paces away on the main avenue, Uruth Sengar heard her son's frantic cry. She spun, seeking the slave among those walking in her wake. At that moment, Mayen shrieked, pushed her way clear of the other women, and was suddenly running – into an alley. And gone.

Frozen, Uruth hesitated, then with a hiss returned her attention to the slaves cowering in front of her.

'Udinaas! Where are you?'

Blank, terrified looks met her. Familiar faces one and all. But among them, nowhere could she find Udinaas.

The slave was gone.

Uruth plunged among them, fists flailing. 'Find him! Find Udinaas!'

A sudden hate raged through her. For Udinaas. For all the Letherii.

Betrayed. My son is betrayed.

Oh, how they would pay.

She could hear sounds of fighting now throughout the city, as the invaders poured into the streets and were met by desperate soldiers. Frightened, moving about from one place of cover to the next in the overgrown yard, the child Kettle began to cry. She was alone.

The five killers were almost free. Their barrow was breaking apart, thick fissures welling in the dark, wet earth, submerged rocks grinding and snapping together. The muted sounds of five voices joined in a chant as heavy as drums ... rising, coming ever closer to the surface.

'Oh,' she moaned, 'where is everybody? Where are my friends?'

Kettle staggered over to the barrow containing her only ally. He was there, so very close. She reached down —

—and was dragged in, a heaving passage of hot soil, then through, stumbling, slipping on a muddy bank. Before her sprawled a fetid swamp beneath a grey sky.

And, almost within arm's reach, a figure was climbing from the dark water. White-skinned, long hair smeared with mud. 'Kettle!' The voice a strained grasp. 'Behind you – reach—'
She turned round.

Two swords, points thrust into the mud.

‘Kettle – take them – give them—’

A wet gasp, and she spun back, to see the bared arms of another figure, clawing up to wrap about her friend – a woman’s arms, lean, ribboned in muscle. He was dragged back – she saw him drive an elbow into the fiercely twisting, black-streaked face that rose suddenly from the slime. Connecting hard in a splatter of blood. But the clutching hands would not let go.

And they both sank back into the swirling foam.

Whimpering, Kettle crawled over to the swords. She tugged them from the mud, then clambered back to the water’s edge.

Limbs appeared amidst the thrashing waves.

Shivering, Kettle waited.

So easy, now, a slave once more, as the Wyval suffused his body, stealing the will of every muscle, every organ, the charging blood in his veins. Udinaas could barely see through his own eyes, as street after street blurred past. Sudden moments of brutal clarity, as he came upon three Soletaken wolves – which turned as one with snarls and bared fangs – and was among them, his hands now talons, the thumb-long claws tearing into wolf-flesh, curling round ribs and ripping them loose. A massive, gnarled fist, slamming into the side of a lunging, snapping head, breaking bone – the wolf’s head suddenly lolling, the eyes blank in death.

Then, motion once more.

His master needed him. Needed him now. No time to lose.

A slave. Absolved of all responsibility, nothing more than a tool.

And this, Udinaas knew, was the poison of surrender.

Close, now, and closing.

There is nothing new in being used. Look upon these sprawled corpses, after all. Poor Letherii soldiers lying dead for no reason. Defending the corpse of a kingdom, citizens once more every one of them. The kingdom that does not move, the kingdom in service to the god of dust – you will find the temples in crooked alleys, in the cracks between cobbles.

You will find, my friends, no sweeter world than this, where honour and faith and freedom are notions levelled one and all, layers as thin as hate, envy and betrayal. Every notion vulnerable to any sordid breeze, stirred up, stirred together. A world without demands to challenge the confused haze of holy apathy.

The god of dust rises dominant—

Ahead, a dozen wolves, charging straight for him.

There would, it seemed, be a delay.

Udinaas bared his teeth.

‘How are you managing it?’ Bugg asked.

The Errant glanced over. ‘The wolves?’

‘They’re everywhere but here, and they should have arrived long ago.’

The god shrugged. ‘I keep nudging them away. It’s not as difficult as I feared, although their leader is too clever by far – much harder to deceive. Besides, the beasts keep running into other ... opposition.’
'What kind of opposition?'

'Other.'

The shouts from within the temple ceased then. Silence, no movement from the dark doorway. A half-dozen heartbeats, then, a muttering of voices and swearing.

The mage, Corlo, appeared, backing out and dragging a limp body in his wake, a body leaving twin trails of blood from its heels.

Concerned, Bugg stepped forward. 'Is she alive?'

Corlo, himself a mass of cuts and bruises, cast the manservant a slightly wild look. 'No, dammit.'

'I am sorry for that,' the Errant murmured.

More Guardsmen were emerging from the doorway. All were wounded, one of them badly, his left arm torn loose at the shoulder and dangling from a few pink-white tendons. His eyes were glazed with shock.

Corlo glared at Turudal Brizad. 'Can you do any healing? Before the rest of us bleed out—'

Iron Bars stepped from the ruined temple, sheathing his sword. He was covered in blood but none of it was his. His expression was alarmingly dark. 'We were expecting wolves, damn you,' he said in a low growl as he stared at the Errant, who had closed to lay hands upon the most grievously injured soldier, raising new flesh to bind the arm once more to the shoulder as the soldier's face twisted with pain.

Turudal Brizad shrugged. 'There was little time to elaborate on what you were about to fight, Avowed. In case you have forgotten.'

'Damned cats,' he said.

'Lizard cats, you mean,' one of the Guardsmen said, spitting blood onto the street. 'Sometimes I think nature is insane.'

'You got that right, Halfpeck,' Corlo said, reaching down to close the eyelids of the dead woman lying at his feet.

Iron Bars suddenly moved, a blur, past the Errant, both hands lifting—

—as a huge white wolf, claws skittering, pitched round from an alley mouth and, head ducking, lunged towards Turudal Brizad, who had only just begun to turn round.

The Avowed caught it in mid-leap, left hand closing on its right leg just beneath the shoulder, right hand clutching its neck beneath the beast's jaws. He heaved the wolf high, pivoted and smashed it head first onto the street. Crushing snout, skull and shoulders. Limbs kicking spasmodically, the Soletaken flopped onto its back, yellow vomit spurting, urine arcing as it died. A moment later, all movement from the limbs ceased, although the urine continued to stream, the arc dwindling, then collapsing.

Iron Bars stepped back.

Halfpeck suddenly laughed. 'It pissed on you!'

'Be quiet,' Iron Bars said, looking down at his wet legs. 'Hood take me, that stinks.'

'We should get back to the ship,' Corlo said. 'There's wolves all over the place and I don't think I can keep them away much longer.'

Turudal Brizad; 'But I can. Especially now.'

Bugg asked, 'What's changed, apart from the Pack getting chopped to pieces?'

The Errant pointed down at the dead Soletaken. 'That was B'nagga, the leader of the Jheck.' He shot Bugg a
look, astonished and half disbelieving. 'You chose well,' he said.

'This squad managed to escape Assail,' Bugg said, shrugging.

The god's eyes widened. He turned to Iron Bars. 'I will ensure you a clear path to your ship—'

'Oh, damn,' Bugg cut in, slowly turning. 'They're getting out.'

'More trouble?' Iron Bars asked, looking round, his hand drifting close to the sword at his hip.

'Not here,' Bugg said. 'But not far.' He faced the Avowed, gauging.

Iron Bars frowned, then said, 'Corlo, take the squad back to the ship. All right, old man, lead the way.'

'You don't have to do this—'

'Yes I do. With that wolf pissing on me I feel the need to lose my temper. It's another fight, isn't it?'

Bugg nodded. 'Might make the Pack seem like kittens, Iron Bars.'

'Might? Will it or won't it?'

'All right, we might well lose this one.'

'Fine,' the Avowed snapped. 'Let's get it over with.'

The manservant sighed. 'Follow me, then. It's a dead Azath House we're heading to.'

'Dead? Hood take me, a garden fete.'

A garden fete? Dear me, I like this man.

'And we're inviting ourselves, Avowed. Still with me?'

Iron Bars looked across at Corlo, who had stopped to listen, his face bloodless as he repeatedly shook his head in denial. The Avowed grunted. 'Once you've dropped 'em off, come and find us, Corlo. And try and make your arrival timely.'

'Avowed—'

'Go.'

Bugg glanced at the Errant. 'You coming?'

'In spirit,' he replied. 'There is another matter I must attend to, I am afraid. Oh,' he added as Bugg and Iron Bars turned to go, 'dear manservant, I thank you. And you as well, Avowed. Tell me, Iron Bars, how many of the Avowed remain among the Crimson Guard?'

'No idea. A few hundred, I'd imagine.'

'Scattered here and there ...,'

The grey-haired soldier smiled. 'For the moment.'

Bugg said, 'We shall have to run, I think.'

'Can you keep up?' Iron Bars asked.

'As swift as a charging wave, that's me,' Bugg said.

Brys stood alone in the corridor. The howling was, thankfully, over. It was the only sound that had managed to penetrate the walls. There was no way to know if the garrison was fighting in the city beyond the Eternal Domicile. It seemed such a pointless thing ...

His breath caught upon hearing a strange sound. Brys lowered his gaze, fixed it upon the Ceda, who was
lying curled tight in the chamber beyond, with his back to Brys and the throne room behind him.

Kuru Qan's head shifted slightly, then rose a fraction from the floor.

And, from the Ceda, there came low laughter.

The path was unmistakable. Keening with glee, the demon drew itself to the cave's entrance, contracting its massive, corpulent presence, the bloated flesh of its body, away from the river's broad span. Inward, gathering, hovering before the tunnel beneath the city, where old swamp water still flowed, putrid and sweet, a flavour like sweet nectar to the demon.

Ready now, at last, for the lunge, the breaking away from the grip of its master. Who was so regrettably preoccupied at the moment.

Now.

Surging forward, filling the cave, then into the narrow, twisting tunnel.

To the heart. The wondrous, blessed heart of power.

Joy and hunger burning like twin fires within it. Close, so close now.

Squirming down, the path narrowing, squeezing with the vast pressure of overlying stone and earth. A little further.

Reaching out, the space suddenly opening, blissfully wide and high, spreading out to all sides, the water welcoming in its warmth.

A storm of long-still silts sweeping up, blinding, shadows of dead things cavorting before its countless eyes.

The heart, the enormous cavern beneath the lake, the city's very soul – the power—

And Brys heard Kuru Qan speak.

'Now, friend Bugg.'

Thirty paces from the overgrown yard of the Azath tower, Bugg skidded to a halt. He cocked his head, then smiled.

Ahead, Iron Bars slowed, then turned round. 'What?'

'Find the girl,' the manservant said. 'I'll join you when I can.'

'Bugg?'

'In a moment, Avowed. I must do something first.'

The Crimson Guardsman hesitated, then nodded and swung back.

Bugg closed his eyes. Jaghut witch, hear me. Recall my favour at the quarry? The time has come for ... reciprocity.

She replied in his mind, distant, yet swiftly closing. 'I hear you, little man. I know what you seek. Ah, you are a clever one indeed ...'

Oh, I cannot take all the credit, this time.

The demon expanded to fill the cavern. The heart was all about, the power seeping in to enliven its flesh. The chains of binding melted away.

Now, it need only reach out and grasp hold.
The strength of a thousand gods awaited it.

Reaching.

Countless grasping, clutching hands.

Finding ... nothing.

Then, a mortal's voice—

From the Ceda, two more words, uttered low and clear, 'Got you.'

A lie! Illusion! Deceit! The demon raged, spun in a conflagration of brown silt, seeking the way out – only to find the tunnel mouth sealed. A smooth surface, fiercely cold, the cold burning – the demon recoiled.

Then, the lake overhead. Upward – fast, faster—

Uursto Hoobutt and his sometime lover, Pinosel, were both drunk as they awaited the fall of Letheras. They had been singing, celebrating the end of their debts, sprawled on the mouldy walkway surrounding Settle Lake amidst nervous rats and head-jutting pigeons.

When the wine ran out, they began bickering.

It had begun innocently enough, as Pinosel loosed a loud sigh and said, 'And now you can marry me.'

It was a moment before her words registered, upon which, bleary-eyed, he looked over in disbelief. 'Marry you? Wha's wrong wi' ow it is now, Cherrytart?'

'What's wrong? It's respectable I want, you fat, flea-bit oaf. I earned it. Respectable. You marry me, Uursto Hoobutt, now that the Edurians done conquered us. Marry me!'

'All right, I will.'

'When?' she demanded, sensing the out he was angling towards.

'When ... when ...' Hah! He had his answer—

And, at that instant, the fetid green water of Settle Lake, sprawled out before them like a turgid plain of seaweed fertilizer, paled into murky white. And clouds began rising from its now frozen surface.

An icy breeze swept over Uursto Hoobutt and Pinosel.

There was a sudden deep thump from somewhere beneath the frozen lake's ice, although not a single crack showed.

Uursto Hoobutt stared, disbelieving, Opened his mouth, then closed it.

Then his shoulders sagged. 'Today, love. I'll marry ya today...'
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When the gods of dust were young
They swam in blood.

Whiteforth’s Dream on the Day of the
Seventh Closure
Fever Witch

Shurq Elalle walked down the tunnel to the crypt door. her thoughts were on Gerun Eberict; her concern was for Tehol Beddict. The Finadd was of the most vicious sort, after all, and Tehol seemed so ... helpless. Oh, fit enough, probably quite capable of running fast and far should the need arise. But it was clear that Tehol had no intention of running anywhere. The silent bodyguards Brys had assigned to him were some comfort, although, the way Gerun worked, they might prove little more than a minor inconvenience.

If that was not troubling enough, there was the ominous silence from Kettle at the dead Azath tower. Was that a result of the child's returning to life, thus severing the link that bound the dead? Or had something terrible happened?

She reached the portal and pushed it open.

Light flared from a lantern, and she saw Ublala seated on the sarcophagus, the lantern on his lap as he adjusted the flame.

She saw his expression and frowned. 'What is wrong, my love?'

'There's no time,' he said, rising, bumping his head on the ceiling, then ducking into a hunch. 'Bad things. I was about to go.' He set the lantern down on the lid. 'Couldn't wait for you any longer. I've got to go.'

'Where?'

'It's the Seregahl,' he mumbled, hands wringing. 'It's bad.'

'The Seregahl? The old Tarthenal gods? Ublala, what are you talking about?'

'I have to go.' He headed for the doorway.

'Ublala, what about Harlest? Where are you going?'

'The old tower.' He was in the tunnel, his words dwindling. 'I love you, Shurq Elalle ...'

She stared at the empty doorway. Love? That sounded ... final.

Shurq Elalle went to the sarcophagus and slid the lid to one side.

'Aarrgh! Hiss! Hiss! Hiss——'

'Stop that, Harlest!' She batted the clawing hands away. 'Get out of there. We have to go——'

'Where?' Harlest slowly sat up, practising baring his long fangs and making growling sounds.

She studied him for a moment, then said, 'A cemetery.'

'Oh,' Harlest sighed, 'that's perfect.'

Sitting in the street, in a pool of darkening blood, the emperor of the Tiste Edur had one hand held against his face and seemed to be trying to claw his eyes out. He still screamed every now and then, a shrill, wordless release of raw anguish.
On the bridge, thirty paces distant, the Letherii soldiers were silent and motionless behind their shields. Other citizens of the city were visible along the edge of the canal on the other side, a row of onlookers, their numbers growing.

Trull Sengar felt a hand settle on his shoulder and he turned to find Uruth, her face twisted with distress.

'Son, something must be done – he's losing his mind—'

Udinaas, the damned slave who had become so essential, so integral to Rhulad – to the young Edur's sanity – had vanished. And now the emperor railed, recognizing no-one, froth on his lips, his cries those of a panicked beast. 'He must be hunted down,' Trull said. 'That slave.'

'There is more—'

Hannan Mosag had moved to stand close to Rhulad, and now spoke, his words carrying easily. 'Emperor Rhulad, hear me! This is a day of dark truths. Your slave, Udinaas, has done what we would expect of a Letherii. Their hearts are filled with treachery and they serve none but themselves. Rhulad, Udinaas has run away.' He paused, then said, 'From you.'

The triumph was poorly hidden as the Warlock King continued. 'He has made himself into your white nectar, and now leaves you in pain. This is a world without faith, Emperor. Only your kin can be trusted—'

Rhulad's head snapped up, features ravaged with hurt, a dark fire in his eyes. 'Trusted? You, Hannan Mosag? My brothers? Mayen? Blood-smeared gold, matted bear fur, sword-blade threaded through bits of human meat and intestines, the emperor staggered upright, chest heaving with emotion. 'You are all as nothing to us. Liars, cheats, betrayers! All of you!' He whipped the sword, spattering red and pink fragments onto the cobbles and against the shins of those standing nearest him, and bared his teeth. 'The emperor shall reflect his people,' he rasped, an ugly grin spreading. 'Reflect, as it must be.'

Trull saw Fear take a step forward, halting as Rhulad's sword shot upward, the point hovering at Fear's throat.

'Oh no, brother, we want nothing from you. We want nothing from any of you. Except obedience. An empire must be shaped, and that shaping shall be by the emperor's hands. Warlock King!'

'Sire?'

The sword slid away from Fear's throat, waved carelessly towards the soldiers blocking the bridge. 'Get rid of them.'

Binadas among them, the K'risnan shambled forward at Hannan Mosag's gesture. Behind them were four slaves with two large leather sacks which they dragged over the cobbles to where the K'risnan waited in a row. Noting the sacks, the Warlock King shook his head. 'Not here, I think. Something ... simpler.' He faced the emperor. 'A moment, sire, in which to prepare. I shall do this myself.'

Uruth tugged Trull round again. 'It is more than just Udinaas,' she said. 'Mayen has escaped.'

He stared at her, not quite comprehending. 'Escaped?'

'We must find her ...'

'She ran away ... from us? From her own people?'

'It is the hunger, Trull. Please.'

After a moment, he pulled away, looked round until he saw a company of warriors grouped behind Theradas and Midik Buhn. Trull walked over to them.

Theradas scowled. 'What do you want, Trull Sengar?'

'The emperor's mother has orders for you and your warriors, Theradas.'
His expression lost its ferocity, was replaced with uncertainty. 'What are they?'

'Mayen is lost, somewhere in the city. She must be found. As for Udinaas ... if you see him ...'

'If we see him he will die terribly, Trull Sengar.'

He betrayed Rhulad. When I warned him ... Trull glanced over at Rhulad. A return from this madness? Not likely. It was too late. 'As you like, Theradas. Just find Mayen.'

He watched them head off, then turned and met Uruth's eyes. She nodded.

The soldiers on the bridge knew what was coming. He saw them duck lower behind their shields. Pointless. Pathetic, yet there was courage here, among these Letherii. Udinaas, I did not ... did not think you would——

A seething, spitting grey wave rose suddenly at the foot of the bridge, churning higher.

The shield wall flinched back, contracted.

The wave plunged forward.

From the banks of the canal to either side citizens shrieked and scattered——

—as the sorcery rushed over the bridge, striking the soldiers in a spray of blood and strips of flesh. A heartbeat, then past, spreading out to wash over the fleeing citizens. Devouring them in writhing hunger.

Trull saw it strike nearby buildings, smashing down doors and bursting through shuttered windows. Screams.

'Enough!' Rhulad roared, stepping towards Hannan Mosag, who lowered his arms, which looked twisted and gnarled.

The sorcery vanished, leaving only heaps of bones, polished shields and armour on the bridge. From the sundered buildings, silence. Hannan Mosag sagged, and Trull saw how misshapen he had become beneath his furs.

The emperor suddenly giggled. 'So eager, Hannan Mosag! Your secret god is so eager!'

Secret god? Trull looked over at Fear, and found his brother staring back.

'Brothers,' the emperor cried, waving his sword, 'we march to the Eternal Domicile! To the throne! None can deny us! And should they dare, their flesh shall be rendered from their bones! They will know pain. They will suffer! Brothers, this shall be a day of suffering – he seemed to find sweetness in tasting the word – 'for all who would oppose us! Now, walk with your Sire!'

He is ... transformed. Lost to us. And all for the treachery of a slave ... An overgrown yard, just visible through the old, battered stones of the gateway. From the skeletal, twisted branches of leaning trees, something like steam billowed upward. There was no-one about. Iron Bars slowed his steps and looked back up the street. That manservant had yet to appear from beyond the corner of the building he had jogged round moments earlier.

'Fine, then,' the Avowed muttered, drawing his sword, 'we'll just have to see for ourselves ...' He approached the gateway, strode onto the winding stone path. The squat, square tower was opposite, stained and leaning and dead. From his left, the sounds of stones grinding together, the snap of wood, and thumps that trembled the ground beneath his feet. Over there, then.

Iron Bars walked into the yard.

Round a mud-smeared barrow, over a fallen tree, to come to a halt ten paces from what had once been an extensive, elongated mound, now torn apart and steaming, mud sliding down as five huge figures dragged themselves free. Flesh darkened by peat, skin mapped by the tracks of countless roots, dangling hair the colour of copper. Tugging weapons free – massive two-handed swords of black, polished wood.
The five were chanting.

Iron Bars grunted. 'Tartheno Toblakai. Hood-damned Fenn. Well, this won't be fun.'

One of the warriors heard him and fixed black, murky eyes on the Avowed. The chant ceased, and it spoke. 'A child, my brothers.'

'The one who spoke through the earth?' another asked.

'I don't know. Does it matter?'

'It would not help us, that child. We have promised a terrible death.'

'Then let us—'

The Toblakai's words were cut short as Iron Bars rushed forward.

A roar, a keening sweep of a wooden sword flung into the path of the Avowed's own weapon, which slid under, point gliding back round and over the warrior's enormous wrist, following in its swishing wake, to intercept the instinctive back-swing. Slashing through hard, thick skin, the edge scoring against muscle tough as wood.

A huge presence lunging in from the Avowed's right. But Iron Bars continued forward, ducking beneath the first Toblakai's arm, then pivoting round as the second attacker slammed into the first warrior. Disengaging his sword, thrusting upward, seeking the soft space between the lower mandibles — a jerk of the giant's head, and the Avowed's sword point speared its right eye, plunging deep in a spurt of what seemed to be swamp water.

A shriek.

Iron Bars found himself scrambling over the ruined barrow, the other Toblakai stumbling as they swung round to face him again — with a heap of boulders, mud and ripped-up roots in the way.

The Avowed leapt down onto level ground once more.

Black blood dripping from one arm, a hand pressed over a gouged socket and burst eye, the Toblakai he had attacked was staggering back.

The other four were spreading out, silent now, intent.

Until they could edge round the entire barrow, their approach would be difficult, the footing treacherous.

One down. Iron Bars was pleased—

And then the fifth one shook itself and straightened. One-eyed, but turning to face the Avowed once more.

'You hurt our brother,' one said.

'There's more to come,' Iron Bars said.

'It's not good, hurting gods.'

_Gods_

'We are the Seregahl,' the lead Toblakai said. 'Before you hurt us, you might have begged for mercy. You might have knelt in worship, and perhaps we would have accepted you. But not now.'

'No,' the Avowed agreed, 'I suppose not.'

'That is all you would say?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing else comes to mind.'
'You are frowning. Why?'

'Well, I've already killed a god today,' Iron Bars said. 'If I'd known this was going to be a day for killing
gods, I might have paced myself better.'

The five were silent for a moment, then the first one said, 'What god have you killed this day, stranger?'

'The Pack.'

A hiss from the Toblakai on the far right. 'The ones that escaped us! The fast ones!'

'They were fast,' Iron Bars said, nodding. 'But not, it seems, fast enough.'

'Divers.'

'Yes,' the Avowed said. 'Six of them ... and only five of you.'

The first Toblakai said to its brothers, 'Careful with this one, then.'

'We are free,' the one-eyed one growled. 'We must kill this one to remain so.'

'True. This is cause enough.'

They began advancing again.

Iron Bars inwardly sighed. At least he'd made them nervous. And that might serve to keep him alive a little
while longer. Then again, he reminded himself, he'd faced worse.

Well, maybe not. Maybe? Who am I kidding?

He shifted his weight, rising to the balls of his feet, readying himself to begin the dance. The dance of
staying alive.

Until help came.

Help ... from a short, pudgy, balding man. Oh, Hood, Iron Bars, just try and stay alive as long as you can –
maybe they'll die of exhaustion.

'Look,' one whined, 'he's smiling.'

Unseen storms, raging through the streets, battering the city. Bugg's head was aching with the chaos of power,
of the clash of fierce wills. He could still feel the impotent fury of the ancient god trapped beneath the ice of
Settle Lake – the Ceda's trap had worked well indeed, and even now the ice was slowly thickening, closing in
around the creature in the sealed cavern, and before the sun set it would find itself encased in the ice, feeling
the unbearable cold seeping into its being, stealing sensation, stealing its life.

Good things came of being nice to a Jaghut, something the T'lan Imass never understood.

Bugg made his way towards the end of the alley beyond which the old Azath tower was visible. He hoped
Iron Bars had not done anything precipitous, such as entering the yard alone. Kettle would have warned him
against that in any case. With luck, the child's buried ally was buried no longer. The Avowed was intended to
give support, that was all, and only if necessity demanded it. This wasn't that man's fight, after all—

His steps slowed suddenly, as a cold dread swept through him. He quested out with his senses, and detected
movement where there should not be movement, an awakening of wills, intentions burning bright, threads of
fate converging ...

The manservant turned round, and began running.

Four of his ablest killers approached Gerun Eberict from up the street. The Finadd raised a hand to halt those
behind him.
'Finadd,' the squad leader said upon arriving, 'we had some luck. The brother at the far lookout was flushed out into the street by a pack of Edur. He took six of the bastards down with him. Once the Edur left I sent Crillo out to make sure he was dead—'

'He was cut to pieces,' Crillo interrupted, grinning.

'—and he was at that,' the squad leader resumed, with a glare at Crillo, whose grin broadened.

'And the other?' Gerun asked, scanning the vicinity. It wouldn't do to run into a company of Tiste Edur right now.

The squad leader scowled. 'Crillo got 'im. A damned lucky knife-throw—'

'No luck at all,' Crillo cut in. 'Poor bastard never knew it was coming—'

'Because he'd caught out the rest of us—'

'They're both dead?' Gerun asked. Then shook his head. 'Luck indeed. It should not have been that easy. All right, that leaves the one on the roof. He'll have been looking for signals from his brothers and he won't be seeing them now. Meaning, he'll know we're coming.'

'It's just one man, Finadd—'

'A Shavankrats, Crillo. Don't get overconfident just because the Errant's nudged our way so far. All right, we stay as a group now—' He stopped, then gestured everyone low.

Thirty paces ahead and coming from a side alley, a lone figure ran into the street. A Tiste Edur woman. Like a startled deer she froze, head darting. Before she had a chance to look their way, she heard something behind her and bolted. A metallic flash in her right hand revealed that she carried a knife of some sort.

Gerun Eberict grunted. She was heading the same direction as he was. An undefended Tiste Edur woman. He would enjoy her before killing her. Once his other business was out of the way, of course. Might let the lads have a go, too. Crillo first, for the work he'd already done getting rid of Brys's damned guards.

The Finadd straightened. 'After her, then, since it's on the way.'

Dark laughs from his troop.

'Take point, Crillo.'

They set out.

Faces behind shutters at second floor windows – the whole city cowered like half-drowned rats. It was disgusting. But they were showing him, weren't they, showing him how few deserved to live. This new empire of the Tiste Edur would be little different, he suspected. There would need to be controllers, deliverers of swift and incorruptible justice. People would continue to be rude. Would continue to be ugly. Would continue to litter the streets. And there would still be people who were just plain ugly, earning the mercy of Gerun's knife. He would have his work, as before, to make this city a place of beauty—

They had reached the place where the woman had emerged from the alley. Crillo was turning round, pointing in the direction she had run, when a spear struck his head, spinning him round in a mass of blood, brain and shattered bone.

From the alley rushed a score or more Tiste Edur warriors.

'Take them!' Gerun Eberict commanded, and was pleased to see his men surge forward.

Past the Finadd, who then stepped back.

I can always get more men.
And ran.

Onto the trail of the woman. Coincidentally, of course. His real target was Tehol Beddict. He'd take her down first, leave her trussed and gagged close by, to await his return. More difficult, now, since he was alone. Tehol's bodyguard would be a challenge, but when one's sword edges were painted with poison, even the slightest cut would be sufficient to kill the man. Quickly.

There!

The woman had been hiding in a niche twenty paces ahead. She bolted at his approach.

Gerun broke into a sprint.

Oh, he wanted her now. She was beautiful. He saw the knife in her hand and laughed. It was a fish knife – he'd seen the Letherii slaves using them in that Hiroth village.

Running hard, he quickly gained on her.

Across another street, into another alley.

Close, now, to Tehol Beddict's home. But he could reach her in time – five more steps—

'There's trouble.'

Stunned, Tehol Beddict turned. 'Not mute after all ...' His words trailed away at seeing the unease in the bodyguard's eyes. 'Serious trouble, then.'

'My brothers are both dead. Gerun Eberict is coming.' 'This city's full of Edur,' Tehol said, throwing both hands up to encompass a vast sweep of rooftops, tiers and bridges. 'Ranging round like wolves. And then there's those real wolves—'

'It's Gerun.'

Tehol studied the man. 'All right. He's on the way for a visit. What should we do about it?'

'They can come up the walls, the way your thief friend does. We need to get below. We need a place with one door and only one door.'

'Well, there's the warehouse opposite – I know it quite well—'

'Let's go, then.'

The guard went to the hatch, knelt at its edge and cautiously looked down into the room below. He waved Tehol forward, then began the descent.

Moments later they stood in the room. The guard headed to the entrance, tugged the hanging back a fraction and peered outside. 'Looks clear. I'll lead, to that wall—'

'The warehouse wall. There's a watchman, Chalas—'

'If he's still there I'd be surprised.'

'You have a point. All right. When we get to the wall, we head right. Round the corner and in through the office door, the first one we'll come to. The main sliding doors will be barred.'

'And if the office door is locked?'

'I know where the key's hidden.'

The guard nodded.

They stepped into the narrow corridor, turned left and approached the street.
Three more strides.

She threw a desperate look over her shoulder, then lunged forward in a sudden burst of speed.

Gerun snarled, reaching out with one hand.

A whimpering sound escaped her, and she raised the knife just as she reached the mouth of the alley.

And thrust it into her own chest.

Gerun was a hand's width behind her, coming opposite a side corridor between two warehouses, when he was grasped hard, pulled off his feet, and yanked into the dark corridor.

A fist crashed into his face, shattering his nose. Stunned, he was helpless as the sword was plucked from his hand, the helmet dragged from his head.

The massive hands lifted him and slammed him hard against a wall. Once, twice, three times, and with each impact the back of Gerun's head crunched against the cut stone. Then he was smashed onto the greasy cobbles, breaking his right shoulder and clavicle. Consciousness slipped away. When it returned a moment later he was vaguely aware of a huge, hulking figure crouched over him in the gloom.

A massive hand snapped down to cover Gerun's mouth and the figure froze.

The sound of running feet in the alleyway, a dozen, maybe more, all moccasined, the rasp of weapons. Then past.

Blearily, Gerun Eberict stared up at an unfamiliar face. A mixed blood. Half Tarthenal, half Nerek.

The huge man crouched closer. 'For what you did to her,' he said in a hoarse whisper. 'And don't think it'll be quick ...'

The hand over his mouth, Gerun could say nothing. Could ask no questions. And he had plenty of those.

It was clear, however, that the mixed blood wasn't interested.

And that, Gerun said to himself, was too bad.

Tehol was three paces behind the guard, who was nearing the warehouse wall, when a scraping noise alerted him. He looked to his right, in time to see an Edur woman stagger out from an alley. A knife handle jutted from her chest, and blood was streaming down.

Dumb misery in her eyes, she saw Tehol. Reached out a red-stained hand, then fell, landing on her left side and skidding slightly on the cobbles before coming to a stop.

'Guard!' Tehol hissed, changing direction. 'She's hurt—'

From the warehouse wall: 'No!'

As Tehol reached her, he looked up to see Tiste Edur warriors rushing from the alley mouth. A spear sailed towards him—

—and was intercepted by the guard lunging in from Tehol's left side. The weapon caught the man under his left arm, snapping ribs as it sank deep into his chest. With a soft groan, the guard stumbled past, then sprawled onto the street, blood pouring from his mouth and nose.

Tehol went perfectly still.

The Edur ranged out cautiously, until they formed a rough circle around Tehol and the dead woman. One checked on the bodyguard, turning the man over with one foot. It was clear that the man was also dead.

In trader tongue, one of the Tiste Edur said, 'You have killed her.'
Tehol shook his head. ‘No. She ran into view, already wounded. I was coming to ... to help. I am sorry ...’

The warrior sneered, then said to the younger Edur beside him, ‘Midik, see if this Letherii is armed.’

The one named Midik stepped up to Tehol. Reached out to pat him down, then snorted. ‘He's wearing rags, Theradas. There is no place he could hide anything.’

A third warrior said, ‘He killed Mayen. We should take him back—’

‘No,’ Theradas growled. He sheathed his sword and pushed Midik to one side as he came close to Tehol. ‘Look at this one,’ he said in a growl. ‘See the insolence in his eyes.’

‘You do poorly at reading a Letherii’s expression,’ Tehol said sadly.

‘That is too bad, for you.’

‘Yes,’ Tehol replied, ‘I imagine—’

Theradas struck him with a gloved fist.

Pitching Tehol's head back, his nose cracking loudly. He bent over, both hands to his face, then a foot slammed down diagonally against his right shin, snapping both bones. He fell. A heel crunched down on his chest, breaking ribs.

Tehol could feel his body trying to curl up as heels and fists battered at him. A foot smashed down on his left cheek, crushing bone and bursting that eye. White fire blazed in his brain, swiftly darkening to murky black.

Another kick dislocated his left shoulder.

Beneath yet another heel, his left elbow was crushed. As kicks hammered into his gut, he tried to draw his knees up, only to feel them stamped on and broken. Something burst low in his gut and he felt himself spilling out.

Then a heel landed on the side of his head.

Fifty paces up the street, Hull Beddict approached. He saw a crowd of Tiste Edur, and it was clear they were kicking someone to death. A sudden uneasiness in his stomach, he quickened his pace. There were bodies, he saw, beyond the circle. A soldier in the garb of a palace guard, the shaft of a spear jutting from him. And ... an Edur woman.

‘Oh, Errant, what has happened here?’

He made to run—

—and found his path blocked.

A Nerek, and a moment later Hull Beddict recognized him. One of Buruk the Pale's servants.

Frowning, wondering how he had come to be here, Hull moved to step around the man – who sidestepped once more to block him.

‘What is this?’

‘You have been judged, Hull Beddict,’ the Nerek said. ‘I am sorry.’

‘Judged? Please, I must—’

‘You chose to walk with the Tiste Edur emperor,’ the Nerek said. ‘You chose ... betrayal.’

‘An end to Lether, yes – what of it? No more will this damned kingdom destroy people like the Nerek, and the Tarthenal—’
'We thought we knew your heart, Hull Beddict, but now we see that it has turned black. It is poisoned, because forgiveness is not within you.'

‘Forgiveness?’ He reached out to push the Nerek aside. *They're beating someone. To death. I think—*

From behind, two knives slid into his back, one under each shoulder blade, angling upward.

Arching in shock, Hull Beddict stared at the Nerek standing before him, and saw that the young man was weeping. *What? Why—*

He sank to his knees, weakness rising through him, and the storm of thoughts – the emotions and desires that had haunted him for years – they too weakened, fell away into a grey, calm mist. The mist rising yet higher, a sudden coldness in his muscles. *It is ... it is ... so ...*

Hull Beddict pitched forward, onto his face, but he never felt the impact with the cobbles.

‘Stop. Please—’

The Tiste Edur turned, to see a Letherii step from where he had been hiding, round the corner of the warehouse. Nondescript, limping, a knout tucked into a rope belt, the man edged forward and continued in the trader tongue, 'He's never hurt no-one. Don't kill him, please. I saw, you see.'

‘You saw what?’ Theradas demanded.

‘The woman, she stabbed herself. Look at the knife, see for yourself.' Chalas wrung his hands, eyes on the bleeding, motionless form of Tehol. 'Please, don't hurt him no more.'

‘You must learn,' Theradas said, baring his teeth. 'We heed our emperor's words. This shall be a day of suffering, old man. Now, leave us, or invite the same fate.'

Chalas surprised them, lunging forward to drape himself over Tehol, shifting to protect as much of him as he could.

Midik Buhn laughed.

Blows rained down, more savage than ever, and it was not long before Chalas lost consciousness. A half-dozen more kicks dislodged the man from Tehol, until the two were lying side by side. With sudden impatience, Theradas slammed his heel down on a head, hard enough to collapse the skull and crush the brain.

Standing on the far side of the bridge, Turudal Brizad felt the malign sorcery wash over him. The soldiers barricading the bridge had died in the grey conflagration a moment earlier, and now it seemed the terrible sorcery would reach out into the rest of the city. Into the nearby buildings, and, for the Errant, enough was enough.

He nudged the wild power coursing through those buildings, angling it ever downward, slipping it past occupied rooms, downward, past the hidden tunnels of the Rat Catchers' Guild where so many citizens huddled, and into the insensate mud and clays of the long dead swamp. Where it could do nothing, and was slowed, slowed, then trapped.

It was clear, a moment later, that the Warlock King had not detected the manipulation, as the magic was surrendered, the poisoning conduit from the Crippled God closed once more. Hannan Mosag's flesh would not suffer much more of that, fortunately.

Not that it would matter.

He watched as a score of Tiste Edur set off into the city, seeking, no doubt, the fleeing woman from their tribe. But nothing good would come of it, the Errant knew. Indeed, a most egregious error was in the offing, and he grieved for that.

Reaching with his senses, he gained a vision of an overgrown, broken-up yard surrounding a squat tower, and watched in wonder and awe as a lone figure wove a deadly dance in the midst of five enraged Toblakai.
gods. Extraordinary – a scene the Errant would never forget. But it could not last much longer, he knew.

Nothing good ever did, alas.

Blinking, he saw that the Tiste Edur emperor was now leading his kin across the bridge. On their way to the Eternal Domicile.

Turudal Brizad pushed himself into motion once more.

The Eternal Domicile, a conjoining of destinations, for yet another sequence of tragic events to come. Today, the empire is reborn. In violence and blood, as with all births. And what, when this day is done, shall we find lying in our lap? Eyes opening onto this world?

The Errant began walking, staying ahead of the Tiste Edur, and feeling, deep within him, the lurching, stumbling measure of time, the countless heartbeats, merging one and all – no need, finally, for a nudge, a push or a pull. No need, it seemed, for anything. He would but witness, now.

He hoped.

Seated cross-legged in the street, the lone High Mage of the Crimson Guard present in this fell city, Corlo Orothos, once of Unta in the days before the empire, cocked his head at the heavy, thumping feet of someone approaching from behind. He risked opening his eyes, then raised a hand in time to halt the newcomer.

'Hello, half-blood,' he said. 'Have you come to worship your gods?'

The giant figure looked down at Corlo. 'Is it too late?' he asked.

'No, they're still alive. Only one man opposes them, and not for much longer. I'm doing all I can, but it's no easy thing to confuse gods.'

The Tarthenal half-blood frowned. 'Do you know why we pray to the Seregahl?'

An odd question. 'To gain their favour?'

'No,' Ublala replied, 'we pray for them to stay away. And now,' he added, 'they're here. That's bad.'

'Well, what do you intend to do about it?'

Ublala squinted down at Corlo, said nothing.

After a moment, the High Mage nodded. 'Go on, then.'

He watched the huge man lumber towards the gateway. Just inside, he paused beside a tree, reached up and broke free a branch as thick as one of Corlo's thighs. Hefting it in both hands, the half-blood jogged into the yard.

It was tearing him apart, striving to burst free of his skeletal cage, the minuscule, now terribly abused muscles. In their journey across Letheras, they'd left thirty or more dead Soletaken in their wake. And six Tiste Edur who'd come up from the docks eager for a fight.

They'd taken wounds – no, the remnant that was Udinaas corrected, I've taken wounds. I should be dead. I'm cut to pieces. Bitten, torn, gouged. But that damned Wyval won't surrender. It needs me still... for a few moments longer.

Through a red haze, the old Azath tower and its yard came into view, and a surge of eagerness from the Wyval flooded him.

The Master needed help. All was not yet lost.

In a blur of motion, Udinaas was past the strange man sitting cross-legged on the street – he caught the sudden jerk of surprise from the man as they swept by. A moment later, plunging through the gateway.
Into the yard.

In time to see a mortal Tarthenal half-blood rushing to close on a fight where a lone swordsman was surrounded by the Toblakai gods, moments from buckling under a hail of blows.

Then, past them all.

To the barrow of the Master. The churned, steaming earth. Diving forward with a piercing, reptilian scream – and into the hot darkness, down, clawing, scraping – tearing clear from the mortal's flesh, the body the Wyval had used for so long, the body it had hidden within – clambering free at last, massive, scaled and sleek-hided, talons plunging into the soil—

* * *

The child Kettle squealed as the creature, winged and as big as an ox, rushed past her on all fours. A thumping splash, water spraying in a broad fan that rose, and rose, then slapped down on the now churning pool. Foam, a snaking red-purple tail slithering down then vanishing in the swirling maelstrom.

She then heard a thud behind her and spun on the slick mud of the bank, the two swords still in her hands—

—to see a badly torn body, a man, lying face down. The shattered ends of long bones jutting from his arms and legs, blood pulsing slowly from ruptured veins. And, settling atop him, a wraith, descending like a shadow to match the contorted body beneath it. A shadowy face looking up at Kettle, the rasp of words—

'Child, we need your help.'

She looked back over her shoulder – the surface of the pool was growing calm once more. 'Oh, what do you want me to do? It's all going wrong—'

'Not as wrong as you think. This man, this Letherii. Help him, he's dying. I cannot hold him together much longer. He is dying, and he does not deserve to die.'

She crawled closer. 'What can I do?'

'The blood within you, child. A drop or two, no more than that. The blood, child, that has returned you to life. Please ...'

'You are a ghost. Why would you have me do this for him – and not for you?'

The wraith's red eyes thinned as it studied her. 'Do not tempt me.'

Kettle looked down at the swords in her hands. Then she set one down and brought the freed hand to the gleaming blue edge of the one she still held. Slid her palm a bit along the edge, then lifted her hand to study the result. A long line of blood, a deep, perfect cut. 'Oh, it's sharp.'

'Here, push him onto his back. Lay your wounded palm on his chest.'

Kettle moved forward.

* * *

A blow had broken his left arm, and the agony as Iron Bars dodged around and between the bellowing Seregahl sent white flashes through his brain. Half blinded, he wielded his battered, blunted sword on instinct alone, meeting blow after blow – he needed a moment free, a few heartbeats in which to recover, to clamp down on the pain—

But he'd run out of that time. Another blow got through, the strange wooden sword slicing as if glass-edged into his left hip. The leg on that side gave out beneath the biting wound. He looked up through sweat-stinging eyes, and saw the one-eyed Seregahl towering directly over him, teeth bared in triumph.

Then a tree branch struck the god in the head. Against its left temple, hard enough to snap the head right over
to bounce from the opposite shoulder. The grin froze, and the Toblakai staggered. A second impact caught it,
this time coming from behind, up into the back of the skull, the branch exploding into splinters. The god bent
forward—

—as a knee drove up into its crotch – and forearms hammered its back, pushing it further down, the knee
rising again, this time to crunch against the god's face.

The grin, Iron Bars saw from where he crouched, was entirely gone now.

The Avowed rolled to one side a moment before the Toblakai landed atop him. Rolled, and rolled, stumbling
to his feet finally to pivot round. And, rising to his name above the agony in his hip, straightening. Once more
facing the Seregahl.

Where, it seemed, one of their own kind was now fighting them – a mortal Tarthenal, who had wrapped his
huge arms around one of the gods from behind, trapping its arms to its sides as he squeezed. The remaining
three gods had staggered back, as if in shock, and the moment was, to the Avowed's eyes, suddenly frozen.

Two, then three heartbeats.

The cloudiness cleared from the Avowed's eyes. A flicker of energy returned to his exhausted limbs. The
pain faded away.

That mortal Tarthenal was moments from dying, as the other three stirred awake and moved forward.

Iron Bars raced to intercept them.

The odds were getting better.

Two huddled shapes on the street. Tiste Edur standing around, still kicking, still breaking bones. One stamped
down, and brains sprayed out onto the cobbles.

Bugg slowed to a stagger, his face twisting with grief, then rage.

He roared.

Heads turned.

And the manservant unleashed what had remained hidden and quiescent within him for so long.

Fourteen Tiste Edur, standing, all reached up to clamp their ears – but the gesture was never completed, as
thirteen of them imploded, as if beneath vast pressure, in horrible contractions of flesh, the wild spurt of blood
and fluids, skulls collapsing inward.

Imploded, only to explode outward a moment later. In bloody pieces, spattering the warehouse wall and out
across the street.

The fourteenth Tiste Edur, the one who had just crushed a head beneath his heel, was lifted into the air.
Writhing, his eyes bulging horribly, wastes streaming down his legs.

As Bugg stalked forward.

Until he was standing before Theradas Buhn of the Hiroth. He stared up at the warrior, at his bloated face, at
the agony in his eyes.

Trembling, Bugg said, 'You, I am sending home ... not your home. My home.' A gesture, and the Tiste Edur
vanished.

Into Bugg's warren, away, then down, down, ever down.

Into depthless darkness, where the portal opened once more, flinging Theradas Buhn into icy, black water.

Where the pressure, immense and undeniable, embraced him.
Fatally.

Bugg's trembling slowed. His roar had been heard, he knew. Upon the other side of the world, it had been heard. And heads had swung round. Immortal hearts had quickened.

'No matter,' he whispered.

Then moved forward, down to kneel beside the motionless bodies.

He gathered one of those bodies into his arms.

Rose, and walked away.

The Eternal Domicile. A title of such profound conceit, as thoroughly bound into the arrogance of the Letherii as the belief in their own immutable destiny. Manifest rights to all things, to ownership, to the claiming of all they perceived, the unconscionable, brazen arrogance of it all, as if a thousand gods stood at their backs, burdened with gifts for the chosen.

Trull Sengar could only wonder, what bred such certainties? What made a people so filled with rectitude and intransigence? Perhaps all that is needed ... is power. A shroud of poison filling the air, seeping into every pore of every man, woman and child. A poison that twisted the past to suit the mores of the present, illuminating in turn an inevitable and righteous future. A poison that made intelligent people blithely disregard the ugly truths of past errors in judgement, of horrendous, brutal debacles that had stained red the hands of their forefathers. A poison that entrenched the stupidity of dubious traditions, and brought misery and suffering upon countless victims.

Power, then. The very same power we are about to embrace. Sisters have mercy upon our people.

The emperor of the Tiste Edur stood before the grand entrance to the Eternal Domicile. Mottled sword in his right, glittering hand. Dusty bearskin riding shoulders grown massively broad with the weight of gold. Old blood staining his back in map patterns, as if he was redrawing the world. Hair now long, ragged and heavy with oily filth.

Trull was standing behind him, and so could not see his brother's eyes. But he knew, should he look into them now, he would see the destiny he feared, he would see the poison coursing unopposed, and he would see the madness born of betrayal.

It would have taken little, he knew. The simple reaching out for a nondescript, sad-eyed slave, the closing of hands, to lift Rhulad upright, to guide him back into sanity. That, and nothing more.

Rhulad turned to face them. 'The doors stand unbarred.'

Hannan Mosag said, 'Someone waits within, sire. I sense ... something.'

'What do you ask of us, Warlock King?'

'Permit me and my K'risnan to enter first, to see what awaits us. In the corridor ...'

Rhulad's eyes narrowed, then he waved them forward, and added, 'Fear, Trull, Binadas, join us. We shall follow immediately behind.'

Hannan Mosag in the lead, the K'risnan and the slaves dragging the two sacks immediately behind him, then Rhulad and his brothers, all approached the doors of the Eternal Domicile.

Standing just outside the throne room's entrance, Brys Beddict saw movement down the corridor, on this side of the motionless form of the Ceda. The Champion reached for his sword, then let his hand fall away as the First Consort, Turudal Brizad, emerged from the shadows, approaching nonchalantly, his expression calm.

'I did not,' Brys said in a low voice, 'expect to see you again, First Consort.'

Turudal's soft eyes lifted past Brys to look into the throne room beyond. 'Who waits, Champion?'
'The king, his concubine. The First Eunuch and the Chancellor. And six of my guards.'

Turudal nodded. 'Well, we will not have to wait much longer. The Tiste Edur are but moments behind me.'

'How fares the city?'

'There has been fighting, Brys Beddict. Loyal soldiers lie dead in the streets. Among them, Moroch Nevath.'

'And Gerun Eberict? What of him?'

Turudal cocked his head, then frowned. 'He pursues ... a woman.'

Brys studied the man. 'Who are you, Turudal Brizad?'

The eyes met his own. 'Today, a witness. We have come, after all, to the day of the Seventh Closure. An end, and a beginning—'

Brys raised a hand to silence the man, then took a step past him.

The Ceda was stirring in the hallway beyond. Then, rising to his feet, adjusting his grimy, creased robes, he lifted the lenses to his face and settled them in place.

Turudal Brizad turned to join Brys. 'Ah, yes.'

The silhouettes of a group of tall figures had appeared at the distant doors, which were now open.

'The Ceda ...'

'He has done very well, thus far.'

Brys shot the First Consort a baffled look. 'What do you mean? He has done ... nothing.'

Brows rose. 'No? He has annihilated the sea-god, the demon chained by Hannan Mosag. And he has been preparing for this moment for days now. See where he stands? See the tile he has painted beneath himself? A tile from which all the power of the Cedance shall pass, upward, into his hands.'

The gloom of the hallway vanished, a white, glowing light suffusing the dusty air.

Revealing the row of Tiste Edur now facing the Ceda, less than fifteen paces between them.

The Edur in the centre of the row spoke. 'Ceda Kuru Qan. The kingdom you serve has fallen. Step aside. The emperor wishes to claim his throne.'

'Fallen?' The Ceda's voice was thin in comparison, almost quavering. 'Relevant? Not in the least. I see you, Hannan Mosag, and your K'risnan. I feel you gathering your power. For your mad emperor to claim the throne of Lether, you shall have to pass through me.'

'It is pointless, old man,' Hannan Mosag said. 'You are alone. All your fellow mages are dead. Look at you. Half blind, barely able to stand—'

'Seek out the demon you chained in the sea, Warlock King.'

From this distance, Trull could not make out Hannan Mosag's expression, but there was sudden fury in his voice. 'You have done this?'

'Letherii are well versed in using greed to lay traps,' Kuru Qan said. 'You’ll not have its power today, nor ever again.'

'For that,' the Warlock King said in a growl, 'you will—'

The white mist exploded, the roar shaking ceiling and walls, and thundered forward, striking the Tiste Edur warlocks.
Ten paces behind Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan, Trull Sengar cried out, ducking away at the blazing concussion, his brothers following suit. He heard screams, cut short, then a body skidded across the polished floor to thud against Trull's feet, knocking him down—

He found himself staring at a K'risnan, burnt beyond recognition, blackened slime melting away from split bones. Rising to his hands and knees, Trull looked up.

Only two Edur remained standing, battling the raging sorcery of the Ceda. Hannan Mosag and Binadas. The other K'risnan were all dead, as were the four slaves who had been crouching beside the two sacks.

As Trull stared, he saw Binadas flung to the ground as if by a thousand fists of light. Blood sprayed—

Then Fear was diving forward, skidding on the bucking tiles to within reach of his brother. Hands closed on a wrist and an ankle, then Fear was dragging Binadas back, away from the conflagration.

Hannan Mosag bellowed. Swirling grey tendrils sprang up from the floor, entwining the raging motes of fire. A blinding detonation—

Then darkness once more, slowly giving way to gloom.

Hannan Mosag, standing alone now, facing the Ceda.

A heartbeat—

Kuru Qan struck again, a moment before Hannan Mosag's own attack. The two powers collided three paces in front of the Warlock King—

—and Trull saw Hannan Mosag stagger, sheathed in blood, his hands reaching back, groping, the left one landing atop one of the sacks and clutching tight. The other hand then found the other and grasped hold. The Warlock King steadied himself, then began to straighten once more against the onslaught.

The sorcery pouring from the Ceda had twisted the marble walls, until they began to bleed white liquid. The ceiling overhead had sagged, its paints scorched away, its surfaces polished and slick. Brys had stared, disbelieving, as the magic swatted away whatever defensive spells the K'risnan had raised before themselves, swatted it away in an instant, to rush in and slaughter them.

Against Hannan Mosag himself, it battered again and again, driving ever closer.

Then the Warlock King riposted, and the pressure in that hallway pushed Brys and Turudal back a step, then two.

All at once, the two battling powers annihilated each other in a flash, the thunder of the detonation sending cracks through the floor, bucking tiles into the air – everywhere but where the two sorcerers stood.

Dusty silence.

The marble columns to either side were burning in patches, melting from the top down like massive tallow candles. Overhead, the ceiling groaned, as if moments from collapse.

'Now,' Turudal Brizad hoarsely whispered, 'we will see the measure of Hannan Mosag's desperation ...'

The sorceries roared to life once again, and Brys saw the Warlock King stagger.

The Ceda, Kuru Qan, the small, ancient man, stood unscathed, and the magic raging from him in wave after wave seemed to Brys to be that of a god.

The Warlock King would not survive this. And, once he fell, this ancient, primal sorcery would sweep out, taking the emperor and his kin, devouring them one and all. Outward, into the city. An entire people, the Tiste Edur, would be annihilated – Brys could sense its hunger, its outrage, its cold lust for vengeance – this was the power of the Letherii, the Cedance, the voice of destiny, a thing terrible beyond comprehension—
Trull saw the Warlock King steady himself, his hands gripping the sacks, and power began to flow from them, up his arms, as he began, slowly, to push back the Ceda's attack.

Those arms twisted, grew into horrific, misshapen appendages. Hannan Mosag's torso began to bend, the spine curving, writhing like a snake on hot stones, new muscles rising, knobs of bone pushing at the skin. He shrieked as the power burgeoned through him.

A grey wave rising, battering at the white fire, tearing its edges, pushing harder, filling half the long, colonnaded hallway, closing on the Ceda, who stood unmoving, head tilted up, the strange lenses flashing before his eyes. Standing, as if studying the storm clawing towards him.

Brys stared in horror as the foul sorcery of the Edur edged ever closer to the Ceda, towering over the small man. He saw a nearby column turn porous, then crumble to dust. A section of the ceiling it had been supporting collapsed downward, only to vanish in a cloudy haze and land in a thud of billowing dust.

Kuru Qan was looking up at the tagging wall looming over him.

Brys saw him cock his head, the slightest of gestures.

A renewed burst of white fire, expanding outward from where he stood, surging up and outward, hammering into the grey wall.

Driving fissures through it, tearing enormous pieces away to whip like rent sails up towards the malformed ceiling.

Brys heard the Warlock King's shriek, as the white flames roared towards him.

Trull felt himself dragged to his feet. He turned, stared into Fear's face. His brother was shouting something—

—but the Warlock King was failing. Crumbling beneath the onslaught. Whatever energies he had drawn upon from what was hidden within the sacks were ebbing. Insufficient to counter the Ceda. The Warlock King was about to die – and with him – all of us ...

'Trull!' Fear shook him. 'Along the wall.' He pointed. 'There, edge forward. For a throw—'

A throw? He stared at the spear in his hands, the Blackwood glistening with beads of red sweat.

'From the shadows, Trull, behind that pillar! From the shadows, Trull!'

It was pointless. Worse, he did not want to even try. What if he succeeded? What would be won?

'Trull! Do this or we all die! Mother, Father – Mayen – her child! All the children of the Edur!'

Trull stared into Fear's eyes, and did not recognize what he saw in them. His brother shook him again, then pushed him along the wall, into the bathing heat of the sorcery battering down at Hannan Mosag, then behind a friable column of what had once been solid marble.

Into cool shadow. Absurdly cool shadow. Trull stumbled forward at a final push from his brother. He was brought up against a warped, rippled wall – and could see, now, the Ceda. Less than seven paces distant. Head tilted upward, watching his assault on the Warlock King's failing defences.

Tears blurred Trull's eyes. He did not want to do this. But they will kill us all. Every one of us, leaving not a single Tiste Edur alive. I know this. In my heart I know this. They will take our lands, our riches. They will sow salt on our burial grounds. They will sweep us into history's forgotten worlds. I ... I know this.

He raised his spear, balanced now in his right hand. Was still for a moment, breath held, then two quick strides, arm flashing forward, the weapon flying straight and true.

Piercing the Ceda in his side, just below his left ribs, its solid weight and the momentum from Trull's arm driving the point deep.
The Ceda spun with the impact, left leg buckling, and fell – away from the painted tile—
—that suddenly shattered.

The white fire vanished, and darkness swept in from all sides.

Numbed, Brys stepped forward—
—and was stayed by the hand of Turadal Brizad. 'No, Champion. He's gone.'

_The Ceda. Kuru Qan. My friend ..._

Kettle sat in the mud, staring down at the man's face. It looked to be a kind face, especially with the eyes closed in sleep. The scars were fading, all across his lean, tanned body. Her blood had done that. She had been dead, once, and now she had given life.

'You're a strange one,' the wraith whispered from where it crouched by the water.

'I am Kettle.'

A grunted laugh. 'And whatboils within you, I wonder?'

'You,' she said, 'are more than just a ghost.'

'Yes.' Amused. 'I am Wither. A good name, don't you think? I was Tiste Andii, once, long, long ago. I was murdered, along with all of my kin. Well, those of us that survived the battle, that is.'

'Why are you here, Wither?'

'I await my lord, Kettle.' The wraith suddenly rose – she had not known how tall it was before. 'And now ... he comes.'

An up-rush of muddy water, and a gaunt figure rose, white-skinned as a blood-drained corpse, long pale hair plastered across its lean face. Coughing, pulling itself clear, crawling onto the bank.

'The swords,' he gasped.

Kettle hurried over to him and pushed the weapons into his long-fingered hands. He used them, points down, to help himself to his feet. Tall, she saw, shrinking back, taller even than the wraith. And such cold, cold eyes, deep red. 'You said you would help us,' she said, cowering beneath his gaze.

'Help?'

The wraith knelt before his lord. 'Silchas Ruin, I was once Killanthir, Third High Mage of the Sixth Cohort —'

'I remember you, Killanthir.'

'I have chosen the new name of Wither, my lord.'

'As you like.'

The wraith glanced up. 'Where is the Wyval?'

'I fear he will not survive, but he keeps her occupied. A noble beast.'

'Please,' Kettle whimpered, 'they're out. They want to kill me – you promised—'

'My lord,' Wither said, 'I would help the Wyval. Together, we can perhaps succeed in driving her deep. Even in binding her once again. If you would give me leave ...'

Silchas Ruin was silent for a moment, staring down at the kneeling wraith. Then he said, 'As you like.'
Wither bowed his head, paused to glance over at Kettle, and said, ‘Leave the Letherii to me. He will not awaken for some time.’ Then the wraith flowed down into the swirling water.

Silchas Ruin drew a deep breath, and looked down at the swords in his hands for the first time. ‘Strange, these. Yet I sense the mortal chose well. Child, get behind me.’ He regarded her, then nodded. ‘It is time to fulfil my promise.’

Corlo had no idea what would come of this. An Avowed could indeed die, if sufficiently damaged. It was, he believed, a matter of will as much as anything else. And he had known Iron Bars for a long time, although not as long as he had known other of the Avowed. To his mind, however, there was no other who could compare with Iron Bars, when it came to sheer will.

The High Mage was exhausted, used up. No longer could he deftly manipulate the four remaining gods, although, luckily, one of those was in enough trouble all on its own, with a crazed Tarthenal seemingly doing the impossible – squeezing the very life out of it. Talk about stubborn.

He had been beaten on, again and again, yet he would not relax his deadly embrace. Iron Bars had fought brilliantly, distracting the remaining three repeatedly, sufficient to keep the Tarthenal alive, but the Avowed was very nearly done. Corlo had never before seen such fighting, had never before witnessed the fullest measure of this Avowed's ability. It had been said, by Guardsmen who would know, that he was nearly a match to Skinner. And now Corlo believed it.

He was more than a little startled when two corpses walked past him towards the gateway, one of them clawing the air and hissing.

They halted at the entrance to the yard, and he heard the woman swear with admirable inventiveness, then say, 'I don't know how we can help them. Oh, Ublala, you big, stupid fool.'

The other said, 'We must attack, Shurq Elalle. I have fangs and talons, you know.'

'Well, go on then.'

Shurq Elalle? The captain of the ship we've signed on with? Our ... employer? Corlo pried his legs loose from their crossed position, wincing in pain, and pushed himself to his feet. 'Hey, you.'

Shurq Elalle, standing alone now, slowly turned. 'Are you addressing me?'

Corlo hobbled over. 'Corlo, ma'am. Crimson Guard. We signed on with you—'

'We?'

'Yes, the one helping your big, stupid friend. That's Iron Bars, my commander.'

'You're supposed to be waiting onboard!'

He blinked.

She scowled. 'Your commander is about to die.'

'I know – wait—' He stepped past her, onto the track. 'Wait, something's coming – quick!' He ran into the yard, Shurq Elalle following.

The Toblakai in the Tarthenal's arms sagged, and Iron Bars heard the cracking of ribs – a moment before one of the gods slipped past the Avowed and slammed the side of his wooden sword into the Tarthenal's head. The huge man toppled, dragging down with him the dead god in his arms.

Stunned, the Tarthenal tried feebly to extricate himself from the corpse.

With the last of his failing strength, Iron Bars leapt over to position himself above him, arriving in time to deflect a sword-blow and counter with a slash that forced the attacker back a step. From the right, another lunged, then spun away of its own accord, wheeling towards a thunderous concussion from a nearby barrow.
Where a tall, pale figure strode into view through a cloud of steam, a sword in each hand.

The Avowed, momentarily distracted, did not even see the sword-blade that slipped over his guard and, deflected at the last moment by clipping the hilt of his sword, slammed flat like a paddle into his right shoulder, breaking everything it could. The impact sent him flying, crashing down into the earth, weapon flying from a senseless hand. He ended up lying on his back, staring up through straggly black tree branches. Too hurt to move. Too tired to care.

From somewhere to his right he heard fighting, then a grunting bellow that sounded a lot like a death-cry. A Toblakai staggered, almost stumbling over Iron Bars, and the Avowed's eyes widened upon seeing blood spurting from two stabs in the god's neck, and a man gnawing on its left calf, being dragged along by its teeth, its taloned hands clawing up the god's thigh.

Well, he'd seen stranger things, he supposed – no, not a chance of that—

The ground shook as another body thumped to the ground. A moment later, there was another dying groan.

Then footsteps slowly approached Iron Bars where he lay, staring up at the sky. A shadow fell over him. The Avowed blinked, and found himself looking up at a pallid, lean face, and two red, very red, eyes.

'You did passably well,' the stranger said.

'And my Tarthenal friend?'

'Struck in the skull. He'll be fine, since I doubt there's much inside it.' A pause, then, 'Why are you still lying there?'

Dust and smoke drifted out from the dark corridor. Turudal Brizad had drawn Brys back into the throne room, and the Champion now stood in the clear space before the dais.

From the throne behind him came a weary voice, 'Finadd? The Ceda ...'

Brys simply shook his head, unable to speak, struggling to push aside his grief.

From the gloom of the corridor, there was silence. Heavy, ominous.

Brys slowly drew out his sword.

A sound. The grate of footsteps dragging through dust and rubble, the scrape of a sword-tip, and a strange series of dull clicks.

The footsteps halted.

Then, a coin. The snap of its bounce—

—rolling slowly into the throne room.

Brys watched it arc a lazy, curling path over the tiles. Gold, blotched with dried blood.

Rolling, tilting, then wobbling to a stop.

The sounds resumed from the corridor, and a moment later a hulking figure shambled out from the shadows and roiling dust.

No-one spoke in the throne room as the emperor of the Tiste Edur entered. Three steps, then four, then five, until he was almost within sword-reach of the Champion. Behind him, Hannan Mosag, almost unrecognizable, so twisted and bent and broken was the Warlock King. Two more Edur warriors, their faces taut with distress, appeared in Hannan Mosag's wake, dragging two sacks.

Brys spared the others the briefest of glances, noting the blood-smeared spear in the right hand of one of the warriors. The one who killed the Ceda. Then he fixed his attention once more on the emperor. The sword was
too large for him. He walked as if in pain. Spasms flickered across his coin-studded face. His hooded eyes glittered as he stared past Brys ... to the throne, and the king seated upon it.

A racking cough from Hannan Mosag as he sagged to a kneeling position, a gasp, and, finally, words. 'King Ezgara Diskanar. I have something ... to show you. A ... gift.' He lifted a mangled hand, the effort sending a shudder through him, and gestured behind him.

The two warriors glanced at each other, both uncertain.

The Warlock King grimaced. 'The sacks. Untie them. Show the king what lies within them.' Another hacking cough, a bubbling of pink froth at the corners of Hannan Mosag's mouth.

The warriors worked at the knotted ropes, the one on the left pulling the strands loose a moment before the other one. Drawing the leather mouth open. The Edur, seeing what was within, suddenly recoiled, and Brys saw horror on the warrior's face.

A moment later the other one cried out and stepped back.

'Show them!' screamed the Warlock King.

At that, even the emperor turned, startled.

The warrior on the left drew a deep, ragged breath, then stepped forward until he could grip the edges of the sack. With strangely gentle motions, he tugged the leather down.

A Letherii, bound tight. Blistered, suppurating skin, fingers worn to stubs, lumps and growths everywhere on his naked body. He had lost most of his hair, although some long strands remained. Blinking in the light, he tried lifting his head, but the malformed tendons and ligaments in his neck forced the motion to one side. The lower jaw settled and a thread of drool slipped down from the gaping mouth.

Then Brys recognized him.

Prince Quillas—

A cry from the king, a terrible, animal wail.

The other sack was pulled down. The queen, her flesh as ruined as that of her son. From her, however, came a wet cackle as if to answer her husband's cry, then a tumbling of nonsensical words, a rush of madness grating out past her swollen, broken lips. Yet, in her eyes, fierce awareness.

Hannan Mosag laughed. 'I used them. Against the Ceda. 1 used them. Letherii blood, Letherii flesh. Look upon the three of us. See, dear king, see the glory of what is to come.'

The emperor shrieked, 'Take them away! Fear! Trull! Take them away!'

The two warriors closed on the huddled figures, drawing the sacks up to what passed for shoulders, then dragging the queen and her son back towards the corridor.

Trembling, the emperor faced the king once more. He opened his mouth to say something, winced, then shut it again. Then he slowly straightened, and spoke in a rasping voice. 'We are Rhulad Sengar, emperor of the Tiste Edur. And now, of Lether. Yield the throne, Diskanar. Yield ... to us.'

From Brys's left the First Eunuch strode forward, a wine jug and two goblets in his hands. He ascended the dais, offered Ezgara one of the goblets. Then he poured out the wine.

Bemused, the Champion took a step to his right and half turned to regard his king.

Who calmly drank down the wine in three quick swallows. At some time earlier the crown had been placed on his brow once again. Nisall was standing just behind the throne, her eyes narrowed on the First Eunuch, who had finished his own wine and was stepping back down from the dais, making his way to stand near the Chancellor at the far wall.
Ezgara Diskanar fixed dull eyes on Brys. 'Stand aside, Champion. Do not die this day.'

'I cannot do as you ask, my king,' Brys said. 'As you well know.'

A weary nod, then Ezgara looked away. 'Very well.'

Nifadas spoke. 'Champion. Show these savages the measure of a Letherii swordsman. The final act of our kingdom on this dark day.'

Brys frowned, then faced Rhulad Sengar. 'You must fight me, Emperor. Or call upon more of your warriors to cut us down.' A glance at the kneeling Hannan Mosag. 'I believe your sorcery is done for now.'

Rhulad sneered. 'Sorcery? We would not so discard this opportunity, Champion. No, we will fight, the two of us.' He stepped back and raised the mottled sword. 'Come. We have lessons for one another.'

Brys did not reply. He waited.

The emperor attacked. Surprisingly fast, a half-whirl of the blade high, then a broken-timed diagonal downward slash intended to meet the Champion's sword and drive it down to the tiles.

Brys matched the momentary hesitation and leaned back, drawing his sword round as he side-stepped to his right. Blade now resting on the top of Rhulad's own as it flashed downward, the Champion darted the tip up to the emperor's left forearm and sliced through a tendon near the elbow.

He leapt back, thrusting low as he was pulling away, to push the tip of his sword between the tendon and kneecap of Rhulad's left leg.

_Snip._

The emperor stumbled forward, almost to the edge of the dais, then, astonishingly, righted himself to lunge in a two-handed thrust.

The mottled blade seemed to dance of its own accord, evading two distinct parries from Brys, and the Champion only managed to avoid the thrust by pushing the heavy blade aside with his left hand.

The two lower fingers spun away from that hand, even as Brys back-pedalled until he was in the centre of the space once more, this time with Rhulad between himself and the king on his throne.

Ezgara was smiling.

As Rhulad wheeled to face him once more, his weapon dipping low, Brys attacked.

Leading foot lifting high, stamping down on the emperor's wavering sword-blade – not a perfect contact, but sufficient to bat it momentarily away – as he drove his point into Rhulad's right kneecap. Slicing downward from the upper edge. Biting deep into the bone near the bottom edge. Twisting withdrawal, pulling the patella out through the cut.

A shriek, as Rhulad's leg shot out to the side.

The kneecap still speared on Brys's sword-point, he darted in again as the emperor drove his own sword down and to the left in an effort to stay upright, and slashed lightly across the tendons of the Edur's right arm, just above the elbow.

Rhulad fell back, thudded hard on the tiles, coins snapping free.

The sword should have dropped from the Edur's hands, yet it remained firm within two clenched fists.

But Rhulad could do nothing with it.

Trying to sit up, eyes filling with rage, he strained to lift the weapon.

Brys struck the floor with his sword-tip, dislodging the patella, stepped close to the emperor and severed the
tendons and ligaments in the Edur's right shoulder, sweeping the blade across to slice a neck tendon, then, point hovering a moment, thrusting down to disable the left shoulder in an identical manner. Standing over the helpless emperor, Brys methodically cut through both tendons above Rhulad's heels, then sliced diagonally across his victim's stomach, parting the wall of muscles there.

A kick sent Rhulad over, exposing his back.

Slashes above each shoulder blade, two more neck tendons. Lower back, ensuring that the sheets of muscle there fully separated, rolling up beneath the coin-studded skin. Back of shoulders, coins dancing away to bounce across the floor.

Brys then stepped back. Lowered his sword.

Rebounding shrieks from the emperor lying face down on the floor, limbs already curling of their own accord, muscles drawing up. The only movement in the chamber.

A slow settling of dust from the corridor.

Then, from one of the Edur warriors, 'Sisters take me ...'

King Ezgara Diskanar sighed, leaned drunkenly forward, then said, 'Kill him. Kill him.'

Brys looked over. 'No, sire.'

Disbelief on the old man's face. 'What?'

'The Ceda was specific on this, sire. I must not kill him.'

'He will bleed out,' Nifadas said, his words strangely dull.

But Brys shook his head. 'He will not. I opened no major vessels, First Eunuch.'

The Edur warrior named Trull then spoke. 'No major vessels ... how – how could you know? It is not possible ... so fast ...'

Brys said nothing.

The king suddenly slumped back on his throne.

Rhulad's shrieks had fallen away, and now he wept. Heaving, helpless cries. A sudden gasp, then, 'Brothers! Kill me!'

Trull Sengar recoiled at Rhulad's command. He shook his head, looked across at Fear, and saw a terrible realization in his brother's eyes.

Rhulad was not healing. Leaking blood onto the polished tiles. His body ... destroyed. And he was not healing. Trull turned to Hannan Mosag, and saw the ugly gleam of satisfaction in the Warlock King's eyes.

'Hannan Mosag,' Trull whispered.

'I cannot. His flesh, Trull Sengar, is beyond me. Beyond all of us. Only the sword ... and only by the sword. You, Trull Sengar. Or Fear.' A weak wave of one hand. 'Oh, call in someone else, if you've not the courage ...'

_Courage._

Fear grunted at that. As if punched in the chest.

Trull studied him – but Fear had not moved, not a single step. He dragged his eyes away, fixed them once more on Rhulad.

'My brothers.' Rhulad wept where he lay. 'Kill me. One of you. Please.'
The Champion – that extraordinary, appalling swordsman – walked over to where the wine jug sat near the foot of the throne. The king looked half asleep, indifferent, his face flushed and slack. Trull drew a deep breath. He saw the First Eunuch, sitting on the floor with his back to the wall. Another man, elderly, stood near Nifadas, hands to his eyes – a posture both strange and pathetic. The woman standing behind the throne was backing away, as if in sudden realization of something. There had been another man, young, handsome, but it seemed he had vanished.

Along the walls, the six palace guards had all drawn their weapons and held them across their chest, a silent salute to the King's Champion. A salute Trull wanted to match. His gaze returned once more to Brys. So modest in appearance, so ... his face. Familial ... Hull Beddict. So like Hull Beddict. Yes, his brother. The youngest. He watched the Letherii pour wine from the jug into the goblet the king had used earlier.

_Sisters, this Champion – what has he done? He has given us this ... this answer. This ... solution._

Rhulad screamed. 'Fear!'

Hannan Mosag coughed, then said, 'He is gone, Emperor.'

Trull spun round, looked about. _Gone? No— Where? Hannan Mosag, where—_

'He ... walked away.' The Warlock King's smile was bloodstained. 'Just that, Trull Sengar. Walked. You understand, now, don't you?'

'To call the others, to bring them here ...'

'No,' Hannan Mosag said. 'I do not think so.'

Rhulad whimpered, then snapped, 'Trull! I command you! Your emperor commands you! Stab me with your spear. Stab me!'

Tears filled Trull's eyes. _And how shall I look upon him ... now? How? As my emperor, or as my brother?_ He tottered, almost collapsing as anguish washed through him. _Fear. You have left. Left us. Me, with ... this._

'Brother! Please!'

From the entrance came a low cackle.

Trull turned, saw the bound forms of the queen and the prince, leaning against the wall like two obscene trophies. The sound was coming from the queen, and he saw a glitter from her eyes.

_Something – something else – there's more here ..._

He turned. Watched as the Champion straightened, goblet in his hand. Watched, as the man lifted it to his lips.

Trull's gaze flicked to the king. To that half-lidded stare. The senseless eyes. The Edur's head snapped round, to where the First Eunuch sat. Chin on chest, motionless.

'No!'

As the Champion drank, head tilting back. Two swallows, then three. Lowering the cup, he turned to regard Trull. Frowned. 'You had better leave,' he said. 'Drag your warlock with you. Approach the emperor and I will kill you.'

Too late. _All... too late. 'What – what do you intend?'_

The Champion looked down at Rhulad. 'We will ... take him somewhere. You will not find him, Edur.'

The queen cackled again, clearly startling the swordsman.

'It is too late,' Trull said. 'For you, in any case. If you have any mercy in you, Champion, best send your
guards away now. And have them take the woman with them. My kin will be here at any moment.' His gaze fell to Rhulad. 'The emperor is for the Edur to deal with.'

The quizzical expression in the Champion’s face deepened. Then he blinked, shook his head. 'What ... what do you mean? I see that you will not kill your brother. And he must die, mustn’t he? To heal. To ... return.'

'Yes. Champion, I am sorry. I was too late to warn you.'

The swordsman sagged suddenly, and he threw a bloody hand out to the edge of the throne for balance. The sword, still in the other hand, wavered, then dipped until the point touched the floor. 'What – what—'

Trull said nothing.

But Hannan Mosag cared nothing for compassion, and he laughed once more. 'I understood your gesture, Champion. The coolness to match that of your king. Besides—' His words broke into a cough. He spat phlegm, then resumed. 'Besides, it hardly mattered, did it? Whether you lived or died. That’s how it seemed, anyway. At that brazen, fateful moment, at least.'

The Champion sank down to the floor, staring dully at the Warlock King.

'Swordsman,' Hannan Mosag called out. 'Hear me, these final words. You have lost. Your king is dead. He was dead before you even began your fight. You fought, Champion, to defend a dead man.'

The Letherii, eyes widening, struggled to pull himself round, striving to look up, to the throne, to the figure seated there. But the effort proved too great, and he slid back down, head lolling.

The Warlock King was laughing. 'He had no faith. Only gold. No faith in you, swordsman—'

Trull stalked towards him. 'Be silent!'

Hannan Mosag sneered up at him. 'Watch yourself, Trull Sengar. You are as nothing to me.'

'You would claim the throne now, Warlock King?' Trull asked.

An enraged shriek from Rhulad.

Hannan Mosag said nothing.

Trull looked back over his shoulder. Saw the Champion lying sprawled on the dais, at the king's slippered feet. Lying, perfectly still, a mixture of surprise and dismay on his young face. Eyes staring, seeing nothing.

But then, there could be no other way. No other way to kill such a man.

Trull swung his gaze back down to the Warlock King. 'Someone will do as he commands,' he said in a low voice.

'Do you really think so?'

'His chosen kin—'

'Will do... nothing. No, Trull, not even Binadas. Just as your hand is stayed, so too will theirs be. It is a mercy, don’t you see? Of course you do. You see that all too well. A mercy.'

'Whilst you heave that ruin of a body onto the throne, Hannan Mosag?'

The answer was plain in the eyes of the Warlock King. It is mine.

A hoarse whisper from Rhulad, 'Trull ... please. I am your brother. Do not... do not leave me. Like this. Please.'

Everything was breaking inside him. Trull stepped away from Hannan Mosag, and sank slowly to his knees. I need Fear. I need to find him. Talk.
'Please, Trull... I never meant, I never meant...'

Trull stared down at his hands. He'd dropped his spear – he did not even know where it was. There were six Letherii guards – he looked up – no, they were gone. Where had they gone? The old man standing beside the body of the First Eunuch – where was he? The woman?

Where had everybody gone?

Tehol Beddict opened his eyes. One of them, he noticed, did not work very well. He squinted. A low ceiling. Dripping.

A hand stroked his brow and he turned his head. OK, *now that hurts*. Bugg leaned forward, nodded. Tehol tried to nod back, almost managed. 'Where are we?'

'In a crypt. Under the river.'

'Did we ... get wet?'

'Only a little."

'Oh.' He thought about that for a time. Then said, 'I should be dead.'

'Yes, you should. But you were holding on. Enough, anyway, which is more than can be said for poor Chalas.'

'Chalas?'

'He tried to protect you, and they killed him for it. I am sorry, Tehol. I was too late in arriving.'

He thought about that, too. 'The Tiste Edur.'

'Yes. I killed them.'

'You did?'

Bugg nodded, looked briefly away. 'I am afraid I lost my temper.'

'Ah.'

The manservant looked back. 'You don't sound surprised.'

'I'm not. I've seen you step on cockroaches. You are ruthless.'

'Anything for a meal.'

'Yes, and what about that, anyway? We've never eaten enough – not to have stayed as healthy as we did.'

'That's true.'

Tehol tried to sit up, groaned and lay back down. 'I smell mud.'

'Mud, yes. Salty mud at that. There's footprints here, were here when we arrived. Footprints, passing through.'

'Arrived. How long ago?'

'Not long. A few moments...'

'During which you mended all my bones.'

'And a new eye, most of your organs, this and that.'

'The eye doesn't work well.'
'Give it time. Babies can't focus past a nipple, you know.'

'No, I didn't. But I fully understand the sentiment.'

They were silent for a time.

Then Tehol sighed and said, 'But this changes everything.'

'It does? How?'

'Well, you're supposed to be my manservant. How can I continue the conceit of being in charge?'

'Just the same as you always have.'

'Hah hah.'

'I could make you forget.'

'Forget what?'

'Very funny.'

'No,' Tehol said, 'I mean specifically.'

'Well,' Bugg rubbed his jaw, 'the events of this day, I suppose.'

'So, you killed all those Tiste Edur.'

'Yes, I am afraid so.'

'Then carried me under the river.'

'Yes.'

'But your clothes are dry.'

'That's right.'

'And your name's not really Bugg.'

'No, I guess not.'

'But I like that name.'

'Me too.'

'And your real one?'

'Mael.'

Tehol frowned, studied his manservant's face, then shook his head. 'It doesn't fit. Bugg is better.'

'I agree.'

'So, if you could kill all those warriors. Heal me. Walk under a river. Answer me this, then. Why didn't you kill all of them? Halt this invasion in its tracks?'

'I have my reasons.'

'To see Lether conquered? Don't you like us?'

'Lether? Not much. You take your natural vices and call them virtues. Of which greed is the most despicable. That and betrayal of commonality. After all, whoever decided that competition is always and without exception
a healthy attribute? Why that particular path to self-esteem? Your heel on the hand of the one below. This is worth something? Let me tell you, it's worth nothing. Nothing lasting. Every monument that exists beyond the moment – no matter which king, emperor or warrior lays claim to it – is actually a testament to the common, to co-operation, to the plural rather than the singular.'

'Ah,' Tehol interjected, managing to raise a finger to mark his objection, 'without a king, general or whomever – without a leader, no monument gets built.'

'Only because you mortals know only two possibilities. To follow or to lead. Nothing else.'

'Hold on. I've seen consortiums and co-operatives at work, Bugg. They're nightmares.'

'Aye, breeding grounds for all those virtues such as greed, envy, betrayal and so on. In other words, each within the group seeks to impose a structure of followers and leaders. Dispense with a formal hierarchy, and you have a contest of personalities.'

'So what is the solution?'

'Would you be greatly disappointed to hear that you're not it?'

'Who? Me?'

'Your species. Don't feel bad. None have been, as of yet. Still, who knows what the future will bring.'

'Oh, that's easy for you to say!'

'Actually, no, it isn't. Look, I've seen all this again and again, over countless generations. To put it simply, it's a mess, a tangled, irreparable mess.'

'Some god you are. You are a god, aren't you?'

The manservant shrugged. 'Make no assumptions. About anything. Ever. Stay mindful, my friend, and suspicious. Suspicious, but not frightened by complexity.'

'And I've some advice for you, since we're doling it out here.'

'And that is?'

'Live to your potential.'

Bugg opened his mouth for a retort, then shut it again and narrowed his gaze.

Tehol gave him an innocent smile.

It was momentary, as more of the memories of this day stirred awake. 'Chalas,' he said after a moment. 'That old fool.'

'You have friends, Tehol Beddict.'

'And that poor guard. He threw himself in front of that spear. Friends – yes, what's happened to everyone else? Do you know? Is Shurq all right? Kettle?'

Bugg grunted, clearly distracted by something, then said, 'I think they're fine.'

'Do you want to go and see for certain?'

He glanced down. 'Not really. I can be very selfish at times, you know.'

'No, I didn't. But I admit, I do have a question. Only I don't know how to ask it.'

Bugg studied him for a long moment, then he snorted, said, 'You have no idea, Tehol, how boring it can be ... existing for all eternity.'
'Fine, but... a manservant?'

Bugg hesitated, then slowly shook his head, and met Tehol's gaze. 'My association with you, Tehol, has been an unceasing delight. You resurrected in me the pleasure of existence, and you cannot comprehend how rare that is.'

'But... a manservant!'

Bugg drew a deep breath. 'I think it's time to make you forget this day, my friend.'

'Forget? Forget what? Is there anything to eat around here?'

He'd wanted to believe. In all the possible glories. The world could be made simple, there need be no complexity, he'd so wanted it to be simple. He walked through the strangely silent city. Signs of fighting here and there. Dead Letherii soldiers, mostly. They should have given up. As would anyone professing to some rationality, but it seemed this was not the day for what was reasonable and straightforward. On this day, madness held dominion, flowing in invisible currents through this city.

Through these poor Letherii. Through the Tiste Edur.

Fear Sengar walked on, unmindful of where his steps took him. All his life, he had been gifted with a single, easily defined role. To fashion warriors among his people. And, when the need arose, to lead them into battle. There had been no great tragedies to mar his youth, and he'd stridden, not stumbled, into adulthood.

There had been no time when he'd felt alone. Alone in the frightened sense, that is. Solitude was born of decision, and could be as easily yielded when its purpose was done. There had been Trull. And Binadas, and then Rhulad. But, first and foremost, Trull. A warrior with skill unmatched when it came to fighting with the spear, yet without blood-lust – and blood-lust was a curse, he well knew, among the Edur. The hunger that swept away all discipline, that could reduce a well-trained fighter into a savage, weapons swinging wild, that strange, seething silence of the Tiste Edur pulled from cool thought. Among other peoples, he knew, that descent was announced with screams and howls and shrieks. An odd difference, and one that, for some unknown reason, deeply troubled Fear Sengar.

And then, looking upon this Champion of the Letherii king, this brother of Hull Beddict – Fear could not recall if he'd ever heard his name, but if he had, he'd forgotten it. That itself was a crime. He would have to learn that man's name. It was important to learn it.

Fear was skilled with his sword. One of the finest sword-wielders among the Tiste Edur, a truth he simply accepted, with neither pride nor affected modesty. And, he knew, had he stood face to face with that Champion in the throne room, he would have lasted some time. Some fair time, and might well have, on occasion, surprised the Letherii. But Fear had no illusions about who would have been left standing when all was done.

He wanted to weep. For that Champion. For his king. For Rhulad, the brother he'd failed again and again. For Trull, whom he had now abandoned – to a choice no warrior should be forced to make.

Because he had failed Rhulad yet again. Trull could see that, surely. There was no way to hide the cowardice raging through Fear. Not from his closest, most cherished brother. Who gave voice to all my doubts, my terrors, so that I could defy them – so that I could be seen to defy them.

Shaped by Hannan Mosag... all of this. He understood that now. From the very first, the brutal unification of the tribes, the secret pact with the unknown god had already been made. So obvious, now. The Warlock King had turned his back on Father Shadow, and why not, since Scabandari Bloodeye was gone. Gone, never to return.

Not even Hannan Mosag, then, but long ago. That was when this path first began. Long, long ago.

There had been a moment, back then, when everything was still simple. He was certain of it. Before the fated choices were made. And to all that had occurred since, there was only one who could give answer, and that was Father Shadow himself.
He walked the dusty streets, past corpses lying here and there like passed-out revellers from some wild fete the night before. Barring the blood, the scattered weapons.

He was ... lost. They had asked too much of him, far too much. There in that throne room. *We carried his body back. Across the ice wastes. I thought I had sent Trull to his death. So many failures, and every one of them mine. There must be other ways ... other ways...*

Motionless, now, looking down upon a body.

*Mayen.*

The hunger, he saw, was gone from her face. Finally, there was nothing but peace there. As he'd seen before, when he'd looked upon her sleeping. Or singing with the other maidens. When he'd carried the sword which she then took into her hands. To bury at the threshold of her home. He would not think of other times, when he caught a certain darkness in her eyes, and was left wondering on the twisting of her mind – such things a man could not know, could never know. Fearful mysteries, the ones that lured a man into love, into fascination and, at times, into trembling terror.

Her face held none of that now. Only peace. Sleeping, like the child within her, here on this street.

Fear crouched, then knelt beside her. He closed a hand on the horn grip of the fisher knife, then pulled it from her chest. He studied the knife. A slave's tool. A small sigil was carved near its base, one he recognized.

The knife had belonged to Udinaas.

Was this his gift? An offering of peace? Or simply one more act of deadly vengeance against the family of Edur who had owned him? Who had stolen his freedom? *He abandoned Rhulad. As I have done. For that, I have no right to hate. But... what of this?*

He rose, tucking the knife into his belt.

*Mayen* was dead. The child he would have loved was dead. Some force was here, some force eager to take everything away from him.

And he did not know what to do.

Weeping, ceaseless, weeping from the blood-spattered, twisted form lying on the floor of the throne room. On his knees ten paces away, Trull had his hands to his ears, wanting it to end, wanting someone to end it. This moment... it was trapped, deep within itself. It would not end. An eternal chorus of piteous crying, reaching into his skull.

Hannan Mosag was dragging himself towards the throne, so bent and mangled he was barely able to move more than a few hand's widths at a time before the pain in his body forced him to pause once again.

Among the Letherii, only one remained, his reappearance a mystery, yet he stood, expression serene yet watchful, near the far wall. Young, handsome and somehow ... soft. Not a soldier, then. He had said nothing, seeming content to observe.

Where were the other Edur? Trull could not understand. They had left Binadas, unconscious but alive, at the far end of the corridor. He turned his head in that direction, saw the huddled shapes of the queen and her son beside the entranceway. The prince looked either dead or asleep. The queen simply watched Hannan Mosag's tortured progress towards the dais, teeth gleaming in a wet smile.

*I need to find Father. He will know what to do ...no, there is nothing to know, is there? Just as there is ... nothing to do. Nothing at all, and that was the horror of it.*

'Please ... Trull...'

Trull shook his head, trying not to hear.

'All I wanted ... you, and Fear, and Binadas. I wanted you to ... include me. Not a child any longer, you see?
Hannan Mosag grunted a laugh. 'Respect, Trull. That is what he wanted. Where does that come from, then? A sword? A wealth of coins burned into your skin? A title? That presumptuous, obnoxious we he's always using now? None of those? How about stealing his brother's wife?'

'Be quiet,' Trull said.

'Do not speak to your king that way, Trull Sengar. It will ... cost you.'

'I am to quail at your threats, Warlock King?'

Trull let his hands fall away from his ears. The gesture had been useless. This chamber carried the slightest whisper. Besides, there could be no deafness without when there was none within. He caught slight movement from the Letherii at the far wall and looked over to see that he had turned his head, attention fixed now upon the entranceway. The man suddenly frowned.

Then Trull heard footsteps. Heavy, dragging. A sound of metal, and something like streaming water.

Hannan Mosag twisted round where he lay. 'What? What comes? Trull – find a weapon, quickly!'

Trull did not move.

Rhulad's weeping resumed, indifferent to all else.

The thudding footsteps came closer.

A moment later, an apparition shambled into view, blood pouring down from its gauntleted hands. Nearly the size of a Tarthenal, it was sheathed in black, stained iron plates, studded with green rivets. A great helm with caged eye-slits hid the face within, the grille-work hanging ragged on its shoulders and beneath its armoured chin. The figure was encrusted with barnacles at the joins of its elbows, knees and ankles. In one hand it carried a sword of Letherii steel, down which the blood flowed ceaselessly.

Rhulad hissed, 'What is it, Trull? What has come?'

The monstrosity paused just within the entrance. Head creaking as it looked round, it fixed its focus, it seemed, on the corpse of the King's Champion. It resumed walking forward, leaving twin trails of blood.

'Trull!' Rhulad shrieked.

The creature halted, looked down at the emperor lying on the floor. After a moment, a heavy voice rumbled from within the helm. 'You are gravely injured.'

Trembling, Rhulad laughed, a sound close to hysteria. 'Injured? Oh yes. Cut to pieces!'

'You will live.'

Hannan Mosag said in a growl, 'Begone, demon. Lest I banish you.'

'You can try,' it said. And moved forward once more. Until it stood directly in front of the Champion's body. 'I see no wounds, yet he lies dead. This honourable mortal.'

'Poison,' it said. And moved forward once more. Until it stood directly in front of the Champion's body. 'I see no wounds, yet he lies dead. This honourable mortal.'

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'Poison,' it said. The Letherii at the far wall.

The creature looked over. 'I know you. I know all your names.'

'I imagine you do, Guardian,' the man replied.

'Poison. Tell me, did you ... push him in that direction?'

'It is my aspect,' the Letherii said, shrugging. 'I am driven to ... poignancy. Tell me, does your god know you are here?'
'I will speak to him soon. Words of chastisement are necessary.'

The man laughed, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the wall. 'I imagine they are at that.'

The Guardian looked once more upon the Champion. 'He held the names. Of all those who were almost forgotten. This ... this is a great loss.'

'No,' the Letherii said, 'those names are not lost. Not yet. But they will be ... soon.'

'I need ... someone, then.'

'And you will find him.'

The Guardian regarded the Letherii once more. 'I am... pushed?'

The man shrugged again.

The Guardian reached down, closed a firm grip on the Champion's sword-belt, then lifted him from the floor and slung him over its left shoulder. Standing in a spreading pool of blood, it turned about.

And looked upon Rhulad Sengar. 'They show no mercy, your friends,' it said.

'No?' Rhulad's laugh became a cough. He gasped, then said, 'I am beginning to see ... otherwise—'

'I have learned mercy,' the Guardian said, and thrust down with his sword.

Into Rhulad's back, severing the spine.

Trull Sengar lurch to his feet, stared, disbelieving—

—as the Letherii man whispered, 'And ... once more.'

The Guardian walked towards the entrance, ignoring Hannan Mosag's enraged bellow as it passed the Warlock King.

Trull stumbled forward, around the motionless form of his brother, until he reached Hannan Mosag. Snapped a hand down and dragged the Warlock King up, until he held him close. 'The throne?' Trull asked in a rasp. 'You just lost it, bastard.' He flung Hannan Mosag back down onto the floor. 'I need to find Fear. Tell him,' Trull said as he walked to the entranceway, 'tell him, Mosag, that I went to find Fear. I am sending in the others —'

Rhulad spasmed behind him, then shrieked.

So be it.

The Wyval clawed its way free from the barrow, dripping red-streaked mud, flanks heaving. A moment later the wraith appeared, dragging the unconscious form of a Letherii man.

Shurq Elalle rose from where she had crouched beside Ublala, stroking his brow and wondering at the stupid smile plastered on his features, and, placing her hands on her hips, surveyed the scene. Five sprawled bodies, toppled trees, the stench of rotting earth. Two of her employees near the facing wall of the Azath tower, the mage tending to the Avowed's wounds. Avowed. What kind of tide is that, anyway?

Closer to the gate, Kettle and the tall, white-skinned warrior with the two Letherii swords.

Impressively naked, she noted, walking over. 'If I am not mistaken,' she said to him, 'you are of the same blood as the Tiste Edur.'

A slight frown as he looked down upon her. 'No. I am Tiste Andii.'

'If you say so. Now that you have finished off those ... things, I take it your allegiance to the Azath tower is at an end.'
He glanced over at it with his strange, red eyes. 'We were never ... friends,' he said, then faintly smiled. 'But it is dead. I am not bound to anyone's service but my own.' Studied her once again. 'And there are things I must do ... for myself.'

Kettle spoke. 'Can I come with you?'

'That would please me, child,' the warrior said.

Shurq Elalle narrowed her eyes. 'You made a promise, didn't you?' she asked him. 'To the tower, and though it is dead the promise remains to be honoured.'

'She will be safe, so long as she chooses to remain with me,' the warrior said, nodding.

Shurq looked round once more, then said, 'This city is now ruled by the Tiste Edur. Will they take undue note of you?'

'Accompanied by a Wyval, a wraith and the unconscious slave he insists on keeping with him, I would imagine so.'

'Best, then,' she said, 'you left Letheras without being seen.'

'Agreed. Do you have a suggestion?'

'Not yet—'

'I have ...'

They turned to see the Avowed and his mage, the latter lending the former his shoulder as they slowly approached. It had been Iron Bars who had spoken.

'You,' Shurq Elalle said, 'work for me, now. No volunteering allowed.'

He grinned. 'Aye, but all I'm saying is they need an escort. Someone who knows all the secret ways out of this city. It's the least I can do, since this Tiste Andii saved my life.'

'Thinking of things before I do does not bode well for a good working relationship,' Shurq Elalle said.

'Apologies, ma'am. I won't do it again, I promise.'

'You think I'm being petty, don't you?'

'Of course not. After all, the undead are never petty.'

She crossed her arms. 'No? See that pit over there? There's an undead man named Harlest hiding in it, waiting to scare someone with his talons and fangs.'

They all turned to study the pit in the yard of the Azath tower. From which they could now hear faint singing.

'Hood's balls,' Iron Bars muttered. 'When do we sail?'

Shurq Elalle shrugged. 'As soon as they let us. And who is Hood?'

The white-skinned warrior replied distractedly, 'The Lord of Death, and yes, he has balls.'

Everyone turned to stare at the warrior, who shrugged.

Shurq grunted, then said, 'Don't make me laugh.'

Kettle pointed up. 'I like that. In your forehead, Mother. I like that.'

'And let's keep it there, shall we?' Fortunately, no-one seemed to grasp the significance of her comment.
The warrior said to Iron Bars. 'Your suggestion?'

The Avowed nodded.

Tehol Beddict, lying atop the sarcophagus, was sleeping. Bugg had been staring down at him, thoughtful, when he heard the sound of footsteps almost directly behind him. He slowly swung about as the Guardian emerged from the wall of water that marked the tunnel mouth.

The apparition was carrying a body over one shoulder. It halted and was silent as it studied the manservant.

Here, in this tomb emptied of water, in this place where an Elder god's will held all back, the Guardian did not bleed.

Bugg sighed. 'Oh, he will grieve for this,' he said, finally recognizing the Letherii on the Guardian's shoulder.

'The Errant says the names remain alive within him,' the creature said.

'The names? Ah, yes. Of course.'

'You abandoned us, Mael.'

'I know. I am sorry.'

The Guardian stepped past him and stopped beside the sarcophagus. Its helmed head tilted down as it observed Tehol Beddict. 'This one shares his blood.'

'A brother, yes.'

'He shall carry the memory of the names, then.' It looked over. 'Do you object to this?'

Bugg shook his head. 'How can I?'

'That is true. You cannot. You have lost the right.'

The manservant said nothing. He watched as the Guardian grasped hold of one of Brys's hands and set it down upon Tehol's brow. A moment, then it was done. The apparition stepped away, headed towards the far wall of water.

'Wait, please,' Bugg said.

It paused, looked back.

'Where will you take him?'

'Into the deep, where else, Elder One?'

Bugg frowned. 'In that place ...'

'Yes. There shall be two Guardians now and for ever more.'

'Will that eternal service please him, do you think?'

The apparition cocked its head. 'I do not know. Does it please me?'

With that ambiguous question hanging in the still air, the Guardian carried the body of Brys Beddict into the water.

After a long moment, Bugg turned back to regard Tehol. His friend would wake with a terrible headache, he knew.

Nothing to be done for it, alas. Except, perhaps, for some tea ... I've a particularly nasty herbal mix that'll make him forget his headache. And if there is anyone in the world who will appreciate that, it is Tehol Beddict
of Letheras.

But first, I'd better get him out of this tomb.

There were bodies lying in the throne room of the Eternal Domicile. The one halfway down the dais, face to the bloody tiles, still made Feather Witch's breath catch, her heart thud loud in her chest. Fear or excitement, she knew not which – perhaps both. King Ezgara Diskanar, flung down from the throne, where Rhulad Sengar of the Tiste Edur now sat, and the darkness in the emperor's eyes seemed beyond measure.

There had been pain in this chamber – she could feel its bitter wake, hanging still in the air. And Rhulad had been its greatest fount. Betrayals, more betrayals than any mortal could bear. She knew this was truth, knew it in her heart.

Before the emperor stood Tomad and Uruth, flanking the trembling, huddled form of Hannan Mosag, who had paid a dear price for this day of triumph. It seemed that he awaited something, a posture of terrified expectation, his eyes downcast. Yet Rhulad appeared content to ignore the Warlock King. For now, he would indulge his sour triumph.

Even so, where was Fear Sengar? And Trull? Feather Witch had assisted Uruth in tending to Binadas, who remained unconscious and would continue so until the healing was done. But, apart from Rhulad's parents, the only others of the emperor's inner court present were a handful of his adopted brothers, Choram Irard, Kholb Harat and Matra Brith. The Buhns were absent, as was the Jheck warchief, B'nagga.

Two Letherii remained, apart from the pathetic wreackages of Queen Janall and Prince Quillas. And already the Chancellor, Triban Gnoi, had knelt before Rhulad and proclaimed his eternal service. The other Letherii drew Feather Witch's attention again and again. Consort to the queen, Turudal Brizad gave the appearance of being almost indifferent to all he was witnessing here in the Eternal Domicile.

And he was handsome, extraordinarily handsome.

More than once, she had met his gaze, and saw in his eyes – even from across the room – a certain avid interest that sent tremors through her.

She remained a step behind Uruth, her new mistress, ever attentive, whilst commanders came and went with their irrelevant reports. Fighting here, an end to fighting there, the docks secured. The first of the emissaries from the protectorates eagerly awaited audience in the ruined hallway beyond.

The empire was born.

And she had witnessed, and more than witnessed. A knife, pushed into the hands of Mayen, and word had come that she had been found. Dead. No more would Feather Witch cower beneath her fury. The whore was dead.

Rhulad's first command was to begin a hunt. For Udinaas. His adopted brothers were given a company of warriors each and sent out to find the slave. The search would be relentless, she knew, and in the end, Udinaas would be captured. And made to pay for his betrayal.

She did not know what to think about that. But the thought had run through her once – and only once, quickly driven away afterwards – a hope, a fervent prayer to the Errant that Udinaas would escape. That he would never be found. That at least one Letherii would defy this emperor, defeat him. And in defeating him thus, would break Rhulad's heart yet again.

The world has drawn breath ... and now breathes once more. As steady as ever, as unbroken in rhythm as the tides.

She could see, through the cleverly fashioned, slitted windows high in the dome overhead, the deepening of the light, and she knew the sun was setting on this day.

A day in which a kingdom was conquered, and a day in which that which was conquered began its inevitable destruction of the conquerors.
For such was the rhythm of these particular tides. Now, with the coming of night, when the shadows drew long, and what remained of the world turned away.

For that is what the Tiste Edur believe, is it not? Until midnight, all is turned away, silent and motionless. Awaiting the last tide.

On his throne, Rhulad Sengar sat, draped in the gold of Lether, and the dying light gleamed in his hooded eyes. Darkened the stains on the sword held in his right hand, point to the dais.

And Feather Witch, her eyes cast downward once more after that momentary glance, downward as required, saw, lying in the join of the dais, a severed finger. Small, like a child's. She stared at it, fascinated, filled with a sudden desire. To possess it. There was power in such things, after all. Power a witch could use.

Assuming the person it had belonged to had been important.

Well, I shall find that out soon enough.

Dusk was claiming the throne room. Someone would have to light lanterns, and soon.

She had not left the room. There had been no reason to. She had sat, motionless, empty, numb to the sounds of fighting, to the howling wolves, to the distant screams in the city beyond. And told herself, every now and then, that she waited. The end of one thing brought the birth of another, after all.

Lives and loves, the gamut of existence was marked by such things. A breaking of paths, the ragged, uneven ever-forward stumble. Blood dried, eventually. Turned to dust. The corpses of kings were laid down and sealed in darkness and set away, to be forgotten. Graves were dug for fallen soldiers, vast pits like mouths in the earth, opened in hunger, and all the bodies were tumbled down, each exhaling a last gasp of lime dust. Survivors grieved, for a time, and looked upon empty rooms and empty beds, the scattering of possessions no-one possessed any longer, and wondered what was to come, what would be written anew on the wiped-clean slate. Wondering, how can I go on?

Kingdoms and empires, wars and causes, she was sick of them.

She wanted to be gone. Away, so far away that nothing of her life from before mattered in the least. No memories to drive her steps in this direction or that.

Corlo had warned her. Not to fall into the cycle of weeping. So now she sat dry-eyed, and let the city beyond weep for itself. She was done with such things.

A knock upon the door.

Seren Pedac looked down the hallway, her heart lurching.

A heavy sound, now repeated, insistent.

The Acquitor rose from the chair, tottering at the tingling in her legs – she had not moved in a long time – then made her way unevenly forward.

Dusk had arrived. She had not noticed that. Someone has decided. Someone has ended this day. Why would they do that?

Absurd thoughts, pushed into her mind as if from somewhere outside, in tones of faint irony, drawled out like a secret joke.

At the door now. Flinching as the knock sounded again, at a level opposite her face.

Seren opened it.

To find, standing before her, Fear and Trull Sengar.

Trull could not understand it, but it had seemed his steps were being guided, down this alley, along that street,
through the vast city with unerring precision until he saw, in the gloom ahead, his brother. Walking with purpose over a minor bridge of the main canal. Turning in surprise at Trull's hoarse shout. Then waiting until his brother caught up to him.

'Rhulad is resurrected,' Trull said.

Fear looked away, squinted into the shadows of the seemingly motionless water of the canal. 'By your hand, Trull?'

'No. I ... failed in that. Something else. A demon of some sort. It came for the Champion – I don't know why, but it carried the man's body away. After killing Rhulad in what it saw as an act of mercy.' Trull grimaced. 'A gift of the ignorant. Fear—'

'No. I will not return.'

Trull stared at him. 'Listen to me, please. I believe, if we work together, we can guide him back. From madness. For the Sisters' sake, Fear, we must try. For our people—'

'No.'

'You ... would leave me to this?'

Sudden pain in Fear's face, but he refused to meet his brother's eyes. 'I must go. I understand something now, you see. This is not of Rhulad's making. Nor Hannan Mosag's. It is Father Shadow's, Trull.'

'Scabandari Bloodeye is dead—'

'Not his spirit. It remains ... somewhere. I intend to find it.'

'To what end?'

'We have been usurped. All of us. By the one behind that sword. No-one else can save us, Trull. I mean to find Scabandari Bloodeye. If he is bound, I mean to free him. His spirit. We shall return together, or not at all.'

Trull knew his brother well enough to cease arguing. Fear had found a new purpose, and with it he intended to flee ... from everything, and everyone, else. 'How will you get out of the city? They will be looking for us – it's probable they are doing so even now.'

'Hull once told me that Seren Pedac had her home here.' Fear shook his head. 'I don't know, I don't understand it myself, but I believe she might help.'

'Why?'

Fear shook his head.

'How do you know where she lives?'

'I don't. But it's ... this way.'

He began walking. Trull quickly caught up to him and gripped his arm. 'Listen – no, I don't mean to prevent you. But listen to me, please.'

'Very well, but let us walk in the meantime.'

'All right. Do you not wonder at all this, Fear? How did I find you? It should have been impossible, yet here we are. And now you, and this house – the Acquitor's house – Fear, something is guiding us. We are being manipulated—'

His brother's smile was wry. 'What of it?'

To that, Trull had no answer. Silent, he walked with Fear. Coming upon a score of dead Letherii, he paused to collect a sword and scabbard. He strapped it on, ignoring Fear's raised brows, not out of some ambivalent
emotion, but because he himself did not know why he had picked up the weapon. They walked on.

Until they came to a modest house.

Trull's chest seemed to clench tight upon seeing her standing in the doorway. He could not understand it—no, he could, but it was impossible. Absurd. He'd only seen Seren Pedac a few times. Had but exchanged a few score words, if that. Yet, as he studied her face, the shock writ there, so at odds with the appalling depth in her eyes, he felt himself falling forward in his mind—

'What?' she asked, gaze darting between him and Fear. 'What are you...

'I need your help,' Fear said.

'I cannot... I don't see how ...'

_Sisters take me, I would give my heart to this woman. This Letherii...

_Fear said, 'I am fleeing. My brother, the emperor. I need a guide to take me through the city unseen. Tonight.'

'How did you find me?'

'I don't know. I don't even know why ... why I have this belief that only you can help me.'

She looked then at Trull, and he saw her eyes hold on his for what seemed a long moment, slowly widening.

'And you, Trull Sengar?' she asked. 'Are coming with us?'

With us. She will do this. Why? What need within her does this answer? The pressure in his chest constricted suddenly, even as the fateful words left him. 'I cannot, Acquitor. I failed Rhulad this day. I must try ... again. I must try to save him.'

Something like resignation filled her eyes.

As if he had wounded something that already bore a thousand scars.

And Trull wanted to cry out. Instead, he said, 'I am sorry. But I will await your return—both of you—'

'We shall return here?' she asked, glancing at Fear. 'Why?'

'To end this,' Fear said.

'To end what?'

'The tyranny born here tonight, Seren Pedac.'

'You would kill Rhulad? Your own brother?'

'Kill him? That would not work, as you know. No. But I shall find another way. I shall,'

_Oh, who has grasped hold of my soul tins night?_ He found himself unhitching the sword, heard himself saying, 'I don't know if you have a weapon, Acquitor,' and knew his own disbelief at the absurdity of his own words, the shallowness of his reasoning, 'so I will give you mine ...' And he was holding the sheathed sword out to her.

At the threshold of her home.

Fear turned, studied him, but Trull could not look away from her, not even to see what must be realization dawning in his face.

_Letherii_ though she was, Seren Pedac clearly understood, her gaze becoming confused, then clearing. 'Just that, I take it. A weapon ... for me to use.'

No. 'Yes ... Acquitor. A weapon ...'
She accepted it, but the gesture was without meaning now.

Trull found himself stepping back. 'I have to go now. I will tell Rhulad I saw you, Fear, down at the docks.'

'You cannot save him, brother,' Fear said.

'I can but try. Go well, Fear.'

And he was walking away. It was best, he decided through sudden tears. They would probably never return. Nor would she have accepted the sword. Which was why she asked him before reaching out for it. A weapon to use. Only that.

He was being a fool. A moment of profound weakness, a love that made no sense, no sense at all. No, better by far the way it had played out. She'd understood, and so she'd made certain. No other meaning. No proclamation. Simply a gesture in the night.

A weapon to use. Only that.

They remained standing at the threshold. Trull was gone, his footsteps swallowed by distance. Fear studied Seren Pedac as she looked down at the sword in her hands. Then, glancing up, she saw his fixed regard and smiled wryly.

'Your brother ... startled me. For a moment, I thought... never mind.'

Then why, Seren Pedac, is there such pain in your eyes? Fear hesitated, was about to speak, when a child's voice spoke behind him.

'Are you Seren Pedac?'

He spun round, sword hissing from its scabbard.

The Acquitor stepped past, holding out a hand to stay him. 'Do I know you?' she asked the small girl standing at the gate.

'I am Kettle. Iron Bars said you would help us. We need to leave the city. With no-one seeing.'

'We?'

The girl walked forward, and behind her came a tall, robed and hooded figure. Then a shadow wraith, dragging a body.

A startled sound from Seren. 'Errant fend, this is about to get a lot harder.'

Fear said to her, 'Acquitor, I would berate you for your generosity this night, had it not included me. Can you still manage this?'

She was studying the tall, hooded figure as she replied, 'Probably. There are tunnels...'

Fear faced the girl and her party once more. His gaze focused on the wraith. 'You, why are you not serving the emperor this night?'

'I am unbound, Fear Sengar. You are fleeing? This is ... unexpected.'

He disliked the amusement in its voice. 'And who is that you are pulling behind you?'

'The slave Udinaas.'

Fear said to Seren, 'They will be hunting in earnest for these ones, Acquitor. For that slave.'

'I remember him,' she said.

'His betrayal of the emperor has exacted a high price,' Fear said. 'More, I believe he killed Mayen—'
'Believe what you like,' the wraith said, 'but you are wrong. You forget, Fear Sengar, this man is a slave. A thing to be used, and used he has been. By me, by the Wyval that even now circles us in the dark overhead. For what befell Rhulad, for Mayen – neither of these tragedies belong to Udinaas.'

As you say.

'We can argue this later,' Seren said. 'Kettle, who is this disguised man?'

She was about to answer when the figure said, 'I am Selekis, of the Azath tower.'

'From the Azath tower?' Seren asked. 'Amusing. Well, you're as tall as an Edur, Selekis. Can we not see your face?'

'I would rather not, Seren Pedac. Not yet, in any case.' It seemed its hidden gaze was on Fear as it continued, 'Perhaps later, once we have quitted this city and have the time to discuss our eventual destinations. It may be, indeed, that we will travel together for some time.'

'I think not,' Fear said. 'I go to find Father Shadow.'

'Indeed? And Scabandari Bloodeye still lives?'

Shocked, Fear said nothing. _He must be a Tiste Edur. One of the other tribes, perhaps. Also fleeing. No different from me, then._

'All of you,' Seren said, 'inside. We should scrape together some supplies, although I am certain the Rat Catchers' Guild will be able to supply us ... for a price.'

The wraith softly laughed. 'It is the Letherii way, of course ...'

* * *

Shurq Elalle stepped clear of the ladder and onto the roof. The sun was up, and people could be seen on the tiers, a little slower in their walking than was usual. Uncertain, filled perhaps with some trepidation. There were Tiste Edur, after all, patrolling in squads. Whilst yet others, in larger groups, were moving through the city as if looking for someone in particular.

Tehol Beddict and his manservant were standing on the side overlooking the canal, their backs to Shurq as she approached. Tehol glanced over a shoulder and gave her a warm smile. He looked ... different.

'Tehol Beddict,' she said as she came to stand beside him, 'one of your eyes is blue.'

'Is it? Must be some kind of nefarious infection, Shurq, since I can barely see with it besides.'

'It'll clear up in time,' Bugg said.

'So,' Shurq said, 'have you resumed plotting the end of civilization, Tehol?'

'I have, and a delicious end it will be.'

She grunted. 'I'll send you Shand, Hejun and Rissarh, then—'

'Don't you dare. Deliver them to the islands. I work better alone.'

'Alone?'

'Well, with Bugg here, of course. Every man needs a manservant, after all.'

'I imagine so. Well, I am here, then, to say goodbye.'

'Off for some pirating, are we?'

'Why not? I'm simply elaborating on a well-established career.'
Tehol looked to Bugg, and said, 'The thief who sank ...'

'... has resurfaced,' Bugg finished.

The two men smiled at each other.

Shurq Elalle turned away. 'Well, that's one thing I won't miss.'

* * *

After she was gone, Tehol and Bugg stared out for a while longer at the reawakening city of Letheras. The city occupied, the throne usurped, strangers in the streets looking rather ... lost.

The two-headed insect clung to Tehol's shoulder and would not move. After a time, Tehol rubbed at his weak eye and sighed. 'You know, Bugg, I am glad you didn't do it.'

'Do what?'

'Make me forget.'

'I figured you could handle it.'

'You're right. I can. At least, this way, I can grieve.'

'In your own way.'

'In my own way, yes. The only way I know how.'

'I know, master.'

A short while later, Bugg turned about and walked towards the hatch. 'I'll be back shortly.'

'Right. And when you do, clean up down there.'

The manservant paused at the hatch, considered, then said, 'I think I will find the time to do just that, master.'

'Excellent. Now I'm going to bed.'

'Good idea, master.'

'Well, of course it is, Bugg. It's mine, isn't it?'
EPILOGUE

And it is this moment, my friends,
When you must look away,
As the world unfurls anew
In shapes announced both bright
And sordid, in dark and light
And the sprawl of all existence
That lies between.

Fisher kel Tath

The hole was vast and deep. The two Kenryll'ah demon princes stood at its edge, staring down into it, as they had been for some time.

Finally, one said, 'How far down do you think it goes, brother?'

'I suspect, brother,' the other replied, 'if we were to vacate our bladders into this abyss the streams would fray into mist long before they reached bottom.'

'I suspect you are right. And that Forkrul Assail went down there, didn't he?'

'He did. Head first.'

'You shouldn't have thrown him, then.'

'You are wrong, brother. I simply threw him in the wrong direction.'

'That, or the world suddenly turned.'

'Unlikely. This place doesn't do things like that.'

'You're right. It is proving exceedingly dull, isn't it?'

'Exceedingly.'

'Well, shall we?'

'Why not?'

The two demons began loosening straps on their ornate baldrics. Dropping flaps. Shifting their stances to adequate width.

And they stood there, side by side, until, perfectly timed, their flows were done.

The storm had risen sudden, impressively fierce as it raged on the seas. Three Nachts huddled at his feet, Withal stood on the beach, feeling the faint wisps of wind that managed to reach through the sorcerous barrier surrounding the island, brushing against his face like a woman's breath.

A sweet woman, to be more precise. Unlike the one standing beside him. This tall, iron-eyed, foul-mouthed, humourless apparition who followed him around and never seemed to sleep and certainly would not let Kim sleep, not a single damned night the whole night through, not once. Always asking, asking and asking. What are you going to do? Besides praying?

Well, what else could he do?
Rhulad Sengar came and went, more insane with each time. Shrieks, laughter, screams and wails. How many times could a man die?

We'll see, I suppose.

'That storm,' Sandalath said, 'it wants to get through, doesn't it?'

He nodded. He could feel its wrath, and its impotence.

'It's waiting for something,' she continued. 'Waiting for someone ... to do something.'

He repressed the urge to hit her – she'd kill him if he did – wait. Wait. Wait. 'Hold on,' he whispered. 'Hold on ... I've thought of something ...'

'A miracle!' she shouted, throwing up her hands. 'Oh, I know! Let's pray!' 

And now he saw it, on the very edge of the thrashing waves beyond the reef. Saw it, and pointed. 'There! A boat, you black-hearted witch! A boat!'

'So what? So what? Why don't you do something?'

He spun round, startling the Nachts, and began running.

There was anger, plenty of anger, giving strength to his strides. Oh, so much anger. Deliverers of suffering deserved what was coming to them, didn't they? Oh yes, they surely did. The Nachts had been showing him. Over and over again, the mad grinning apes. Over and over.

Build a nest.

Kick it down.

Build a nest.

Kick ... it ... down!

He saw the hut, that squalid, insipid hovel crouched there on the dead plain. Sensed the Crippled God's sudden awareness, sudden probings into his mind. But oh no, he laughed silently, it couldn't work it out. Couldn't fathom the endless refrain filling his skull.

Build a nest! Kick it down!

He reached the hut, not where the doorway made its slash in the wall, but from a blind side. And, with all his weight, the swordsmith flung himself into that flimsy structure.

It collapsed inward, Withal on top, landing upon a squawking figure beneath. Spitting, hissing with rage and indignation.

Withal grasped handfuls of rotten canvas, heaved himself back upright, and dragged the tent away. Pegs snapping, ties breaking. Dragged it away from that horrid little bastard god.

It shrieked, the brazier tumbling, coals spilling out, sparks lodging in the god's ratty robes, where they smouldered—

'You will die for this, mortal!'

Withal stumbled back, laughing.

And, from behind, the wind suddenly arrived.

Almost knocking him down.

He turned into it, facing the beach once more, and saw the stormclouds billowing, rushing in, growing ever
higher, towering, spreading their shadow upon the island.

Leaning into the gale, Withal ran back to the beach.

Thrashing, foaming waves on all sides, but there, before him, a stretch of calm. A stretch opposite Sandalath and the capering, dancing Nachts.

Along which the boat slid gracefully through the reef, its lone sail luffing lightly as it glided to shore, grating to a halt five paces from the waterline.

Withal reached the sand in time to see a squat, nondescript man clamber down from the side and wade ashore.

'This,' he said to Withal in the Letherii trader's tongue, 'is for you. Take your friends and make sail.'

'Who are you?' Sandalath demanded.

'Oh, be quiet!' Withal snarled. 'Climb in, woman!'

The Nachts had already done so, and were scrambling about the rigging.

Scowling, the Tiste Andii woman hurried towards the boat.

Withal stared at the man.

Who grimaced, then said, 'Aye, Withal of Meckros, you pray hard enough ...'

'I knew it.'

'Now, get going. You'll find a way of calm through.'

'And you, Mael?'

'I'll drop in later. I've things for you to do, Withal. But for now,' he faced inland, 'I am going to beat a god senseless.'

This ends the fifth tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen
GLOSSARY

**Letherii Titles**

*Acquitor:* a sanctioned position as guide/factor when dealing with non-Letherii peoples

*Atri-Preda:* military commander who governs a city or town

*Ceda:* title of King's own mage

*Finadd:* equivalent of captain in the military

*Preda:* equivalent of commander or general in the military

*Sentinel:* the King's Voice in establishing first contact with non-Letherii peoples

*The King's Leave:* a title relieving the holder of all criminal convictions

**Lether Place Names**

*Burl Square:* a square in Letheras

*Cedance:* the dominant set of Tiles (see the Holds)

*Cul Street:* a street in Letheras

*Down Markets:* a district in Letheras

*Errant's Heel:* an alley in Letheras

*Eternal Domicile:* the new palace under construction in Letheras

*Huldo's:* a restaurant in Letheras

*Katter Bight:* a stretch of water outside Old Katter

*Kraig's Landing:* upriver from the city of Trate

*Lether:* the kingdom and its protectorates

*Letheras:* the capital city of Lether

*Merchants' Tolls:* equivalent of a stock market in Lether

*Purser's District:* a district in Letheras

*Quillas Canal:* one of the main canals in Letheras

*Rat Catchers' Guild:* a mysterious guild active throughout Lether

*Red Lane:* a lane in Letheras

*Rild's:* a restaurant in Letheras

*Scale House:* headquarters of the Rat Catcher's Guild, Letheras
Sherp’s Last Lane: a lane in Letheras
Soulan Bridge: a bridge in Letheras
Stinking House: abode of Selush the Dresser of the Dead
Tarancede Tower: a watchtower overlooking Trate Harbour
Temple School: an educational institution in Letheras
The Temple: a high-end brothel in Letheras
Urum’s Lenders: an establishment in Letheras
Windlow’s Meatgrinders: an abattoir in Letheras

Letherii Cities, Villages and Forts

Awl
Brans Keep
Bridle
Cargo
Desden
Dissent
Dresh
Fent Reach
First Maiden Fort
First Reach
Five Points
Fort Shake
Gedry
Harness
High Fort
Letheras
The Manse
Miner Sluice
Old Gedure
Old Katter
Second Maiden Fort
Thetil
Third Maiden Fort
Trails
Trate
Truce

**Leherii Protectorates**
Bluerose
Karn Korshenn
Pilott
Pockface Islands

**Neighbouring Ringdoms**
Kolanse

**Letherii Military**
Artisan Battalion
Bluerose Battalion
Cold Clay Battalion
Crimson Rampant Brigade
Fent Garrison
Grass Jackets Brigade
Harridict Brigade
Katter Legion
Maiden Garrison
Merchants' Battalion
Shake Legion
Trate Legion
Wave Wake Brigade
Whitefinder Battalion

**Letherii Phrases**
**Blue Style Steel**: an earlier method of ironmongery
**Docks**: commonest denomination of Lether money
**Dresh Ballista**: a multi-quarrel war weapon
**Letheran Steel**: a secret method of ironmongery
**Letherii**: that of Lether, also the name of the language and of the people
Levels: the coin of the wealthy of Lether

Lupe Fish: a large carnivorous fish resident in Lether River and the canals of Letheras

Ootooloo: a primitive but singular sea-creature from Bluerose

Peaks: the coin of the filthy rich in Lether

(The) Seventh Closure: prophesied renaissance

(The) Shrouded Sisters of the Empty Throne: Educators

Stripling: lowest denomination of Lether money

Truce Fever: a common, curable fever

Tusked Milk: an alcoholic beverage

Tiste Edur Places and Names

Arapay: subjugated and easternmost tribe of Tiste Edur

Beneda: subjugated tribe of Tiste Edur

Calach Breeding Beds: coastline where Tusked Seals breed

Den-Ratha: subjugated, northernmost tribe of Tiste Edur

Hasana Inlet: an inlet claimed by the Tiste Edur

Hiroth: dominant tribe of the Tiste Edur

Kaschan Inlet: an inlet claimed by the Tiste Edur

Knarri: a whaling and fishing craft

K'orthan: raider longboats

K'risnan: the Warlock King's cadre of sorcerors

Merude: subjugated tribe of Tiste Edur

Morok Tree: a blue-leafed tree used in funeral practices

Sollanta: subjugated tribe of Tiste Edur

Stonebowl: a natural depression at the base of a gorge north of the main Hiroth village

Other Names, Titles and Terms

(The) Eres'al: the spirit goddess of the Nerek

Faraed: an assimilated people in Lether

Fent: an assimilated people in Lether

Jheck: a northern tribe

Ken'ryllah: a type of demon

Kenyll'rah: a type of demon
**Khalibaral:** a type of demon

**Meckros:** a civilization of mobile, floating cities

**N’purel:** the Whiskered Fish of the Kenyll’rah homeworld

**Nachts:** Jaghut-bred versions of bhoka’rala

**Nerek:** an assimilated people in Lether

**Onyx Wizards:** sorcerors of Bluerose (defeated in conquest)

**Tarthenal:** an assimilated people in Lether

**The Seregahl:** the five gods of the Tarthenal

**Mythos (Letherii, Edur and other)**

**(The) Black Winged Lord:** divinity worshipped in Bluerose

**Kilmandaros:** an Elder Goddess

**Mael:** an Elder God

**Menandore** (Betrayer, Dawn)

**Scabandari Bloodeye** (Father Shadow, Emurlahnis)

**Sheltatha Lore** (Daughter Dusk)

**Silchas Ruin** (The Betrayer)

**Sukul Ankhadu** (The Fickle, Dapple)

**The Holds**

The Tiles

**The Beast Hold**

Bone Perch
Elder
Crone
Seer
Shaman
Hunter
Tracker

**The Azath Hold**

Heartstone
Keeper
Portal
Path
Mason
Tomb
Guest
Barrow
Root
Wall
**The Dragon Hold**

Queen  
Consort  
Liege  
Knight  
Gate  
Wyval  
The Lady  
Blood-Drinker  
Path-Shaper

**The Ice Hold**

Ice Throne  
Walker  
Huntress  
Shaper  
Bearer  
Child  
Seed

**The Empty Hold**

Empty Throne  
Wanderer  
Mistress  
Watcher  
Walker  
Saviour  
Betrayer

**The Fulcra (unaligned)**

Shapefinder  
The Pack  
The Errant  
Axe (Eres)  
Crow (White Crow)  
Fire  
Dolmen  
Blade  
Knuckles
STEVEN ERIKSON'S EPIC FANTASY
SEQUENCE CONTINUES IN

THE BONEHUNTERS
NOW AVAILABLE FROM BANTAM BOOKS

Here's a taster ...
PROLOGUE

1164 Burn's Sleep
Istral'fennidahn, the season of D'rek, Worm of Autumn
22nd Year of the Rule of Empress Laseen
Twenty-Four days since the Execution of Sha'ik in Raraku

The webs between the towers were visible in glistening sheets far overhead, and the faint wind coming in from the sea shivered the vast threads so that a mist of rain descended on Kartool City, as it did most mornings.

Most things a person could get used to, eventually, and since the yellow-banded paralt spiders had been the first to occupy the once infamous towers following the Malazan conquest of the island, and that was decades past, now, there had been plenty of time to become inured to such details. Even the sight of gulls and pigeons suspended motionless between the score of towers every morning, before the fist-sized spiders emerged from their upper floor dens to retrieve their prey, yielded little more than faint revulsion among the citizens of Kartool City.

Sergeant Hellian of the Septarch District city guard, alas, was an exception to this. There were gods, she suspected, convulsed in perpetual hilarity at her wretched fate, for which they were no doubt responsible. Born in the city, cursed with a fear of all manner of spiders, she had lived the entirety of her nineteen years in unrelieved terror.

Why not just leave? A question asked by comrades and acquaintances more times than she cared to count. But it wasn't that simple. It was impossible, in fact. The murky waters of the harbour were fouled with moult-skins and web-fragments, and sodden, feather-tufted carcasses bobbing here and there. Inland, things got even worse. The young paralt, upon escaping their elders in the city, struggled to maturity among the limestone cliffs ringing Kartool. And though young, they were no less aggressive or virulent. While traders and farmers told her that one could walk the trails and roads all day without encountering a single one, Hellian didn't care. She knew the gods were waiting. Just like the spiders.

When sober, the sergeant noticed things, in proper diligent manner suited to a city guard. And while she was not consistently drunk, cold sobriety was an invitation to hysteria, so Hellian endeavoured to proceed steadily on the wobbly rope of not-quite-drunk. Accordingly, she had not known of the odd ship now moored in the Free Docks that had arrived before sunrise, its pennons indicating that it had come from Malaz Island.

Ships hailing from Malaz Island were not of themselves unusual or noteworthy; however, autumn had arrived, and the prevailing winds made virtually all lanes to the south impossible to navigate for at least the next two months.

Were things less bleary, she might also have noticed – had she taken the time to head down to the docks, which perhaps could have been managed at sword-point – that the ship was not the usual barque or trader, nor a military dromon, but a sleek, gracile thing, styled in a manner not employed in the past fifty years by any shipbuilders of the empire. Arcane carvings adorned the blade-like prow, minuscule shapes detailing serpents and worms, the panels sweeping back along the gunnels almost halfway down the length of the ship. The stern was squared and strangely high, with a side-mounted steering oar. The crew numbered about a dozen, quiet for sailors, and disinclined to leave the ship as it lolled alongside the dock. A lone figure had disembarked as soon as the gangplank had settled, shortly before dawn.

For Hellian, these details came later. The runner that found her was a local brat who, when he wasn't breaking laws, loitered around the docks in the hopes of being hired as a guide for visitors. The fragment of parchment he handed her was, she could feel, of some quality. On it was written a terse message, the contents of which made her scowl.
'All right, lad, describe the man who gave this to you.'

'I can't.'

Hellian glanced back at the three guards standing behind her on the street corner. One of them stepped behind the boy and picked him up, one-handed, gripping the back of the ratty tunic. A quick shake.

'Loosened your memory some?' Hellian asked. 'I hope so, because I ain't paying coin.'

'I can't remember! I looked right into his face, Sergeant! Only ... I can't remember what it looked like!'

She studied the boy for a moment, then grunted and turned away.

The guard set the boy down but did not release his grip.

'Let him go, Urb.'

The lad scampered away.

With a vague gesture for her guards to follow, she set off.

The Septarch District was the city's most peaceful area, not through any particular diligence on Hellian's part, however. There were few commercial buildings, and those residences that existed served to house acolytes and support staff of the dozen temples commanding the district's main avenue. Thieves who wanted to stay alive did not steal from temples.

She led her squad onto the avenue, noting once again how decrepit many of the temples had become. The paralt spiders liked the ornate architecture and the domes and lesser towers, and it seemed the priests were losing the battle. Chitenous rubbish crackled and crunched underfoot as they walked.

Years ago, the first night of Istral'fennidahn, just past, would have been marked with an island-wide fete, filled with sacrifices and propitiations to Kartool's patron goddess, D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, and the archpriest of the Grand Temple, the Demidrek, would lead a procession through the city on a carpet of fecund rubbish, his bared feet sweeping through maggot- and worm-ridden refuse. Children would chase lame dogs down the alleys, and those they cornered they would stone to death whilst shrieking their goddess's name. Convicted criminals sentenced to execution would have their skins publicly flailed, their long-bones broken, then the hapless victims would be flung into pits aswarm with carrion beetles and red fireworms, that would devour them over the course of four or five days.

All of this was before the Malazan conquest, of course. The emperor's principal target had been the cult of D'rek. He'd well understood that the heart of Kartool's power was the Grand Temple, and the island's master sorcerers were the priests and priestesses of D'rek, ruled over by the Demidrek. Further, it was no accident that the night of slaughter that preceded the naval battle and the subsequent invasion, a night led by the infamous Dancer and Surly, Mistress of the Claws, had so thoroughly obliterated the cult's sorcerers, including the Demidrek. For the archpriest of the Grand Temple had only recently gained his eminence via an internal coup, and the ousted rival had been none other than Tayschreenn, the emperor's High Mage.

Hellian had but heard tales of the celebrations, since they had been outlawed as soon as the Malazan occupiers settled the imperial mantle upon the island, but she had been told often enough about those glorious days of long ago, when Kartool Island had been at the pinnacle of civilization.

The present sordid condition was the fault of the Malazans, everyone agreed. Autumn had in truth arrived upon the island and its morose inhabitants. More than the cult of D'rek had been crushed, after all. Slavery was abolished, the execution pits had been scoured clean and permanently sealed. There was even a building hosting a score of misguided altruists who adopted lame dogs.

They passed the modest temple of the Queen of Dreams, and on the opposite side squatted the much-hated Temple of Shadows. There had once been but seven religions permitted upon Kartool, six subservient to D'rek – hence the district's name. Soliel, Poliel, Beru, Burn, Hood and Fener. Since the conquest, more had arrived – the aforementioned, along with Dessembrae, Togg, and Oponn. And the Grand Temple, still the largest of all
the structures in the city, was in a pathetic state of disrepair.

The figure standing before the broad-stepped entrance wore the garb of a Malazan sailor, faded waterproofed leathers, a worn shirt of thin, ragged linen. His dark hair was in a queue, hanging down between his shoulders and otherwise unadorned. As he turned at their approach, the sergeant saw a face of even, benign features, although there was something odd about the man's eyes, something vaguely fevered.

Hellian drew a deep breath to help clear her sodden thoughts, then raised the parchment between them. 'This is yours, I presume?'

The man nodded. 'You are the guard commander in this district?'

She smiled. 'Sergeant Hellian. The captain died last year of a septic foot. We're still waiting for a replacement.'

Brows rose with irony. 'Not a promotion, Sergeant? One presumes, therefore, that sobriety would be a decisive virtue for a captain.'

'Your note said there's trouble at the Grand Temple,' Hellian said, ignoring the man's rudeness and turning to study the massive edifice. The double doors, she noted with a frown, were closed. On this day of all days, this was unprecedented.

'I think so, Sergeant,' the man said.

'Had you come to pay your respects to D'rek?' Hellian asked him, as faint unease struggled through the alcoholic haze. 'Are the doors locked? What's your name and where are you from?'

'I am named Banaschar, from Malaz City. We arrived this morning.'

A grunt from one of the guards behind her, and Hellian thought about it. Then she shot Banaschar a more careful look. 'By ship? At this time of year?'

'We made what haste we could. Sergeant, I believe we need to break into the Grand Temple.'

'Why not just knock?'

'I have tried,' Banaschar replied. 'No one comes.'

Hellian hesitated. Break into the Grant Temple? The Fist will have my tits on a fry pan for this.

'Hood's blessing,' Hellian muttered, 'lots of them.' Curious now, she walked closer. Banaschar followed, and after a moment the squad fell in.

'They look ...' she shook her head.

'Decayed,' Banaschar said. 'Rotting. Sergeant, the doors, please.'

Still she hesitated. A thought occurred to her and she glared at the man. 'You said you made all haste to get here. Why? Are you an acolyte of D'rek – you don't look it. What brought you here, Banaschar?'

'A presentiment, Sergeant. I was ... many years past... a priest of D'rek, in the Jakatakan temple on Malaz Island.'

'A presentiment brought you all the way to Kartool? Do you take me for a fool?'

Anger flashed in the man's eyes. 'Clearly you're too drunk to smell what I can smell.' He eyed the guards. 'Do you share your sergeant's failings, or am I alone in this matter?'
Urb was frowning, then he said, 'Sergeant, we should kick in these doors, I think.'

'So do it then, damn you!'

She 'watched as her guard battered away at the door. The noise attracted a crowd, and Hellian saw, threading to the forefront, a tall, robed woman who was clearly a priestess from one of the other temples. Oh, now what?

But the woman’s eyes were fixed on Banaschar, who had in turn noted her approach and stared steadily back, his expression setting hard.

'What are you doing here?' the woman demanded.

'Have you sensed nothing, High Priestess? Complacency is a disease fast spreading, it seems.'

The woman's gaze shifted to the guards kicking at the doors. 'What has happened?'

The door on the right splintered, then was knocked back by a final kick.

Hellian gestured for Urb to enter then followed, Banaschar behind her.

The stench was overwhelming, and in the gloom was visible great splashes of blood on the walls, fragments of meat scattered on the polished tiles, and pools of bile, blood, and faeces, as well as scraps of clothing and clumps of hair.

Urb had taken no more than two steps and now stood, staring down at what he was standing in. Hellian edged past him, her hand of its own accord reaching for the flask tucked in her belt. Banaschar's hand stayed her. 'Not in here,' he said.

She roughly shook him off. 'Go to Hood,' she growled, pulling the flask loose and tugging free the stopper. She drank three quick mouthfuls. 'Corporal Hinib, go find Commander Charl. We'll need a detachment to secure the area. Have word sent to the Fist, I want some mages down here.'

'Sergeant,' said Banaschar, 'this is a matter for priests.'

'Don't be an idiot.' She waved at her remaining guards. 'Conduct a search. See if there's any survivors—'

'There are none,' Banaschar pronounced. 'The High Priestess of the Queen of Dreams has already left, Sergeant. Accordingly, all of the temples will be informed. Investigations will begin.'

'What sort of investigations?' Hellian demanded.

He grimaced. 'Priestly sorts.'

'And what of you?'

'I have seen enough,' he said.

'Don't even think of going anywhere, Banaschar,' she said, scanning the scene of slaughter. 'First night of Autumn in the Grand Temple, that used to involve an orgy. Looks like it got out of hand.' Two more quick swallows from the flask, and blessed numbness beckoned. 'You've a lot of questions you need to answer—'

Urb's voice cut in. 'He's gone, Sergeant.'

Hellian swung about. 'Damn! Weren't you keeping an eye on the bastard, Urb?'

The big man spread his hands. 'You was talking away to 'im, Sergeant. I was eyeing the crowd out front. He didn't get past me, that's for sure.'

'Get a description out. I want him found.'

Urb frowned. 'Uh, I can't remember what he looked like.'
'Damn you, neither can I.' Hellian walked over to where Banaschar had been standing. Squinted down at his footprints in the blood. They didn't lead anywhere.

Sorcery. She hated sorcery. 'You know what I'm hearing right now, Urb?'

'No.'

'I'm hearing the Fist. Whistling. You know why he's whistling?'

'No. Listen, Sergeant—'

'It's the fry pan, Urb. It's that nice, sweet sizzle that makes him so happy.'

'Sergeant—'

'Where will he send us, do you think? Korel? That one's a real mess. Maybe Genabackis, though that's quieted down some. Seven Cities, maybe.' She drained the last of the pear brandy in the flask. 'One thing for sure, we'd better set stones to our swords, Urb.'

The tramp of heavy boots sounded in the street beyond. A half dozen squads at the very least.

'Don't get many spiders on ships, right, Urb?' She glanced over, fought the bleariness and studied the miserable expression on his face. 'That's right, isn't it? Tell me I'm right, damn you.'

A hundred or so years ago, lightning had struck the huge guldinda tree, the white fire driving like a spear down its heartwood and splitting wide the ancient trunk. The blackened scorch-marks had long since bleached away as the desert sun burned its unceasing light upon the worm-riven wood. Swaths of bark had peeled back and now lay heaped over the bared roots wrapped about the hill's summit like a vast net.

The mound, misshapen where once it had been circular, commanded the entire basin. It stood alone, an island profoundly deliberate in the midst of a haphazard, random landscape. Beneath the jumbled boulders, sandy earth and snaking dead roots, a capstone that had once protected a slab-walled burial chamber had cracked, collapsing to swallow the space beneath, and in so doing settling an immense weight upon the body interred within.

The tremor of footfalls reaching down to that body were a rare enough occurrence – perhaps a handful of times over the past countless millennia – that the long-slumbering soul was stirred into wakefulness, then intense awareness, upon the sensation of not one set of feet, but a dozen, ascending the steep, rough slopes and assembling at last around the shattered tree.

The skein of wards embracing the creature was twisted and tangled, yet persistent in its multi-layered power. The one who had imprisoned it had been thorough, fashioning rituals of determined permanence, blood-traced and chaos-fed. They were intended to last for ever.

Such intentions were a conceit, asserted in the flawed belief that mortals would one day be without malice, or desperation. That the future was a safer place than the brutal present, and that all that was once past would never again be revisited. The twelve lean figures, bodies swathed in ragged, stained linen, their heads hooded and faces hidden behind grey veils, well understood the risks entailed when driven to precipitous acts. Alas, they also understood desperation.

All were destined to speak at this gathering, the order specified by the corresponding position of various stars, planets and constellations, all unseen behind blue sky yet the locations known nonetheless. Upon taking their positions, a long moment of stillness passed, then the first of the Nameless Ones spoke.

'We stand once more before necessity. These are the patterns long ago foreseen, revealing all our struggles to have been for naught. In the name of the Warren of Mockra, I invoke the ritual of release.'

At these words, the creature within the barrow felt a sudden snap, and the awakened awareness all at once found its own identity. Its name was Dejim Nebrah. Born on the eve of the death of the First Empire, when the streets of the city beyond burned and screams announced unrelied slaughter. For the T’lan Imass had come.
Dejim Nebrahl, born into fullest knowledge, a child with seven souls, climbing blood-smeared and trembling from his mother's cooling body. A child. An abomination.

T'rolbarahl, demonic creations by the hand of Dessimbelackis himself, long before the Dark Hounds took shape in the Emperor's mind. T'rolbarahl, misshapen errors in judgement, they had been expunged, exterminated at the Emperor's own command. Blood-drinkers, eaters of human flesh, yet possessing depths of cunning even Dessimbelackis could not have imagined. And so, seven T'rolbarahl had managed to elude their hunters for a time, sufficient to impart something of their souls to a mortal woman, widowed by the Trell Wars and without family, a woman whom none would notice, whose mind could be broken, whose body could be made into a feeding vessel, a M'ena Mahybe, for the seven-faced D'ivers T'rolbarahl child swiftly growing within her.

Born into a night of terror. The T'lan Imass, had they found Dejim, would have acted without hesitation. Dragging forth those seven demonic souls, binding them into an eternity of pain, their power bled out, slow and incrementally, to feed the T'lan Bonecasters in their unceasing wars against the Jaghut.

But Dejim Nebrahl had escaped. His power growing as he fed, night after night, through the ruins of the First Empire. Always hidden, even from those few Soletaken and D'ivers that had survived the Great Slaughter, for even they would not abide Dejim's existence. He fed on some of them as well, for he was smarter than they, and quicker, and had not the Deragoth stumbled onto his trail...

The Dark Hounds had a master in those days, a clever master, excelled in ensnaring sorceries and, once decided upon a task, he would not relent.

A single mistake, and Dejim's freedom was ended. Binding upon binding, taking away his very own self-awareness, and with it all sense of having once been ... otherwise.

Yet now ... awake once more.

The second Nameless One, a woman, spoke, 'There stands a plain west and south of Raraku, vast and level for leagues in all directions. When the sands blow away, the shards of a million broken pots are exposed, and to cross the plain is to leave a trail of blood. In this scene are found unmitigated truths. On the trail out of savagery ... some vessels must needs break. And for the sojourner, a toll in blood must be paid. By the power of the Warren of Telas, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Within the barrow, Dejim Nebrahl became aware of his body. Battered flesh, straining bone, sharp gravel, sifting sands, the immense weight lying upon him. Agony.

'As we fashioned this dilemma,' the third priest said, 'so we must initiate its resolution. Chaos pursues this world, and every world beyond this one. In the seas of reality can be found a multitude of layers, one existence flowing upon another. Chaos threatens with storms and tides and wayward currents, sending all into dread tumult. We have chosen one current, a terrible, unchained force – chosen to guide it, to shape its course unseen and unchallenged. We intend to drive one force upon another, and so effect mutual annihilation. We assume a terrible responsibility in this, yet the only hope of success lies with us, with what we do here on this day. In the name of the Warren of Denul. I invoke the ritual of release.'

Pain faded from Dejim's body. Still trapped and unable to move, the D'ivers T'rolbarahl felt his flesh heal.

The fourth Nameless One said, 'We must acknowledge grief for the impending demise of an honourable servant. It must, alas, be a short-lived grief, and so unequal to the measure of our unfortunate servant. This, of course, is not the only grief demanded of us. Of the other, I trust we have all made our peace, else we would not be here. In the name of the Warren of Driss, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Dejim Nebrahl's seven souls became distinct from one another. D'ivers, yet far more so, not seven who are one – although that could be said to be true – but seven separate in identity, independent yet together.

'We do not yet understand every facet of this trial,' the fifth, a priestess, said, 'and to this our absent kin must not relent in their pursuit. Shadowthrone cannot – must not – be underestimated. He possesses too much knowledge. Of the Azath. Perhaps, too, of us. He is not yet our enemy, but that alone does not make him our
ally. He ... perturbs. And I would we negate his existence at the earliest opportunity, although I recognize that my view is in the minority within our cult. Yet, who else is more aware of the Realm of Shadow and its new master? In the name of the Warren of Meanas, I invoke the ritual of release.'

And so Dejim came to comprehend the power of his shadows, seven spawned deceivers, his ambushers in the necessary hunt that sustained him, that gave him so much pleasure, far beyond that of a filled belly and fresh, warm blood in his veins. The hunt delivered ... domination, and domination was exquisite.

The sixth Nameless One spoke, her accent strange, otherworldly, 'All that unfolds in the mortal realm gives shape to the ground upon which the gods walk. Thus, they are never certain of their stride. It falls to us to prepare the footfalls, to dig the deep, deadly pits, the traps and snares that shall be shaped by the Nameless Ones, for we are the hands of the Azath, we are the shapers of the will of the Azath. It is our task to hold all in place, to heal what is torn asunder, to lead our enemies into annihilation or eternal imprisonment. We shall not fail. I call upon the power of the Shattered Warren, Kurald Emurlahn, and invoke the ritual of release.'

There were favored paths through the world, fragment paths, and Dejim had used them well. He would do so again. Soon.

'Barghast, Trell, Tartheno Toblakai,' said the seventh priest, his voice a rumble, 'these are the surviving threads of Imass blood, no matter their claims to purity. Such claims are inventions, yet inventions have purpose. They assert distinction, they redirect the path walked before, and the path to come. They shape the emblems upon the standards in every war, and so give justification to slaughter. Their purpose, therefore, is to assert convenient lies. By the Warren of Tellann, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Fire in the heart, a sudden drumming of life. Cold flesh grew warm.

'Frozen worlds hide in darkness,' came the rasping words of the eighth Nameless One, 'and so hold the secret of death. The secret is singular. Death arrives as knowledge. Recognition, comprehension, acceptance. It is this and nothing more and nothing less. There shall come a time, perhaps not too far off, when death discovers its own visage, in a multitude of facets, and something new will be born. In the name of Hood's Warren, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Death. It had been stolen from him by the master of the Dark Hounds. It was, perhaps, something to be longed for. But not yet.

The ninth priest began with a soft, lilting laugh, then said, 'Where all began, so it will return in the end. In the name of the Warren of Kurald Galain, of True Darkness, I invoke the ritual of release.'

'And by the power of Rashan,' the tenth Nameless One hissed with impatience, 'I invoke the ritual of release.'

The ninth priest laughed again.

'The stars are wheeling,' the eleventh Nameless One said, 'and so the tension burgeons. There is justice in all that we do. In the name of the Warren of Thyrllan, I invoke the ritual of release.'

They waited. For the twelfth Nameless One to speak. Yet she said nothing, instead reaching out a slim, rust-red, scaled hand that was anything but human.

And Dejim Nebrahl sensed a presence. An intelligence, cold and brutal, seeping down from above, and the D'ivers was suddenly afraid.

'Can you hear me, T'rolbarahl?'

Yes.

'We would free you, but you must pay us for that release. Refuse to pay us, and we shall send you once more into mindless oblivion.'

Fear became terror. What is this payment you demand of me?
‘Do you accept?’

I do.

She explained to him, then, what was required. It seemed a simple thing. A minor task, easily achieved. Dejim Nebrahl was relieved. It would not take long, the victims were close by, after all, and once it was done the D'ivers would be freed of all obligation, and could do as he pleased.

The twelfth and last Nameless One, who had once been known as Sister Spite, lowered her hand. She knew that, of the twelve gathered here, she alone would survive the emergency of this fell demon. For Dejim Nebrahl would be hungry. Unfortunate, and unfortunate too the shock and dismay of her comrades upon witnessing her escape – in the brief moment before the T'rolbarahl attacked. She had her reasons, of course. First and foremost being the simple desire to stay among the living, for a while longer, anyway. As for the other reasons, they belonged to her and her alone.

She said, ‘In the name of the Warren of Starvald Demelain, I invoke the ritual of release.’ And from her words descended, through dead tree root, through stone and sand, dissolving ward after ward, a force of entropy, known to the world as Otataral.

And Dejim Nebrahl rose into the world of the living.

Eleven Nameless Ones began invoking their final prayers. Most of them never finished.

Some distance away, seated cross-legged before a small fire, a tattooed warrior cocked his head at the sound of distant screams. He looked southward and saw a dragon rising heavily from the hills lining the horizon, mottled scales glimmering in the sun's dying light. Watching it climb ever higher, the warrior scowled.

‘Bitch,’ he muttered. ‘I should've guessed.’

He settled back down, even as the screams faded in the distance. The lengthening shadows among the rock outcroppings surrounding his camp were suddenly unpleasant, thick and smeared.

Taralack Veed, a Gral warrior and the last survivor of the Eroth Clan, gathered a mouthful of phlegm and spat it onto the palm of his left hand. He then brought both hands together to spread the mucous evenly, which he then used to flatten down his swept-back, black hair in an elaborate gesture that startled the mass of flies crawling through it, momentarily, before they settled again.

After a time, he sensed that the creature had finished feeding, and was on the move. Taralack straightened. He pissed on the fire to douse it, then collected his weapons and set off to find the demon's trail.

There were eighteen residents living in the scatter of hovels at the crossroads. The track running parallel to the coast was Tapur Road, and three days' trek north was the city of Ahol Tapur. The other road, little more than a rutted trail, crossed the Path' Apur Mountains far inland, then stretched eastward, past this hamlet, for another two days of travel, where it finally reached the coast road alongside the Otataral Sea.

Four centuries ago a village had thrived in this place. The ridge to the south had been clothed in hardwood trees with a distinct, feathery foliage, trees now extinct on the subcontinent of Seven Cities. Appropriately, the wood from these trees had been used to carve sarcophagi, and the village had become renowned in cities as far away as Hissar to the south, Karashimesh to the west, and Ehrlitan to the northwest. The industry died with the last tree. Low-growth vanished into the gullets of goats, the topsoil blew away and the village shrank within a single generation to its present decrepit state.

The eighteen residents who remained now provided services growing ever rarer in demand, supplying water to passing caravans, repairing tack and such. A Malazan official had been through once, two years back, muttering something about a new raised road, and a garrisoned outpost, but this had been motivated by the illegal trade in raw Otataral, which, through other imperial efforts, had since dried up.

The recent rebellion had barely brushed the collective awareness of the residents, apart from the occasional rumour arriving with a messenger or outlaw riding through, but even they no longer came to the hamlet. In any case, rebellions were for other people.
Thus it was that the appearance of five figures, standing on the nearest rise of the inland track, shortly after midday, was quickly noticed, and word soon reached the nominal head of the community, the blacksmith, whose name was Barathol Mekhar, and who was the only resident who had not been born there. Of his past in the world beyond, little was known except what was self-evident – his deep, almost onyx black skin marked him as from a tribe of the southwestern corner of the subcontinent, hundreds, perhaps thousands of leagues distant. And the curled scarification on his cheeks looked martial, as did the skein of blade-cuts puckering his hands and forearms. He was known as a man of few words and virtually no opinions – at least none he cared to share – and so was well-suited as the hamlet's unofficial leader.

Trailed by a half-dozen adults who still professed to curiosity, Barathol Mekhar walked up the only street until he came to the hamlet's edge. The buildings to either side were ruined, long abandoned, their roofs caved in and walls crumbling and sand-heaped. Sixty or so paces away stood the five figures, motionless barring the ripple of ragged strips of the fur cloaks they wore. Two held spears, the other three carrying long two-handed swords slung across their backs. Some of them appeared to be missing limbs.

Barathol's eyes were not as sharp as they once had been. Even so ... 'Jhelim, Filiad, go to the smithy. Walk, don't run. There's a trunk behind the hide bolts. It's got a lock – break it. Take out the axe and shield, and the gauntlets, and the helm – never mind the chain – there's no time for that. Now, go.'

In the eleven years that Barathol had lived among them, he had never spoken so many words in a row to anyone. Jhelim and Filiad both stared in shock at the blacksmith's broad back, then, sudden fear filling their guts, they turned about and walked, stiffly with awkward, overlong strides, back down the street.

'Bandits,' whispered Kulat, the herder who'd butchered his last goat in exchange for a bottle of liquor from a caravan passing through seven years ago, and had done nothing since. 'Maybe they just want water – we ain't got nothing else.'

'They don't want water,' Barathol said. 'The rest of you, go find weapons – anything – no, never mind mat. Just go to your homes. Stay there.'

'What are they waiting for?' Kulat asked, as the others scattered.

'I don't know,' the blacksmith admitted.

'Well, they look to be from a tribe I ain't never seen before. Those furs – ain't it kind of hot for furs? And those bone helmets—'

'They're bone? Your eyes are better than mine, Kulat.'

'Only things still working, Barathol. Squat bunch, eh? You recognize the tribe, maybe?'

The blacksmith nodded. From the village behind them, he could now hear Jhelim and Filiad, their breaths loud as they hurried forward. 'I think so,' Barathol said in answer to Kulat's question.

'They going to be trouble?'

Jhelim stepped into his view, struggling beneath the weight of the double-bladed axe, the haft encased in strips of iron, a looping chain at the weighted pommel, the Aren Steel of the honed edges gleaming silver. A three-pronged punch-spike jutted from the top of the weapon, edged like a crossbow quarrel-head. The young man was staring down at it as if it was the old emperor's sceptre.

Beside Jhelim was Filiad, carrying the iron-scaled gauntlets, a round-shield and the camailed, grille-faced helm.

Barathol collected the gauntlets and tugged them on. The rippling scales reached up his forearms to a hinged elbow-cup, and the gauntlets were strapped in place just above the joint. The underside of the sleeves held a single bar, the iron black and notched, reaching from wrist to cup. He then took the helm, and scowled. 'You forgot the quilted under-padding.' He handed it back. 'Give me the shield – strap it on my arm, damn you, Filiad. Tighter. Good.'
The blacksmith then reached out for the axe. Jhelim needed both arms and all his strength to raise the weapon high enough for Barathol's right hand to slip through the chain loop, twisting twice before closing about the haft, and lifting it seemingly effortlessly from Jhelim's grasp. To the two men, he said, 'Get out of here.'

Kulat remained. 'They're coming forward now, Barathol.'

The blacksmith had not pulled his gaze from the figures. 'I'm not that blind, old man.'

'You must be, to stay standing here. You say you know the tribe – have they come for you, maybe? Some old vendetta?'

'It's possible,' Barathol conceded. 'If so, then the rest of you should be all right. Once they're done with me, they'll leave.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'I'm not.' Barathol lifted the axe into readiness. 'With T'lan Imass, there's no way to tell.'

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A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON

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- NIGHT OF KNIVES
To Courtney Welch.
Keep the music coming, friend.
Acknowledgements

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE MALAZANS

Empress Laseen, ruler of the Malazan Empire
Adjunct Tavore, commander of the Fourteenth Army
Fist Keneb, division commander
Fist Blistig, division commander
Fist Tene Baralta, division commander
Fist Temul, division commander
Nil, a Wickan warlock
Nether, a Wickan witch
T’amber, Tavore’s aide
Lostara Yil, aide to Pearl
Pearl, a Claw
Nok, Admiral of the Imperial Fleet
Banaschar, an ex-priest of D'rek
Hellian, a sergeant in the city guard of Kartool
Urb, a city guard in Kartool
Brethless, a city guard in Kartool
Touchy, a city guard in Kartool
Quick Ben, High Mage in the Fourteenth Army
Kalam Mekhar, an assassin
Grub, a foundling

SELECTED SOLDIERS IN THE FOURTEENTH ARMY

Captain Kindly, Ashok Regiment
Lieutenant Pores, Ashok Regiment
Captain Faradan Sort
Sergeant Fiddler/Strings
Corporal Tarr
Cuttle
Bottle
Koryk
Smiles
Sergeant Gesler
Corporal Stormy
Master Sergeant Braven Tooth
Maybe
Lutes
Ebron
Sinn
Crump
Sergeant Balm
Corporal Deadsmell
Throatslitter
Masan Gilani

OTHERS

Barathol Mekhar, a blacksmith
Kulat, a villager
Nulliss, a villager
Hayrith, a villager
Chaur, a villager
Noto Boil, company cutter (healer) in Onearm's Host
Hurlochel, an outrider in Onearm's Host
Captain Sweetcreek, an officer in Onearm's Host
Corporal Futhgar, an officer in Onearm's Host
Fist Rythe Bude, an officer in Onearm's Host
Ormologun, artist
Gumble, his critic
Apsalar, an assassin
Telorast, a spirit
Curdle, a spirit
Samar Dev, a witch of Ugarat
Karsa Orlong, a Teblor warrior
Ganath, a Jaghut
Spite, a Soletaken and sister to Lady Envy
Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas
Leoman of the Flails, last leader of the rebellion
Captain Dunsparrow, Y'Ghatan city guard
Karpolan Demesand, Trygalle Trade Guild
Torahaval Delat, a priestess of Poliel
Cutter, once Crokus of Darujhistan
Heboric Ghost Hands, Destraint of Treach
Scillara, refugee from Raraku
Felisin the Younger, refugee from Raraku
Greyfrog, a demon
Mappo Runt, a Trell
Icarium, a Jhag
Iskaral Pust, a priest of Shadow
Mogora, a D'ivers
Taralack Veed, a Gral and agent of the Nameless Ones
Dejim Nebrahl, a D'ivers T'rolbarahl of the First Empire
Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Onrack the Broken, an unbound T'lan Imass
Ibra Gholan, a T'lan Imass
Monok Ochem, a T'lan Imass Bonecaster
Minala, commander of the Company of Shadow
Tomad Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Feather Witch, a Letherii slave
Atri-Preda Yan Tovis (Twilight), commander of Letherii forces
Captain Varat Taun, officer under Twilight's Command
Taxilian, an interpreter
Ahlrada Ahn, a Tiste Andii spy among the Tiste Edur
Sathbaro Rangar, Arapay warlock
For all that is made real
In this age descending
Where heroes leave naught
But the iron ring of their names
From bardic throats
I stand in this silent heart
Yearning the fading beat
Of lives fallen to dust
And the sifting whisper
Proclaims glory’s passing
As the songs fail
In dwindling echoes
For all that is made real
The chambers and halls
Yawn empty to my cries –
For someone must
Give answer
Give answer
To all of this
Someone

The Age Descending
Torbora Fethena
The webs between the towers were visible in glistening sheets far overhead, and the faint wind coming in from the sea shivered the vast threads so that a mist of rain descended on Kartool City, as it did every morning in the Clear Season.

Most things a person could get used to, eventually, and since the yellow-banded paralt spiders had been the first to occupy the once infamous towers following the Malazan conquest of the island, and that was decades past now, there had been plenty of time to become inured to such details. Even the sight of gulls and pigeons suspended motionless between the score of towers every morning, before the fist-sized spiders emerged from their upper-floor dens to retrieve their prey, yielded little more than faint revulsion among the citizens of Kartool City.

Sergeant Hellian of the Septarch District city guard, alas, was an exception to this. There were gods, she suspected, convulsed in perpetual hilarity at her wretched fate, for which they were no doubt responsible. Born in the city, cursed with a fear of all manner of spiders, she had lived the entirety of her nineteen years in unrelieved terror.

Why not just leave? A question asked by comrades and acquaintances more times than she cared to count. But it wasn't that simple. It was impossible, in fact. The murky waters of the harbour were fouled with moultskins and web-fragments and sodden, feather-tufted carcasses bobbing here and there. Inland, things got even worse. The young paralt, upon escaping their elders in the city, struggled to maturity among the limestone cliffs ringing Kartool. And though young, they were no less aggressive or virulent. While traders and farmers told her that one could walk the trails and roads all day without encountering a single one, Hellian didn't care. She knew the gods were waiting. Just like the spiders.

When sober, the sergeant noticed things, in a proper and diligent manner suited to a city guard. And while she was not consistently drunk, cold sobriety was an invitation to hysteria, so Hellian endeavoured to proceed steadily on the wobbly rope of not-quite-drunk. Accordingly, she had not known of the odd ship now moored in the Free Docks, that had arrived before sunrise, its pennons indicating that it had come from Malaz Island.

Ships hailing from Malaz Island were not of themselves unusual or noteworthy; however, autumn had arrived, and the prevailing winds of the Clear Season made virtually all lanes to the south impossible to navigate for at least the next two months.

Were things less bleary, she might also have noticed – had she taken the time to head down to the docks, which perhaps could have been managed at sword-point – that the ship was not the usual barque or trader, nor a military dromon, but a sleek, gracile thing, styled in a manner not employed in the past fifty years by any shipbuilders of the empire. Arcane carvings adorned the blade-like prow, minuscule shapes detailing serpents and worms, the panels sweeping back along the gunnels almost halfway down the length of the ship. The stern was squared and strangely high, with a side-mounted steering oar. The crew numbered about a dozen, quiet for sailors, and disinclined to leave the ship as it lolled alongside the dock. A lone figure had disembarked as soon as the gangplank had settled, shortly before dawn.

For Hellian, these details came later. The runner that found her was a local brat who, when he wasn't breaking laws, loitered around the docks in the hopes of being hired as a guide for visitors. The fragment of parchment he handed her was, she could feel, of some quality. On it was written a terse message, the contents of which made her scowl.
'All right, lad, describe the man gave this to you."

'I can't."

Hellian glanced back at the four guards standing behind her on the street corner. One of them stepped behind the boy and picked him up, one-handed, gripping the back of the ratty tunic. A quick shake.

'Loosed your memory some?' Hellian asked. 'I hope so, because I ain't paying coin.'

'I can't remember! I looked right into his face, Sergeant! Only ... I can't remember what it looked like!' She studied the boy for a moment, then grunted and turned away.

The guard set the boy down but did not release his grip.

'Let him go, Urb.'

The lad scampered away.

With a vague gesture for her guards to follow, she set off.

The Septarch District was the city's most peaceful area, not through any particular diligence on Hellian's part, however. There were few commercial buildings, and those residences that existed served to house acolytes and support staff of the dozen temples commanding the district's main avenue. Thieves who wanted to stay alive did not steal from temples.

She led her squad onto the avenue, noting once again how decrepit many of the temples had become. The paralt spiders liked the ornate architecture and the domes and lesser towers, and it seemed the priests were losing the battle. Chitinous rubbish crackled and crunched underfoot as they walked.

Years ago, the first night of Istralf'fenndahn, just past, would have been marked with an island-wide fete, filled with sacrifices and propitiations to Kartool's patron goddess, D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, and the archpriest of the Grand Temple, the Demidrek, would lead a procession through the city on a carpet of fecund rubbish, his bared feet sweeping through maggot- and worm-ridden refuse. Children would chase lame dogs down the alleys, and those they cornered they would stone to death whilst shrieking their goddess's name. Convicted criminals sentenced to execution would have their skins publicly flailed, their long-bones broken, then the hapless victims would be flung into pits aswarm with carrion beetles and red fireworms, that would devour them over the course of four or five days.

All of this was before the Malazan conquest, of course. The Emperor's principal target had been the cult of D'rek. He'd well understood that the heart of Kartool's power was the Grand Temple, and the island's master sorcerers were the priests and priestesses of D'rek, ruled over by the Demidrek. Further, it was no accident that the night of slaughter that preceded the naval battle and the subsequent invasion, a night led by the infamous Dancer and Surly, Mistress of the Claw, had so thoroughly obliterated the cult's sorcerers, including the Demidrek. For the archpriest of the Grand Temple had only recently gained his eminence via an internal coup, and the ousted rival had been none other than Tayschrenn, the Emperor's new – at the time – High Mage.

Hellian had but heard tales of the celebrations, since they had been outlawed as soon as the Malazan occupiers settled the imperial mantle upon the island, but she had been told often enough about those glorious days of long ago, when Kartool Island had been at the pinnacle of civilization.

The present sordid condition was the fault of the Malazans, everyone agreed. Autumn had in truth arrived upon the island and its morose inhabitants. More than the cult of D'rek had been crushed, after all. Slavery was abolished, the execution pits had been scoured clean and permanently sealed. There was even a building hosting a score of misguided altruists who adopted lame dogs.

They passed the modest temple of the Queen of Dreams and, squatting on the opposite side, the much-hated Temple of Shadows. There had once been but seven religions permitted upon Kartool, six subservient to D'rek – hence the district's name. Soliel, Poliel, Beru, Burn, Hood and Fener. Since the conquest, more had arrived – the two aforementioned, along with Dessembrae, Togg and Oponn. And the Grand Temple of D'rek, still the
largest of all the structures in the city, was in a pathetic state of disrepair.

The figure standing before the broad-stepped entrance wore the garb of a Malazan sailor, faded waterproofed leathers, a worn shirt of thin, ragged linen. His dark hair was in a queue, hanging down between his shoulders and otherwise unadorned. As he turned at their approach, the sergeant saw a middle-aged face with even, benign features, although there was something odd about the man’s eyes, something vaguely fevered.

Hellian drew a deep breath to help clear her sodden thoughts, then raised the parchment between them. ‘This is yours, I presume?’

The man nodded. ‘You are the guard commander in this district?’

She smiled. ‘Sergeant Hellian. The captain died last year of a septic foot. We’re still waiting for a replacement.’

Brows rose with irony. ‘Not a promotion, Sergeant? One presumes, therefore, that sobriety would be a decisive virtue for a captain.’

‘Your note said there’s trouble at the Grand Temple,’ Hellian said, ignoring the man’s rudeness and turning to study the massive edifice. The double doors, she noted with a frown, were closed. On this day of all days, this was unprecedented.

‘I think so, Sergeant,’ the man said.

‘Had you come to pay your respects to D’rek?’ Hellian asked him, as faint unease struggled through the alcoholic haze. ‘Are the doors locked? What’s your name and where are you from?’

‘I am named Banaschar, from Malaz Island. We arrived this morning.’

A grunt from one of the guards behind her, and Hellian thought about it. Then she shot Banaschar a more careful look. ‘By ship? At this time of year?’

‘We made what haste we could. Sergeant, I believe we need to break into the Grand Temple.’

‘Why not just knock?’

‘I have tried,’ Banaschar replied. ‘No-one comes.’

Hellian hesitated. *Break into the Grand Temple? The Fist will have my tits on a fry pan for this.*

‘There are dead spiders on the steps,’ Urb said suddenly.

They turned.

‘Hood’s blessing,’ Hellian muttered, ‘lots of them.’ Curious now, she walked closer. Banaschar followed, and after a moment the squad fell in.

‘They look ...’ She shook her head.

‘Decayed,’ Banaschar said. ‘Rotting. Sergeant, the doors, please.’

Still she hesitated. A thought occurred to her and she glared at the man. ‘You said you made all haste to get here. Why? Are you an acolyte of D’rek? – You don’t look it. What brought you here, Banaschar?’

‘A presentiment, Sergeant. I was ... many years past ... a priest of D’rek, in the Jakatakan temple on Malaz Island.’

‘A presentiment brought you all the way to Kartool? Do you take me for a fool?’

Anger flashed in the man’s eyes. ‘Clearly you’re too drunk to smell what I can smell.’ He eyed the guards. ‘Do you share your sergeant’s failings, or am I alone in this matter?’
Urb was frowning, then he said, 'Sergeant, we should kick in these doors, I think.'

'So do it then, damn you!'

She watched as her guards battered away at the door. The noise attracted a crowd, and Hellian saw, threading to the forefront, a tall, robed woman who was clearly a priestess from one of the other temples. Oh, now what?

But the woman's eyes were fixed on Banaschar, who had in turn noted her approach and stared steadily back, his expression setting hard.

'What are you doing here?' the woman demanded.

'Have you sensed nothing, High Priestess? Complacency is a disease fast spreading, it seems.'

The woman's gaze shifted to the guards kicking at the doors. 'What has happened?'

The door on the right splintered, then was knocked back by a final kick.

Hellian gestured for Urb to enter then followed, Banaschar behind her.

The stench was overwhelming, and in the gloom was visible great splashes of blood on the walls, fragments of meat scattered on the polished tiles, and pools of bile, blood and faeces, as well as scraps of clothing and clumps of hair.

Urb had taken no more than two steps and now stood, staring down at what he was standing in. Hellian edged past him, her hand of its own accord reaching for the flask tucked in her belt. Banaschar's hand stayed her. 'Not in here,' he said.

She roughly shook him off. 'Go to Hood,' she growled, pulling the flask loose and tugging free the stopper. She drank three quick mouthfuls. 'Corporal, go find Commander Charl. We'll need a detachment to secure the area. Have word sent to the Fist, I want some mages down here.'

'Sergeant,' said Banaschar, 'this is a matter for priests.'

'Don't be an idiot.' She waved at her remaining guards. 'Conduct a search. See if there's any survivors—'

'There are none,' Banaschar pronounced. 'The High Priestess of the Queen of Dreams has already left, Sergeant. Accordingly, all of the temples will be informed. Investigations will begin.'

'What sort of investigations?' Hellian demanded.

He grimaced. 'Priestly sorts.'

'And what of you?'

'I have seen enough,' he said.

'Don't even think of going anywhere, Banaschar,' she said, scanning the scene of slaughter. 'First night of the Clear Season in the Grand Temple, that used to involve an orgy. Looks like it got out of hand.' Two more quick swallows from the flask, and blessed numbness beckoned. 'You've a lot of questions you need to answer—'

Urb's voice cut in, 'He's gone, Sergeant.'

Hellian swung about. 'Damn! Weren't you keeping an eye on the bastard, Urb?'

The big man spread his hands. 'You was talking away to 'im, Sergeant. I was eyeing the crowd out front. He didn't get past me, that's for sure.'

'Get a description out. I want him found.'

Urb frowned. 'Uh, I can't remember what he looked like.'
'Damn you, neither can I.' Hellian walked over to where Banaschar had been standing. Squinted down at his footprints in the blood. They didn't lead anywhere.

Sorcery. She hated sorcery. 'You know what I'm hearing right now, Urb?'

'No.'

'I'm hearing the Fist. Whistling. You know why he's whistling?'

'No. Listen, Sergeant—'

'It's the fry pan, Urb. It's that nice, sweet sizzle that makes him so happy.'

'Sergeant—'

'Where will he send us, do you think? Korel? That one's a real mess. Maybe Genabackis, though that's quieted down some. Seven Cities, maybe.' She drained the last of the pear brandy in the flask. 'One thing's for sure, we'd better set stones to our swords, Urb.'

The tramp of heavy boots sounded in the street beyond. A half-dozen squads at the very least.

'Don't get many spiders on ships, right, Urb?' She glanced over, fought the bleariness and studied the miserable expression on his face. 'That's right, isn't it? Tell me I'm right, damn you.'

A hundred or so years ago, lightning had struck the huge guldindha tree, the white fire driving like a spear down its heartwood and splitting wide the ancient trunk. The blackened scorch-marks had long since bleached away as the desert sun burned its unceasing light upon the wormriven wood. Swaths of bark had peeled back and now lay heaped over the bared roots that were wrapped about the hill's summit like a vast net.

The mound, misshapen where once it had been circular, commanded the entire basin. It stood alone, an island profoundly deliberate in the midst of a haphazard, random landscape. Beneath the jumbled boulders, sandy earth and snaking dead roots, the capstone that had once protected a slab-walled burial chamber had cracked, collapsing to swallow the space beneath, and in so doing settling an immense weight upon the body interred within.

The tremor of footfalls reaching down to that body were a rare enough occurrence – perhaps a handful of times over the past countless millennia – that the long-slumbering soul was stirred into wakefulness, then intense awareness, upon the sensation of not one set of feet, but a dozen, ascending the steep, rough slopes and assembling at last around the shattered tree.

The skein of wards embracing the creature was twisted and tangled, yet persistent in its multi-layered power. The one who had imprisoned it had been thorough, fashioning rituals of determined permanence, blood-traced and chaosfed. They were intended to last for ever.

Such intentions were a conceit, asserted in the flawed belief that mortals would one day be without malice, or desperation. That the future was a safer place than the brutal present, and that all that was once past would never again be revisited. The twelve lean figures, bodies swathed in ragged, stained linen, their heads hooded and faces hidden behind grey veils, well understood the risks entailed when driven to precipitous acts. Alas, they also understood desperation.

All were destined to speak at this gathering, the order specified by the corresponding position of various stars, planets and constellations, all unseen behind blue sky yet the locations known nonetheless. Upon taking their positions, a long moment of stillness passed, then the first of the Nameless Ones spoke.

'We stand once more before necessity. These are the patterns long ago foreseen, revealing all our struggles to have been for naught. In the name of the Warren of Mockra, I invoke the ritual of release.'

At these words, the creature within the barrow felt a sudden snap, and the awakened awareness all at once found its own identity. Its name was Dejim Nebrahl. Born on the eve of the death of the First Empire, when the
streets of the city beyond burned and screams announced unrelieved slaughter. For the T’lan Imass had come.

Dejim Nebrahl, born into fullest knowledge, a child with seven souls, climbing blood-smeared and trembling from his mother's cooling body. A child. An abomination.

T’rolbarahl, demonic creations by the hand of Dessimbelackis himself, long before the Dark Hounds took shape in the Emperor's mind. T’rolbarahl, misshapen errors in judgement, had been expunged, exterminated at the Emperor's own command. Blood-drinkers, eaters of human flesh, yet possessing depths of cunning even Dessimbelackis could not have imagined. And so, seven T’rolbarahl had managed to elude their hunters for a time, sufficient to impart something of their souls to a mortal woman, widowed by the Trell Wars and without family, a woman whom none would notice, whose mind could be broken, whose body could be made into a feeding vessel, a M'ena Mahybe, for the seven-faced D'ivers T’rolbarahl child swiftly growing within her.

Born into a night of terror. The T’lan Imass, had they found Dejim, would have acted without hesitation: dragging forth those seven demonic souls, binding them into an eternity of pain, their power bled out, slowly and incrementally, to feed the T’lan bonecasters in their unceasing wars against the Jaghut.

But Dejim Nebrahl had escaped. His power growing as he fed, night after night through the ruins of the First Empire. Always hidden, even from those few Soletaken and D'ivers that had survived the Great Slaughter, for even they would not abide Dejim's existence. He fed on some of them as well, for he was smarter than they, and quicker, and had not the Deragoth stumbled onto his trail ...

The Dark Hounds had a master in those days, a clever master, who excelled in ensnaring sorceries and, once decided upon a task, he would not relent.

A single mistake, and Dejim's freedom was ended. Binding upon binding, taking away his self-awareness, and with it all sense of having once been ... otherwise.

Yet now ... awake once more.

The second Nameless One, a woman, spoke: 'There stands a plain west and south of Raraku, vast and level for leagues in all directions. When the sands blow away, the shards of a million broken pots are exposed, and to cross the plain barefooted is to leave a trail of blood. In this scene are found unmitigated truths. On the trail out of savagery ... some vessels must needs break. And for the sojourner, a toll in blood must be paid. By the power of the Warren of Telas, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Within the barrow, Dejim Nebrahl became aware of his body. Battered flesh, straining bone, sharp gravel, sifting sands, the immense weight lying upon him. Agony.

‘As we fashioned this dilemma,’ the third priest said, 'so we must initiate its resolution. Chaos pursues this world, and every world beyond this one. In the seas of reality can be found a multitude of layers, one existence flowing upon another. Chaos threatens with storms and tides and wayward currents, sending all into dread tumult. We have chosen one current, a terrible, unchained force – chosen to guide it, to shape its course unseen and unchallenged. We intend to drive one force upon another, and so effect mutual annihilation. We assume a terrible responsibility in this, yet the only hope of success lies with us, with what we do here on this day. In the name of the Warren of Denul, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Pain faded from Dejim's body. Still trapped and unable to move, the D'ivers T’rolbarahl felt his flesh heal.

The fourth Nameless One said, 'We must acknowledge grief for the impending demise of an honourable servant. It must, alas, be a short-lived grief, and so unequal to the measure of the unfortunate victim. This, of course, is not the only grief demanded of us. Of the other, I trust we have all made our peace, else we would not be here. In the name of the Warren of D'riss, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Dejim Nebrahl's seven souls became distinct from one another. D'ivers, yet far more so, not seven who are one – although that could be said to be true – but seven separate in identity, independent yet together.

'Ve do not yet understand every facet of this trail,’ the fifth, a priestess, said, 'and to this our absent kin must not relent in their pursuit. Shadowthrone cannot – must not – be underestimated. He possesses too much
knowledge. Of the Azath. Perhaps, too, of us. He is not yet our enemy, but that alone does not make him our ally. He ... perturbs. And I would we negate his existence at the earliest opportunity, although I recognize that my view is in the minority within our cult. Yet, who else is more aware than I, of the Realm of Shadow and its new master? In the name of the Warren of Meanas, I invoke the ritual of release.'

And so Dejim came to comprehend the power of his shadows, seven spawned deceivers, his ambushers in the necessary hunt that sustained him, that gave him so much pleasure, far beyond that of a filled belly and fresh, warm blood in his veins. The hunt delivered ... domination, and domination was exquisite.

The sixth Nameless One spoke, her accent strange, otherworldly: 'All that unfolds in the mortal realm gives shape to the ground upon which the gods walk. Thus, they are never certain of their stride. It falls to us to prepare the footfalls, to dig the deep, deadly pits, the traps and snares that shall be shaped by the Nameless Ones, for we are the hands of the Azath, we are the shapers of the will of the Azath. It is our task to hold all in place, to heal what is torn asunder, to lead our enemies into annihilation or eternal imprisonment. We shall not fail. I call upon the power of the Shattered Warren, Kurald Emurlahn, and invoke the ritual of release.'

There were favoured paths through the world, fragment paths, and Dejim had used them well. He would do so again. Soon.

'Barghast, Trell, Tartheno Toblakai,' said the seventh priest, his voice a rumble, 'these are the surviving threads of Imass blood, no matter their claims to purity. Such claims are inventions, yet inventions have purpose. They assert distinction, they redirect the path walked before, and the path to come. They shape the emblems upon the standards in every war, and so give justification to slaughter. Their purpose, therefore, is to assert convenient lies. By the Warren of Tellann, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Fire in the heart, a sudden drumming of life. Cold flesh grew warm.

'Frozen worlds hide in darkness,' came the rasping words of the eighth Nameless One, 'and so hold the secret of death. The secret is singular. Death arrives as knowledge. Recognition, comprehension, acceptance. It is this and nothing more and nothing less. There shall come a time, perhaps not too far off, when death discovers its own visage, in a multitude of facets, and something new will be born. In the name of Hood's Warren, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Death. It had been stolen from him by the master of the Dark Hounds. It was, perhaps, something to be longed for. But not yet.

The ninth priest began with a soft, lilting laugh, then said, 'Where all began, so it will return in the end. In the name of the Warren of Kurald Galain, of True Darkness, I invoke the ritual of release.'

'And by the power of Rashan,' the tenth Nameless One hissed with impatience, 'I invoke the ritual of release!' The ninth priest laughed again.

'The stars are wheeling,' the eleventh Nameless One said, 'and so the tension burgeons. There is justice in all that we do. In the name of the Warren of Thyrllan, I invoke the ritual of release.'

They waited. For the twelfth Nameless One to speak. Yet she said nothing, instead reaching out a slim, rust-red, scaled hand that was anything but human.

And Dejim Nebrahls sensed a presence. An intelligence, cold and brutal, seeping down from above, and the Divers was suddenly afraid.

'Can you hear me, Trolbarahl?'

Yes.

'We would free you, but you must pay us for that release. Refuse to pay us, and we shall send you once more into mind-less oblivion.'

Fear became terror. What is this payment you demand of me?
'Do you accept?'

I do.

She explained to him, then, what was required. It seemed a simple thing. A minor task, easily achieved. Dejim Nebrahl was relieved. It would not take long, the victims were close by, after all, and once it was done the D'ivers would be freed of all obligation, and could do as he pleased.

The twelfth and last Nameless One, who had once been known as Sister Spite, lowered her hand. She knew that, of the twelve gathered here, she alone would survive the emergence of this fell demon. For Dejim Nebrahl would be hungry. Unfortunate, and unfortunate too the shock and dismay of her comrades upon witnessing her escape – in the brief moment before the Trolbarahl attacked. She had her reasons, of course. First and foremost being the simple desire to stay among the living, for a while longer, anyway. As for the other reasons, they belonged to her and her alone.

She said, 'In the name of the Warren of Starvald Demelain, I invoke the ritual of release.' And from her words descended, through dead tree root, through stone and sand, dissolving ward after ward, a force of entropy, known to the world as otataral.

And Dejim Nebrahl rose into the world of the living.

Eleven Nameless Ones began invoking their final prayers. Most of them never finished.

Some distance away, seated cross-legged before a small fire, a tattooed warrior cocked his head at the sound of distant screams. He looked southward and saw a dragon rising heavily from the hills lining the horizon, mottled scales glimmering in the sun's dying light. Watching it climb ever higher, the warrior scowled.

'Bitch,' he muttered. 'I should've guessed.'

He settled back down, even as the screams faded in the distance. The lengthening shadows among the rock out-crop surrounding his camp were suddenly unpleasant, thick and smeared.

Taralack Veed, a Gral warrior and the last survivor of the Eroth bloodline, gathered a mouthful of phlegm and spat it onto the palm of his left hand. He brought both hands together to spread the mucus evenly, which he then used to flatten down his swept-back black hair in an elaborate gesture that startled the mass of flies crawling through it, momentarily, before they settled once again.

After a time, he sensed that the creature had finished feeding, and was on the move. Taralack straightened. He pissed on the fire to douse it, then collected his weapons and set off to find the demon's trail.

There were eighteen residents living in the scatter of hovels at the crossroads. The track running parallel to the coast was Tapur Road, and three days' trek north was the city of Ahol Tapur. The other road, little more than a rutted trail, crossed the Path'Apur Mountains far inland, then stretched eastward, past this hamlet, for another two days of travel, where it finally reached the coast road alongside the Otataral Sea.

Four centuries ago a village had thrived in this place. The ridge to the south had been clothed in hardwood trees with a distinctive, feathery foliage, trees now extinct on the subcontinent of Seven Cities. Appropriately, the wood from these trees had been used to carve sarcophagi, and the village had become renowned in cities as far away as Hissar to the south, Karashimesh to the west, and Ehrlitan to the northwest. The industry died with the last tree. Lowgrowth vanished into the gullets of goats, the topsoil blew away and the village shrank within a single generation to its present decrepit state.

The eighteen residents who remained now provided services growing ever less in demand, supplying water to passing caravans, repairing tack and such. A Malazan official had been through once, two years back, muttering something about a new raised road, and a garrisoned out-post, but this had been motivated by the illegal trade in raw otataral, which, through other imperial efforts, had since dried up.

The recent rebellion had barely brushed the collective awareness of the residents, apart from the occasional
rumour arriving with a messenger or outlaw riding through, but even they no longer came to the hamlet. In any case, rebellions were for other people.

Thus it was that the appearance of five figures, standing on the nearest rise of the inland track, shortly after midday, was quickly noticed, and word soon reached the nominal head of the community, the blacksmith, whose name was Barathol Mekhar, and who was the only resident who had not been born there. Of his past in the world beyond, little was known except what was self-evident – his deep, almost onyx black skin marked him as from a tribe of the south-western corner of the subcontinent, hundreds, perhaps thousands of leagues distant. And the curled scarification on his cheeks looked martial, as did the skein of blade-cuts puckering his hands and forearms. He was known as a man of few words and virtually no opinions – at least none he cared to share – and so was well-suited as the hamlet's unofficial leader.

Trailed by a half-dozen adults who still professed to curiosity, Barathol Mekhar walked up the only street until he came to the hamlet's edge. The buildings to either side were ruined, long abandoned, their roofs caved in and walls crumbling and sand-heaped. Sixty or so paces away stood the five figures, motionless, barring the ripple of the ragged strips of their fur cloaks. Two held spears, the other three carrying long two-handed swords slung across their backs. Some of them appeared to be missing limbs.

Barathol's eyes were not as sharp as they once had been. Even so... 'Jhelim, Filiad, go to the smithy. Walk, don't run. There's a trunk behind the hide bolts. It's got a lock – break it. Take out the axe and shield, and the gauntlets, and the helm – never mind the chain – there's no time for that. Now, go.'

In the eleven years that Barathol had lived among them, he had never spoken so many words in a row to anyone. Jhelim and Filiad both stared in shock at the blacksmith's broad back, then, sudden fear filling their guts, they turned about and walked, stiffly, with awkward, overlong strides, back down the street.

'Bandits,' whispered Kulat, the herder who'd butchered his last goat in exchange for a bottle of liquor from a caravan passing through seven years ago, and had done nothing since. 'Maybe they just want water – we ain't got nothing else.' The small round pebbles he kept in his mouth clicked as he spoke.

'They don't want water,' Barathol said. 'The rest of you, go find weapons – anything – no, never mind that. Just go to your homes. Stay there.'

'What are they waiting for?' Kulat asked, as the others scattered.

'I don't know,' the blacksmith admitted.

'Well, they look to be from a tribe I ain't never seen before.' He sucked on the stones for a moment, then said, 'Those furs – ain't it kind of hot for furs? And those bone helmets—'

'They're bone? Your eyes are better than mine, Kulat.'

'Only things still working, Barathol. Squat bunch, eh? You recognize the tribe, maybe?'

The blacksmith nodded. From the village behind them, he could now hear Jhelim and Filiad, their breaths loud as they hurried forward. 'I think so,' Barathol said in answer to Kulat's question.

'They going to be trouble?'

Jhelim stepped into his view, struggling beneath the weight of the double-bladed axe, the haft encased in strips of iron, a looping chain at the weighted pommel, the Aren steel of the honed edges gleaming silver. A three-pronged punch-spoke jutted from the top of the weapon, edged like a crossbow quarrel-head. The young man was staring down at it as if it were the old Emperor's sceptre.

Beside Jhelim was Filiad, carrying the iron-scaled gauntlets, a round-shield and the camailed, grille-faced helm.

Barathol collected the gauntlets and tugged them on. The rippling scales reached up his forearms to a hinged elbow-cup, and the gauntlets were strapped in place just above the joint. The underside of the sleeves held a single bar, the iron black and notched, reaching from wrist to cup. He then took the helm, and scowled. 'You
forgot the quilted under-padding.' He handed it back. 'Give me the shield – strap it on my arm, damn you, Filiad. Tighter. Good.'

The blacksmith then reached out for the axe. Jhelim needed both arms and all his strength to raise the weapon high enough for Barathol's right hand to slip through the chain loop, twisting twice before closing about the haft, and lifting it seemingly effortlessly from Jhelim's grasp. To the two men, he said, 'Get out of here.'

Kulat remained. 'They're coming forward now, Barathol.'

The blacksmith had not pulled his gaze from the figures. 'I'm not that blind, old man.'

'You must be, to stay standing here. You say you know the tribe – have they come for you, maybe? Some old vendetta?'

'It's possible,' Barathol conceded. 'If so, then the rest of you should be all right. Once they're done with me, they'll leave.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'I'm not.' Barathol lifted the axe into readiness. 'With T'lan Imass, there's no way to tell.'
BOOK ONE

THE THOUSAND-FINGERED GOD
I walked the winding path down into the valley,
Where low stone walls divided the farms and holds
And each measured plot had its place in the scheme
That all who lived there well understood,
To guide their travels and hails in the day
And lend a familiar hand in the darkest night
Back to home's door and the dancing dogs.
I walked until called up short by an old man
Who straightened from work in challenge,
And smiling to fend his calculation and judgement,
I asked him to tell me all he knew
Of the lands to the west, beyond the vale,
And he was relieved to answer that there were cities,
Vast and teeming with all sorts of strangeness,
And a king and feuding priesthoods and once,
He told me, he saw a cloud of dust flung up
By the passing of an army, off to battle
Somewhere, he was certain, in the chilly south,
And so I gleaned all that he knew, and it was not much,
Beyond the vale he had never been, from birth
Until now, he had never known and had,
Truth to tell, never been for thus it is
That the scheme transpires for the low kind
In all places in all times and curiosity lies unhoned
And pitted, although he gave breath enough to ask
Who I was and how had I come here and where
My destination, leaving me to answer with fading smile,
That I was bound for the teeming cities yet must needs
Pass first through here and had he yet noticed
That his dogs were lying still on the ground,
For I had leave to answer, you see, that I am come,
Mistress of Plague and this, alas, was proof
Of a far grander scheme.

Poliel's Leave
Fisher kel Tath
CHAPTER ONE

The streets are crowded with lies these days.

High Mage Tayschrenn, Empress Laseen's Coronation
Recorded by Imperial Historian Duiker

1164 Burn's Sleep
Fifty-eight days after the Execution of Sha'ik

Wayward winds had stirred the dust into the air earlier that day, and all who came into Ehrlitan's eastern inland gate were coated, clothes and skin, with the colour of the red sandstone hills. Merchants, pilgrims, drovers and travellers appeared before the guards as if conjured, one after another, from the swirling haze, heads bent as they trudged into the gate's lee, eyes slitted behind folds of stained linen. Rust-sheathed goats stumbled after the drovers, horses and oxen arrived with drooped heads and rings of gritty crust around their nostrils and eyes, wagons hissed as sand sifted down between weathered boards in the beds. The guards watched on, thinking only of the end of their watch, and the baths, meals and warm bodies that would follow as proper reward for duties upheld.

The woman who came in on foot was noted, but for all the wrong reasons. Sheathed in tight silks, head wrapped and face hidden beneath a scarf, she was nonetheless worth a second glance, if only for the grace of her stride and the sway of her hips. The guards, being men and slavish to their imaginations, provided the rest.

She noted their momentary attention and understood it well enough to be unconcerned. More problematic had one or both of the guards been female. They might well have wondered that she was entering the city by this particular gate, having come down, on foot, this particular road, which wound league upon league through parched, virtually lifeless hills, then ran parallel to a mostly uninhabited scrub forest for yet more leagues. An arrival, then, made still more unusual since she was carrying no supplies, and the supple leather of her moccasins was barely worn. Had the guards been female, they would have accosted her, and she would have faced some hard questions, none of which she was prepared to answer truthfully.

Fortunate for the guards, then, that they had been male. Fortunate, too, the delicious lure of a man's imagination as those gazes followed her into the street, empty of suspicion yet feverishly disrobing her curved form with every swing of her hips, a motion she only marginally exaggerated.

Coming to an intersection she turned left and moments later was past their lines of sight. The wind was blunted here in the city, although fine dust continued to drift down to coat all in a monochrome powder. The woman continued through the crowds, her route a gradual, inward spiral towards the Jen'rahb, Ehrlitan's central tel, the vast multi-layered ruin inhabited by little more than vermin, of both the four-legged and two-legged kind. Arriving at last within sight of the collapsed buildings, she found a nearby inn, modest in presentation and without ambition to be other than a local establishment housing a few whores in the second-floor rooms and a dozen or so regulars in the groundfloor tavern.

Beside the tavern's entrance was an arched passage leading into a small garden. The woman stepped into that passage to brush the dust from her clothing, then walked on to the shallow basin of silty water beneath a desultorily trickling fountain, where she unwound the scarf and splashed her face, sufficient to take the sting from her eyes.

Returning through the passage, the woman then entered the tavern.

Gloomy, the smoke from fires, oil lanterns, durhang, itralse and rustleaf drifting beneath the low plaster ceiling, three-quarters full and all of the tables occupied. A youth had preceded her by a few moments, and was now breathlessly expounding on some adventure barely survived. Noting this as she walked past the young man
and his listeners, the woman allowed herself a faint smile that was, perhaps, sadder than she had intended.

She found a place at the bar and beckoned the tender over. He stopped opposite and studied her intently while she ordered, in unaccented Ehlil, a bottle of rice wine.

At her request he reached under the counter and she heard the clink of bottles as he said, in Malazan, 'Hope you're not expecting anything worth the name, lass.' He straightened, brushing dust from a clay bottle then peering at the stopper. 'This one's at least still sealed.'

'That will do,' she said, still speaking the local dialect, laying out on the bar-top three silver crescents.

'Plan on drinking all of it?'

'I'd need a room upstairs to crawl into,' she replied, tugging the stopper free as the barman set down a tin goblet. 'One with a lock,' she added.

'Then Oponn's smiling on you,' he said. 'One's just become available.'

'Good.'

'You attached to Dujek's army?' the man asked.

She poured out a full draught of the amber, somewhat cloudy wine. 'No. Why, is it here?'

'Tail ends,' he replied. 'The main body marched out six days ago. Left a garrison, of course. That's why I was wondering—'

'I belong to no army.'

Her tone, strangely cold and flat, silenced him. Moments later, he drifted away to attend to another customer.

She drank. Steadily working through the bottle as the light faded outside, and the tavern grew yet more crowded, voices getting louder, elbows and shoulders jostling against her more often than was entirely necessary. She ignored the casual groping, eyes on the liquid in the goblet before her.

At last she was done, and so she turned about and threaded her way, unsteadily, through the press of bodies to arrive finally at the stairs. She made her ascent cautiously, one hand on the flimsy railing, vaguely aware that someone was, unsurprisingly, following her.

At the landing she set her back against a wall.

The stranger arrived, still wearing a stupid grin – that froze on his face as the point of a knife pressed the skin beneath his left eye.

'Go back downstairs,' the woman said.

A tear of blood trickled down the man's cheek, gathered thick along the ridge of his jaw. He was trembling, wincing as the point slipped in ever deeper. 'Please,' he whispered.

She reeled slightly, inadvertently slicing open the man's cheek, fortunately downward rather than up into his eye. He cried out and staggered back, hands up in an effort to stop the flow of blood, then stumbled his way down the stairs.

Shouts from below, then a harsh laugh.

The woman studied the knife in her hand, wondering where it had come from, and whose blood now gleamed from it.

No matter.

She went in search of her room, and, eventually, found it.
The vast dust storm was natural, born out on the Jhag Odhan and cycling widdershins into the heart of the Seven Cities subcontinent. The winds swept northward along the east side of the hills, crags and old mountains ringing the Holy Desert of Raraku – a desert that was now a sea – and were drawn into a war of lightning along the ridge's breadth, visible from the cities of Pan'potsun and G'danisban. Wheeling westward, the storm spun out writhing arms, one of these striking Ehlitan before blowing out above the Ehlitan Sea, another reaching to the city of Pur Atrii. As the main body of the storm curled back inland, it gathered energy once more, battering the north side of the Thalas Mountains, engulfing the cities of Hatra and Y'Ghatan before turning southward one last time. A natural storm, one final gift, perhaps, from the old spirits of Raraku.

The fleeing army of Leoman of the Flails had embraced that gift, riding into that relentless wind for days on end, the days stretching into weeks, the world beyond reduced to a wall of suspended sand all the more bitter for what it reminded the survivors of – their beloved Whirlwind, the hammer of Sha'ik and Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Yet, even in bitterness, there was life, there was salvation.

Tavore's Malazan army still pursued, not in haste, not with the reckless stupidity shown immediately following the death of Sha'ik and the shattering of the rebellion. Now, the hunt was a measured thing, a tactical stalking of the last organized force opposed to the empire. A force believed to be in possession of the Holy Book of Dryjhna, the lone artifact of hope for the embattled rebels of Seven Cities.

Though he possessed it not, Leoman of the Flails cursed that book daily. With almost religious zeal and appalling imagination, he growled out his curses, the rasping wind thankfully stripping the words away so that only Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, riding close alongside his commander, could hear. When tiring of that tirade, Leoman would concoct elaborate schemes to destroy the tome once it came into his hands. Fire, horse piss, bile, Moranth incendiaries, the belly of a dragon ... until Corabb, exhausted, pulled away to ride in the more reasonable company of his fellow rebels.

Who would then ply him with fearful questions, casting uneasy glances Leoman's way. What was he saying?

Prayers, Corabb would answer. Our commander prays to Dryjhna all day. Leoman of the Flails, he told them, is a pious man.

About as pious as could be expected. The rebellion was collapsing, whipped away on the winds. Cities had capitulated, one after another, upon the appearance of imperial armies and ships. Citizens turned on neighbours in their zeal to present criminals to answer for the multitude of atrocities committed during the uprising. Once-heroes and petty tyrants alike were paraded before the reoccupiers, and blood-lust was high. Such grim news reached them from caravans they intercepted as they fled ever onward. And with each tatter of news, Leoman's expression darkened yet further, as if it was all he could do to bind taut the rage within him.

It was disappointment, Corabb told himself, punctuating the thought each time with a long sigh. The people of Seven Cities so quickly relinquished the freedom won at the cost of so many lives, and this was indeed a bitter truth, a most sordid comment on human nature. Had it all been for nothing, then? How could a pious warrior not experience soul-burning disappointment? How many tens of thousands of people had died? For what?

And so Corabb told himself he understood his commander. Understood that Leoman could not let go, not yet, perhaps never. Holding fast to the dream gave meaning to all that had gone before.

Complicated thoughts. It had taken Corabb many hours of frowning regard to reach them, to make that extraordinary leap into the mind of another man, to see through his eyes, if only for a moment, before reeling back in humble confusion. He had caught a glimpse, then, of what made great leaders, in battle, in matters of state. The facility of their intelligence in shifting perspectives, in seeing things from all sides. When, for Corabb, it was all he could manage, truth be told, to cling to a single vision – his own – in the midst of so much discord as the world was wont to rear up before him.

If not for his commander, Corabb well knew, he would be lost.

A gloved hand, gesturing, and Corabb kicked his mount forward until he was at Leoman's side.

The hooded, cloth-wrapped face swung close, leatherclad fingers tugging the stained silk away from the
mouth, and words shouted so that Corabb could hear them: 'Where in Hood's name are we?'

Corabb stared, squinted, then sighed.

Her finger provided the drama, ploughing a traumatic furrow across the well-worn path. The ants scurried in confusion, and Samar Dev watched them scrabbling fierce with the insult, the soldiers with their heads lifted and mandibles opened wide as if they would challenge the gods. Or, in this case, a woman slowly dying of thirst.

She was lying on her side in the shade of the wagon. It was just past midday, and the air was still. The heat had stolen all strength from her limbs. It was unlikely she could continue her assault on the ants, and the realization gave her a moment of regret. The deliverance of discord into otherwise predictable, truncated and sordid lives seemed a worthwhile thing. Well, perhaps not worthwhile, but certainly interesting. God-like thoughts, then, to mark her last day among the living.

Motion caught her attention. The dust of the road, shivering, and now she could hear a growing thunder, reverberating like earthen drums. The track she was on was not a well-traversed one here on the Ugarat Odhan. It belonged to an age long past, when the caravans plied the scores of routes between the dozen or more great cities of which ancient Ugarat was the hub, and all those cities, barring Kayhum on the banks of the river and Ugarat itself, were dead a thousand years or more.

Still, a lone rider could as easily be one too many as her salvation, for she was a woman with ample womanly charms, and she was alone. Sometimes, it was said, bandits and raiders used these mostly forgotten tracks as they made their way between caravan routes. Bandits were notoriously ungenerous.

The hoofs approached, ever louder, then the creature slowed, and a moment later a sultry cloud of dust rolled over Samar Dev. The horse snorted, a strangely vicious sound, and there was a softer thud as the rider slipped down. Faint footfalls drew nearer.

What was this? A child? A woman?

A shadow slid into view beyond that cast by the wagon, and Samar Dev rolled her head, watching as the figure strode round the wagon and looked down on her.

No, neither child nor woman. Perhaps, she considered, not even a man. An apparition, tattered white fur riding the impossibly broad shoulders. A sword of flaked flint strapped to his back, the grip wrapped in hide. She blinked hard, seeking more details, but the bright sky behind him defeated her. A giant of a man who walked quiet as a desert cat, a nightmare vision, a hallucination.

And then he spoke, but not, it was clear, to her. 'You shall have to wait for your meal, Havok. This one still lives.'

'Havok eats dead women?' Samar asked, her voice ragged. 'Who do you ride with?'

'Not with,' the giant replied. 'On.' He moved closer and crouched down beside her. There was something in his hands – a waterskin – but she found she could not pull her gaze from his face. Even, hard-edged features, broken and crazed by a tattoo of shattered glass, the mark of an escaped slave. 'I see your wagon,' he said, speaking the language of the desert tribes yet oddly accented, 'but where is the beast that pulled it?'

'In the bed,' she replied.

He set the skin at her side and straightened, walked over and leaned in for a look. 'There's a dead man in there.'

'Yes, that's him. He's broken down.'

'He was pulling this wagon? No wonder he's dead.'

She reached over and managed to close both hands around the waterskin's neck. Tugged the stopper free and
tilted it over her mouth. Warm, delicious water. 'Do you see those double levers beside him?' she asked. 'Work
those and the wagon moves. It's my own invention.'

'Is it hard work? Then why hire an old man to do it?'

'He was a potential investor. Wanted to see how it would work for himself.'

The giant grunted, and she saw him studying her. 'We were doing fine,' she said. 'At first. But then it broke.
The linkage. We were only planning half a day, but he'd taken us too far out before dropping dead. I thought to
walk, but then I broke my foot—'

'How?'

'Kicking the wheel. Anyway, I can't walk.'

He continued staring down at her, like a wolf eyeing a lame hare. She sipped more water. 'Are you planning
on being unpleasant?' she asked.

'It is blood-oil that drives a Teblor warrior to rape. I have none. I have not taken a woman by force in years.
You are from Ugarat?'

'Yes.'

'I must enter that city for supplies. I want no trouble.'

'I can help with that.'

'I want to remain beneath notice.'

'I'm not sure that's possible,' she said.

'Make it possible and I will take you with me.'

'Well, that's not fair. You are half again taller than a normal man. You are tattooed. You have a horse that
eats people – assuming it is a horse and not an enkar'al. And you seem to be wearing the skin of a white-furred
bear.'

He turned away from the wagon.

'All right!' she said hastily. 'I'll think of something.'

He came close again, collected the waterskin, slung it over a shoulder, and then picked her up by the belt,
one-handed. Pain ripped through her right leg as the broken foot dangled. 'Seven Hounds!' she hissed. 'How
undignified do you have to make this?'

Saying nothing, the warrior carried her over to his waiting horse. Not an enkar'al, she saw, but not quite a
horse either. Tall, lean and pallid, silver mane and tail, with eyes red as blood. A single rein, no saddle or
stirrups. 'Stand on your good leg,' he said, lifting her straight. Then he picked up a loop of rope and vaulted
onto the horse.

Gasping, leaning against the horse, Samar Dev tracked the double strands of the rope the man held, and saw
that he had been dragging something while he rode. Two huge rotted heads. Dogs or bears, as oversized as the
man himself.

The warrior reached down and unceremoniously pulled her up until she was settled behind him. More waves
of pain, darkness threatening.

'Beneath notice,' he said again.

Samar Dev glanced back at those two severed heads. 'That goes without saying,' she said.
Musty darkness in the small room, the air stale and sweaty. Two slitted, rectangular holes in the wall just beneath the low ceiling allowed the cool night air to slip inside in fitful gusts, like sighs from a waiting world. For the woman huddled on the floor beside the narrow bed, that world would have to wait a little longer. Arms closed about her drawn-up knees, head lowered, sheathed in black hair that hung in oily strands, she wept. And to weep was to be inside oneself, entirely, an inner place far more unrelenting and unforgiving than anything that could be found outside.

She wept for the man she had abandoned, fleeing the pain she had seen in his eyes, as his love for her kept him stumbling in her wake, matching each footfall yet unable to come any closer. For that she could not allow. The intricate patterns on a hooded snake held mesmerizing charms, but the bite was no less deadly for that. She was the same. There was nothing in her – nothing that she could see – worth the overwhelming gift of love. Nothing in her worthy of him.

He had blinded himself to that truth, and that was his flaw, the flaw he had always possessed. A willingness, perhaps a need, to believe in the good, where no good could be found. Well, this was a love she could not abide, and she would not take him down her path.

Cotillion had understood. The god had seen clearly into the depths of this mortal darkness, as clearly as had Apsalar. And so there had been nothing veiled in the words and silences exchanged between her and the patron god of assassins. A mutual recognition. The tasks he set before her were of a nature suited to his aspect, and to her particular talents. When condemnation had already been pronounced, one could not be indignant over the sentence. But she was no god, so far removed from humanity as to find amorality a thing of comfort, a refuge from one's own deeds. Everything was getting ... harder, harder to manage.

He would not miss her for long. His eyes would slowly open. To other possibilities. He travelled now with two other women, after all – Cotillion had told her that much. So. He would heal, and would not be alone for long, she was certain of that.

More than sufficient fuel to feed her self-pity.

Even so, she had tasks set before her, and it would not do to wallow overlong in this unwelcome self-indulgence. Apsalar slowly raised her head, studied the meagre, grainy details of the room. Trying to recall how she had come to be here. Her head ached, her throat was parched. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she slowly stood. Pounding pain behind her eyes.

From somewhere below she could hear tavern sounds, a score of voices, drunken laughter. Apsalar found her silklined cloak, reversed it and slipped the garment over her shoulders, then she walked over to the door, unlocked it, and stepped out into the corridor beyond. Two wavering oil-lamps set in niches along the wall, a railing and stairs at the far end. From the room opposite hers came the muffled noise of love-making, the woman's cries too melodramatic to be genuine. Apsalar listened a moment longer, wondering what it was about the sounds that disturbed her so, then she moved through the flicker of shadows, reaching the steps, and made her way down.

It was late, probably well after the twelfth bell. Twenty or so patrons occupied the tavern, half of them in the livery of caravan guards. They were not regulars, given the unease with which they were regarded by the remaining denizens, and she noted, as she approached the counter, that three were Gral, whilst another pair, both women, were Pardu. Both rather unpleasant tribes, or so Cotillion's memories informed her in a subtle rustle of disquiet. Typically raucous and overbearing, their eyes finding and tracking her progress to the bar; she elected caution and so kept her gaze averted.

The barman walked over as she arrived. 'Was beginning to think you'd died,' he said, as he lifted a bottle of rice wine into view and set it before her. 'Before you dip into this, lass, I'd like to see some coin.'

'How much do I owe you so far?'

'Two silver crescents.'

She frowned. 'I thought I'd paid already.'
'For the wine, aye. But then you spent a night and a day and an evening in the room – and I have to charge you for tonight as well, since it's too late to try renting it out now. Finally,' he gestured, 'there's this bottle here.'

'I didn't say I wanted it,' she replied. 'But if you've any food left ...'

'I've some.'

She drew out her coin pouch and found two crescents. 'Here. Assuming this is for tonight's room as well.'

He nodded. 'You don't want the wine, then?'

'No. Sawr'ak beer, if you please.'

He collected the bottle and headed off.

A figure pushed in on either side of her. The Pardu women. 'See those Gral?' one asked, nodding to a nearby table. 'They want you to dance for them.'

'No they don't,' Apsalar replied.

'No,' the other woman said, 'they do. They'll even pay. You walk like a dancer. We could all see that. You don't want to upset them—'

'Precisely. Which is why I won't dance for them.'

The two Pardu were clearly confused by that. In the interval the barman arrived with a tankard of beer and a tin bowl of goat soup, the layer of fat on the surface sporting white hairs to give proof of its origin. He added a hunk of dark bread. 'Good enough?'

She nodded. 'Thank you.' Then turned to the woman who had first spoken. 'I am a Shadow Dancer. Tell them that, Pardu.'

Both women backed off suddenly, and Apsalar leaned on the counter, listening to the hiss of words spreading out through the tavern. All at once she found she had some space around her. Good enough.

The bartender was regarding her warily. 'You're full of surprises,' he said. 'That dance is forbidden.'

'Yes, it is.'

'You're from Quon Tali,' he said in a quieter voice. 'Itko Kan, I'd guess, by the tilt of your eyes and that black hair. Never heard of a Shadow Dancer out of Itko Kan.' He leaned close. 'I was born just outside Gris, you see. Was regular infantry in Dassem's army, took a spear in the back my first battle and that was it for me. I missed Y'Ghatan, for which I daily give thanks to Oponn. You understand. Didn't see Dassem die and glad for it.'

'But you still have stories aplenty,' Apsalar said.

'That I have,' he said with an emphatic nod. Then his gaze sharpened on her. After a moment he grunted and moved away.

She ate, sipped ale, and her headache slowly faded.

Some time later, she gestured to the barman and he approached. 'I am going out,' she said, 'but I wish to keep the room so do not rent it out to anyone else.'

He shrugged. 'You've paid for it. I lock up at fourth bell.'

She straightened and made her way towards the door. The caravan guards tracked her progress, but none made move to follow – at least not immediately.

She hoped they would heed the implicit warning she'd given them. She already intended to kill a man this night, and one was enough, as far as she was concerned.
Stepping outside, Apsalar paused for a moment. The wind had died. The stars were visible as blurry motes behind the veil of fine dust still settling in the storm's wake. The air was cool and still. Drawing her cloak about her and slipping her silk scarf over the lower half of her face, Apsalar swung left down the street. At the juncture of a narrow alley, thick with shadows, she slipped suddenly into the gloom and was gone.

A few moments later the two Pardu women padded towards the alley. They paused at its mouth, looking down the twisted track, seeing no-one.

'She spoke true,' one hissed, making a warding sign. 'She walks the shadows.'

The other nodded. 'We must inform our new master.'

They headed off.

Standing within the warren of Shadow, the two Pardu looking ghostly, seeming to shiver into and out of existence as they strode up the street, Apsalar watched them for another dozen heartbeats. She was curious as to who their master might be, but that was a trail she would follow some other night. Turning away, she studied the shadow-wrought world she found herself in. On all sides, a lifeless city. Nothing like Ehrlitan, the architecture primitive and robust, with gated lintel-stone entrances to narrow passageways that ran straight and high-walled. No-one walked those cobbled paths. The buildings to either side of the passageways were all two storeys or less, flat-roofed, and no windows were visible. High narrow doorways gaped black in the grainy gloom.

Even Cotillion's memories held no recognition of this manifestation in the Shadow Realm, but this was not unusual. There seemed to be uncounted layers, and the fragments of the shattered warren were far more extensive than one might expect. The realm was ever in motion, bound to some wayward force of migration, scudding ceaseless across the mortal world. Overhead, the sky was slate grey – what passed for night in Shadow, and the air was turgid and warm.

One of the passageways led in the direction of Ehrlitan's central flat-topped hill, the Jen'rahb, once the site of the Falah'd Crown, now a mass of rubble. She set off down it, eyes on the looming, near-transparent wreckage of tumbled stone. The path opened out onto a square, each of the four walls lined with shackles. Two sets still held bodies. Desiccated, slumped in the dust, skin-wrapped skulls sunk low, resting on gracile-boned chests; one was at the end opposite her, the other at the back of the left-hand wall. A portal broke the line of the far wall near the right-side corner.

Curious, Apsalar approached the nearer figure. She could not be certain, but it appeared to be Tiste, either Andii or Edur. The corpse's long straight hair was colourless, bleached by antiquity. Its accoutrements had rotted away, leaving only a few withered strips and corroded bits of metal. As she crouched before it, there was a swirl of dust beside the body, and her brows lifted as a shade slowly rose into view. Translucent flesh, the bones strangely luminescent, a skeletal face with black-pitted eyes.

'The body's mine,' it whispered, bony fingers clutching the air. 'You can't have it.'

The language was Tiste Andii, and Apsalar was vaguely surprised that she understood it. Cotillion's memories and the knowledge hidden within them could still startle her on occasion. 'What would I do with the body?' she asked. 'I have my own, after all.'

'Not here. I see naught but a ghost.'

'As do I.'

It seemed startled. 'Are you certain?'

'You died long ago,' she said. 'Assuming the body in chains is your own.'

'My own? No. At least, I don't think so. It might be. Why not? Yes, it was me, once, long ago. I recognize it. You are the ghost, not me. I've never felt better, in fact. Whereas you look ... unwell.'

'Nonetheless,' Apsalar said, 'I have no interest in stealing a corpse.'
The shade reached out and brushed the corpse's lank, pale hair. 'I was lovely, you know. Much admired, much pursued by the young warriors of the enclave. Perhaps I still am, and it is only my spirit that has grown so ... tattered. Which is more visible to the mortal eye? Vigour and beauty moulding flesh, or the miserable wretch hiding beneath it?'

Apsalar winced, looked away. 'Depends, I think, on how closely you look.'

'And how clear your vision. Yes, I agree. And beauty, it passes so quickly, doesn't it just? But misery, ah, misery abides.'

A new voice hissed from where the other corpse hung in its chains. 'Don’t listen to her! Treacherous bitch, look where we ended up! My fault? Oh no, I was the honest one. Everyone knew that – and prettier besides, don't let her tell you otherwise! Come over here, dear ghost, and hear the truth!'

Apsalar straightened. 'I am not the ghost here—'

'Dissembler! No wonder you prefer her to me!'

She could see the other shade now, a twin to the first one, hovering over its own corpse, or at least the body it claimed as its own. 'How did you two come to be here?' she asked.

The second shade pointed at the first. 'She's a thief!'

'So are you!' the first one retorted.

'I was only following you, Telorast! "Oh, let's break into Shadowkeep! There's no-one there, after all! We could make off with uncounted riches!" Why did I believe you? I was a fool—'

'Well,' cut in the other, 'that's something we can agree on, at least.'

'There is no purpose,' Apsalar said, 'to the two of you remaining here. Your corpses are rotting away, but those shackles will never release them.'

'You serve the new master of Shadow!' The second shade seemed most agitated with its own accusation. 'That miserable, slimy, wretched—'

'Quiet!' hissed the first shade, Telorast. 'He'll come back to taunt us some more! I, for one, have no desire ever to see him again. Nor those damned Hounds.' The ghost edged closer to Apsalar. 'Most kind servant of the wondrous new master, to answer your question, we would indeed love to leave this place. Alas, where would we go? It gestured with one filmy, bony hand. 'Beyond the city, there are terrible creatures. Deceitful, hungry, numerous! Now,' it added in a purr, 'had we an escort ...'

'Oh yes,' cried the second shade, 'an escort, to one of the gates – a modest, momentary responsibility, yet we would be most thankful.'

Apsalar studied the two creatures. 'Who imprisoned you? And speak the truth, else you'll receive no help from me.'

Telorast bowed deeply, then seemed to settle even lower, and it was a moment before Apsalar realized it was grovelling. 'Truth to tell. We would not lie as to this. No clearer recollection and no purer integrity in relating said recollection will you hear in any realm. 'Twas a demon lord—'

'With seven heads!' the other interjected, bobbing up and down in some ill-contained excitement.

Telorast cringed. 'Seven heads? Were there seven? There might well have been. Why not? Yes, seven heads!' 'And which head,' Apsalar asked, 'claimed to be the lord?'

'The sixth!'

'The second!'
The two shades regarded each other balefully, then Telorast raised a skeletal finger. ‘Precisely! Sixth from the right, second from the left!’

‘Oh, very good,’ crooned the other.

Apsalar faced the shade. ‘Your companion's name is Telorast – what is yours?’

It flinched, bobbed, then began its own grovelling, raising minute clouds of dust. ‘Prince – King Cruel, the Slayer of All Foes. The Feared. The Worshipped.’ It hesitated, then, ‘Princess Demure? Beloved of a thousand heroes, bulging, stern-faced men one and all! A twitch, low muttering, a brief clawing at its own face. ‘A warlord, no, a twenty-two-headed dragon, with nine wings and eleven thousand fangs. Given the chance ...’

Apsalar crossed her arms. ‘Your name.’

‘Curdle.’

‘Curdle.’

‘I do not last long.’

‘Which is what brought us to this sorry demise in the first place,’ Telorast said. ‘You were supposed to watch the path – I specifically told you to watch the path—’

‘I did watch it!’

‘But failed to see the Hound Baran—’

‘I saw Baran, but I was watching the path.’

‘All right,’ Apsalar said, sighing, ‘why should I provide you two with an escort? Give me a reason, please. Any reason at all.’

‘We are loyal companions,’ Telorast said. ‘We will stand by you no matter what horrible end you come to.’

‘We'll guard your torn-up body for eternity,’ Curdle added, ‘or at least until someone else comes along—’

‘Unless it's Edgewalker.’

‘Well, that goes without saying, Telorast,’ Curdle said. ‘We don't like him.’

‘Or the Hounds.’

‘Of course—’

‘Or Shadowthrone, or Cotillion, or an Aptorian, or one of those—’

‘All right!’ Curdle shrieked.

‘I will escort you,’ Apsalar said, ‘to a gate. Whereupon you may leave this realm, since that seems to be your desire. In all probability, you will then find yourselves walking through Hood's Gate, which would be a mercy to everyone, except perhaps Hood himself.’

‘She doesn't like us,’ Curdle moaned.

‘Don't say it out loud,’ Telorast snapped, ‘or she'll actually realize it. Right now she's not sure, and that's good for us, Curdle.’

‘Not sure? Are you deaf? She just insulted us!’

‘That doesn't mean she doesn't like us. Not necessarily. Irritated with us, maybe, but then, we irritate everyone. Or, rather, you irritate everyone, Curdle. Because you're so unreliable.’
'I'm not always unreliable, Telorast.'

'Come along,' Apsalar said, walking towards the far portal. 'I have things to do this night.'

'But what about these bodies?' Curdle demanded.

'They stay here, obviously.' She turned and faced the two shades. 'Either follow me, or don't. It's up to you.'

'But we liked those bodies—'

'It's all right, Curdle,' Telorast said in a soothing tone. 'We'll find others.'

Apsalar shot Telorast a glance, bemused by the comment, then she set off, striding into the narrow passageway.

The two ghosts scurried and flitted after her.

The basin's level floor was a crazed latticework of cracks, the clay silts of the old lake dried by decades of sun and heat. Wind and sands had polished the surface so that it gleamed in the moonlight, like tiles of silver. A deep-sunk well, encircled by a low wall of bricks, marked the centre of the lake-bed.

Outriders from Leoman's column had already reached the well, dismounting to inspect it, while the main body of the horse-warriors filed down onto the basin. The storm was past, and stars glistened overhead. Exhausted horses and exhausted rebels made a slow procession over the broken, webbed ground. Capemoths flitted over the heads of the riders, weaving and spinning to escape the hunting rhizan lizards that wheeled in their midst like miniature dragons. An incessant war overhead, punctuated by the crunch of carapaced armour and the thin, metallic deathcries of the capemoths.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas leaned forward on his saddle, the hinged horn squealing, and spat to his left. Defiance, a curse to these clamouring echoes of battle. And to get the taste of grit from his mouth. He glanced over at Leoman, who rode in silence. They had been leaving a trail of dead horses, and almost everyone was on their second or third mount. A dozen warriors had surrendered to the pace this past day, older men who had dreamed of a last battle against the hated Malazans, beneath the blessed gaze of Sha'ik, only to see that opportunity torn away by treachery. There were more than a few broken spirits in this tattered regiment, Corabb knew. It was easy to understand how one could lose hope during this pathetic journey.

If not for Leoman of the Flails, Corabb himself might have given up long ago, slipping off into the blowing sands to seek his own destiny, discarding the trappings of a rebel soldier, and settling down in some remote city with memories of despair haunting his shadow until the Hoarder of Souls came to claim him. If not for Leoman of the Flails.

The riders reached the well, spreading out to create a circle encampment around its life-giving water. Corabb drew rein a moment after Leoman had done so, and both dismounted, boots crunching on a carpet of bones and scales from long-dead fish.

'Corabb,' Leoman said, 'walk with me.'

They set off in a northerly direction until they were fifty paces past the outlying pickets, standing alone on the cracked pan. Corabb noted a depression nearby in which sat half-buried lumps of clay. Drawing his dagger, he walked over and crouched down to retrieve one of the lumps. Breaking it open to reveal the toad curled up within it, he dug the creature out and returned to his commander's side. 'An unexpected treat,' he said, pulling off a withered leg and tearing at the tough but sweet flesh.

Leoman stared at him in the moonlight. 'You will have strange dreams, Corabb, eating those.'

'Spirit dreams, yes. They do not frighten me, Commander. Except for all the feathers.'

Making no comment on that, Leoman unstrapped his helm and pulled it off. He stared up at the stars, then said, 'What do my soldiers want of me? Am I to lead us to an impossible victory?'
'You are destined to carry the Book,' Corabb said around a mouthful of meat.

'And the goddess is dead.'

'Dryjhna is more than that goddess, Commander. The Apocalyptic is as much a time as it is anything else.'

Leoman glanced over. 'You do manage to surprise me still, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas, after all these years.'

Pleased by this compliment, or what he took for a compliment, Corabb smiled, then spat out a bone and said, 'I have had time to think, Commander. While we rode. I have thought long and those thoughts have walked strange paths. We are the Apocalypse. This last army of the rebellion. And I believe we are destined to show the world the truth of that.'

'Why do you believe that?'

'Because you lead us, Leoman of the Flails, and you are not one to slink away like some creeping meer-rat. We journey towards something – I know, many here see this as a flight, but I do not. Not all the time, anyway.'

'A meer-rat,' Leoman mused. 'That is the name for those lizard-eating rats in the Jen'rahb, in Ehrlitan.'

Corabb nodded. 'The long-bodied ones, with the scaly heads, yes.'

'A meer-rat,' Leoman said again, oddly thoughtful. 'Almost impossible to hunt down. They can slip through cracks a snake would have trouble with. Hinged skulls ...'

'Bones like green twigs, yes,' Corabb said, sucking at the skull of the toad, then flinging it away. Watching as it sprouted wings and flew off into the night. He glanced over at his commander's feather-clad features. 'They make terrible pets. When startled, they dive for the first hole in sight, no matter how small. A woman died with a meer-rat halfway up her nose, or so I heard. When they get stuck, they start chewing. Feathers everywhere.'

'I take it no-one keeps them as pets any more,' Leoman said, studying the stars once again. 'We ride towards our Apocalypse, do we? Yes, well.'

'We could leave the horses,' Corabb said. 'And just fly away. It'd be much quicker.'

'That would be unkind, wouldn't it?'

'True. Honourable beasts, horses. You shall lead us, Winged One, and we shall prevail.'

'An impossible victory.'

'Many impossible victories, Commander.'

'One would suffice.'

'Very well,' Corabb said. 'One, then.'

'I don't want this, Corabb. I don't want any of this. I'm of a mind to disperse this army.'

'That will not work, Commander. We are returning to our birthplace. It is the season for that. To build nests on the rooftops.'

'I think,' Leoman said, 'it is time you went to sleep.'

'Yes, you are right. I will sleep now.'

'Go on. I will remain here for a time.'

'You are Leoman of the Feathers, and it shall be as you say.' Corabb saluted, then strode back towards the encampment and its host of oversized vultures. It was not so bad a thing, he mused. Vultures survived because other things did not, after all.
Now alone, Leoman continued studying the night sky. Would that Toblakai rode with him now. The giant warrior was blind to uncertainty. Alas, also somewhat kicking in subtlety. The bludgeon of Karsa Orlong's reasoning would permit no disguising of unpleasant truths.

A meer-rat. He would have to think on that.

‘You can't come in here with those!’

The giant warrior looked back at the trailing heads, then he lifted Samar Dev clear of the horse, set her down, and slipped off the beast himself. He brushed dust from his furs, walked over to the gate guard. Picked him up and threw him into a nearby cart.

Someone screamed – quickly cut short as the warrior swung round.

Twenty paces up the street, as dusk gathered the second guard was in full flight, heading, Samar suspected, for the blockhouse to round up twenty or so of his fellows. She sighed. ’This hasn't started well, Karsa Orlong.’

The first guard, lying amidst the shattered cart, was not moving.

Karsa eyed Samar Dev, then said, ’Everything is fine, woman. I am hungry. Find me an inn, one with a stable.’

’We shall have to move quickly, and I for one am unable to do that.’

’You are proving a liability,’ Karsa Orlong said.

Alarm bells began ringing a few streets away. ’Put me back on your horse,’ Samar said, ’and I will give you directions, for all the good that will do.’

He approached her.

’Careful, please – this leg can't stand much more jostling.’

He made a disgusted expression. ’You are soft, like all children.’ Yet he was less haphazard when he lifted her back onto the horse.

’Down this side track,’ she said. ’Away from the bells. There's an inn on Trosfalhadan Street, it’s not far.’ Glancing to her right, she saw a squad of guards appear further down the main street. ’Quickly, warrior, if you don’t want to spend this night in a gaol cell.’

Citizens had gathered to watch them. Two had walked over to the dead or unconscious guard, crouching to examine the unfortunate man. Another stood nearby, complaining about his shattered cart and pointing at Karsa – although only when the huge warrior wasn't looking.

They made their way down the avenue running parallel to the ancient wall. Samar scowled at the various bystanders who had elected to follow them. ’I am Samar Dev,’ she said loudly. ’Will you risk a curse from me? Any of you?’ People shrank back, then quickly turned away.

Karsa glanced back at her. ’You are a witch?’

’You have no idea.’

’And had I left you on the trail, you would have cursed me?’

’Most certainly.’

He grunted, said nothing for the next ten paces, then turned once again. ’Why did you not call upon spirits to heal yourself?’

’I had nothing with which to bargain,’ she replied. ’The spirits one finds in the wastelands are hungry things,
Karsa Orlong. Covetous and not to be trusted.'

“You cannot be much of a witch, then, if you need to bargain. Why not just bind them and demand that they heal your leg?”

“One who binds risks getting bound in return. I will not walk that path.’

He made no reply to that.

‘Here is Trosfalhadan Street. Up one avenue, there, see that big building with the walled compound beside it? Inn of the Wood, it’s called. Hurry, before the guards reach this corner.’

‘They will find us nonetheless,’ Karsa said. ‘You have failed in your task.’

‘I wasn’t the one who threw that guard into a cart!’

‘He spoke rudely. You should have warned him.’

They reached the double gates at the compound.

From the corner behind them came shouts. Samar twisted round on the horse and watched the guards rush towards them. Karsa strode past her, drawing free the huge flint sword. ‘Wait!’ she cried. ‘Let me speak with them first, warrior, else you find yourself fighting a whole city’s worth of guards.’

He paused. ‘They are deserving of mercy?’

She studied him a moment, then nodded. ‘If not them, then their families.’

‘You are under arrest!’ The shout came from the rapidly closing guards.

Karsa’s tattooed face darkened.

Samar edged down from the horse and hobbled to place herself between the giant and the guards, all of whom had drawn scimitars and were fanning out on the street. Beyond, a crowd of onlookers was gathering. She held up her hands. ‘There has been a misunderstanding.’

‘Samar Dev,’ one man said in a growl. ‘Best you step aside – this is no affair of yours—’

‘But it is, Captain Inashan. This warrior has saved my life. My wagon broke down out in the wastes, and I broke my leg – look at me. I was dying. And so I called upon a spirit of the wild-lands.’

The captain’s eyes widened as he regarded Karsa Orlong. ‘This is a spirit?’

‘Most assuredly,’ Samar replied. ‘One who is of course ignorant of our customs. That gate guard acted in what this spirit perceived as a hostile manner. Does he still live?’

The captain nodded. ‘Knocked senseless, that is all.’ The man then pointed towards the severed heads. ‘What are those?’

‘Trophies,’ she answered. ‘Demons. They had escaped their own realm and were approaching Ugarat. Had not this spirit killed them, they would have descended upon us with great slaughter. And with not a single worthy mage left in Ugarat, we would have fared poorly indeed.’

Captain Inashan narrowed his gaze on Karsa. ‘Can you understand my words?’

‘They have been simple enough thus far,’ the warrior replied.

The captain scowled. ‘Does she speak the truth?’

‘More than she realizes, yet even so, there are untruths in her tale. I am not a spirit. I am Toblakai, once bodyguard to Sha’ik. Yet this woman bargained with me as she would a spirit. More, she knew nothing of where I came from or who I was, and so she might well have imagined I was a spirit of the wild-lands.’
Voices rose among both guards and citizens at the name Sha'ik, and Samar saw a dawning recognition in the
captain's expression. Toblakai, companion to Leoman of the Flails. Tales of you have reached us.' He pointed
with his scimitar at the fur riding Karsa's shoulders. 'Slayer of a Soletaken, a white bear. Executioner of Sha'ik's
betrayers in Raraku. It is said you slew demons the night before Sha'ik was killed,' he added, eyes on the rotted,
flailed heads. 'And, when she had been slain by the Adjunct, you rode out to face the Malazan army – and they
would not fight you.'

'There is some truth in what you have spoken,' Karsa said, 'barring the words I exchanged with the Malazans
—'

'One of Sha'ik's own,' Samar quickly said, sensing the warrior was about to say something unwise, 'how
could we of Ugarat not welcome you? The Malazan garrison has been driven from this city and is even now
starving in Moraval Keep on the other side of the river, besieged with no hope of succour.'

'You are wrong in that,' Karsa said.

She wanted to kick him. Then again, look how that had turned out the last time? All right, you ox, go and
hang yourself.

'What do you mean?' Captain Inashan asked.

'The rebellion is broken, the Malazans have retaken cities by the score. They will come here, too, eventually.
I suggest you make peace with the garrison.'

'Would that not put you at risk?' Samar asked.

The warrior bared his teeth. 'My war is done. If they cannot accept that, I will kill them all.'

An outrageous claim, yet no-one laughed. Captain Inashan hesitated, then he sheathed his scimitar, his
soldiers following suit. 'We have heard of the rebellion's failure,' he said. 'For the Malazans in the keep, alas, it
might well be too late. They have been trapped in there for months. And no-one has been seen on the walls for
some time—'

'I will go there,' Karsa said. 'Gestures of peace must be made.'

'It is said,' Inashan muttered, 'that Leoman still lives. That he leads the last army and has vowed to fight on.'

'Leoman rides his own path. I would place no faith in it, were I you.'

The advice was not well received. Arguments rose, until Inashan turned on his guards and silenced them with
an upraised hand. 'These matters must be brought to the Falah'd.' He faced Karsa again. 'You will stay this night
at the Inn of the Wood?'

'I shall, although it is not made of wood, and so it should be called Inn of the Brick.'

Samar laughed. 'You can bring that up with the owner, Toblakai. Captain, are we done here?'

Inashan nodded. 'I will send a healer to mend your leg, Samar Dev.'

'In return, I bless you and your kin, Captain.'

'You are too generous,' he replied with a bow.

The squad headed off. Samar turned to regard the giant warrior. 'Toblakai, how have you survived this long
in Seven Cities?'

He looked down at her, then slung the stone sword once more over his shoulder. 'There is no armour made
that can withstand the truth ...'

'When backed by that sword?'
'Yes, Samar Dev. I find it does not take long for children to understand that. Even here in Seven Cities.' He pushed open the gates. 'Havok will require a stable away from other beasts ... at least until his hunger is appeased.'

'I don't like the looks of that,' Telorast muttered, nervously shifting about.

'It is a gate,' Apsalar said.

'But where does it lead?' Curdle asked, indistinct head bobbing.

'It leads out,' she replied. 'Onto the Jen'rahb, in the city of Ehrlitan. It is where I am going.'

'Then that is where we are going,' Telorast announced. 'Are there bodies there? I hope so. Fleshy, healthy bodies.'

She regarded the two ghosts. 'You intend to steal bodies to house your spirits? I am not sure that I can permit that.'

'Oh, we wouldn't do that,' Curdle said. 'That would be possession, and that's difficult, very difficult. Memories seep back and forth, yielding confusion and inconsistency.'

'True,' Telorast said. 'And we are most consistent, are we not? No, my dear, we just happen to like bodies. In proximity. They ... comfort us. You, for example. You are a great comfort to us, though we know not your name.'

'Apsalar.'

'She's dead!' Curdle shrieked. To Apsalar: 'I knew you were a ghost!'

'I am named after the Mistress of Thieves. I am not her in the flesh.'

'She must be speaking the truth,' Telorast said to Curdle. 'If you recall, Apsalar looked nothing like this one. The real Apsalar was Imass, or very nearly Imass. And she wasn't very friendly—'

'Because you stole from her temple coffers,' Curdle said, squirming about in small dust-clouds.

'Even before then. Decidedly unfriendly, where this Apsalar, this one here, she's kind. Her heart is bursting with warmth and generosity—'

'Enough of that,' Apsalar said, turning to the gate once more. 'As I mentioned earlier, this gate leads to the Jen'rahb ... for me. For the two of you, of course, it might well lead into Hood's Realm. I am not responsible for that, should you find yourselves before Death's Gate.'

'Hood's Realm? Death's Gate?' Telorast began moving from side to side, a strange motion that Apsalar belatedly realized was pacing, although the ghost had sunk part-way into the ground, making it look more like wading. 'There is no fear of that. We are too powerful. Too wise. Too cunning.'

'We were great mages, once,' Curdle said. 'Necromancers, Spiritwalkers, Conjurers, Wielders of Fell Holds, Masters of the Thousand Warrens—'

'Mistresses, Curdle. Mistresses of the Thousand Warrens.'

'Yes, Telorast. Mistresses indeed. What was I thinking? Beauteous mistresses, curvaceous, languid, sultry, occasionally simpering—'

Apsalar walked through the gate.

She stepped onto broken rubble alongside the foundations of a collapsed wall. The night air was chill, stars sharp overhead.
'—and even Kallor quailed before us, isn't that right, Telorast?'

'Oh yes, he quailed.'

Apsalar looked down to find herself flanked by the two ghosts. She sighed. 'You evaded Hood's Realm, I see.'

'Clumsy grasping hands,' Curdle sniffed. 'We were too quick.'

'As we knew we'd be,' Telorast added. 'What place is this? It's all broken—'

Curdle clambered atop the foundation wall. 'No, you are wrong, Telorast, as usual. I see buildings beyond. Lit windows. The very air reeks of life.'

'This is the Jen'rahb,' Apsalar said. 'The ancient centre of the city, which collapsed long ago beneath its own weight.'

'As all cities must, eventually,' Telorast observed, trying to pick up a brick fragment. But its hand slipped ineffectually through the object. 'Oh, we are most useless in this realm.'

Curdle glanced down at its companion. 'We need bodies—'

'I told you before—'

'Fear not, Apsalar,' Curdle replied in a crooning tone, 'we will not unduly offend you. The bodies need not be sentient, after all.'

'Are there the equivalent of Hounds here?' Telorast asked.

Curdle snorted. 'The Hounds are sentient, you fool!'

'Only stupidly so!'

'Not so stupid as to fall for our tricks, though, were they?'

'Are there imbrules here? Stantars? Luthuras – are there luthuras here? Scaly, long grasping tails, eyes like the eyes of purlith bats—'

'No,' Apsalar said. 'None of those creatures.' She frowned. 'Those you have mentioned are of Starvald Demelain.'

A momentary silence from the two ghosts, then Curdle snaked along the top of the wall until its eerie face was opposite Apsalar. 'Really? Now, that's a peculiar coincidence—'

'Yet you speak the language of the Tiste Andii.'

'We do? Why, that's even stranger.'

'Baffling,' Telorast agreed. 'We, uh, we assumed it was the language you spoke. Your native language, that is.'

'Why? I am not Tiste Andii.'

'No, of course not. Well, thank the Abyss that's been cleared up. Where shall we go from here?'

'I suggest,' Apsalar said after a moment's thought, 'that you two remain here. I have tasks to complete this night, and they are not suited to company.'

'You desire stealth,' Telorast whispered, crouching low. 'We could tell, you know. There's something of the thief about you. Kindred spirits, the three of us, I think. A thief, yes, and perhaps something darker.'

'Well of course darker,' Curdle said from the wall. 'A servant of Shadowthrone, or the Patron of Assassins.
There will be blood spilled this night, and our mortal companion will do the spilling. She's an assassin, and we should know, having met countless assassins in our day. Look at her, Telorast, she has deadly blades secreted about her person—'

'And she smells of stale wine.'

'Stay here,' Apsalar said. 'Both of you.'

'And if we don't?' Telorast asked.

'Then I shall inform Cotillion that you have escaped, and he will send the Hounds on your trail.'

'You bind us to servitude! Trap us with threats! Curdle, we have been deceived!'

'Let's kill her and steal her body!'

'Let's not, Curdle. Something about her frightens me. All right, Apsalar who is not Apsalar, we shall stay here ... for a time. Until we can be certain you are dead or worse, that's how long we'll stay here.'

'Or until you return,' Curdle added.

Telorast hissed in a strangely reptilian manner, then said, 'Yes, idiot, that would be the other option.'

'Then why didn't you say so?'

'Because it's obvious, of course. Why should I waste breath mentioning what's obvious? The point is, we're waiting here. That's the point.'

'Maybe it's your point,' Curdle drawled, 'but it's not necessarily mine, not that I'll waste my breath explaining anything to you, Telorast.'

'You always were too obvious, Curdle.'

'Both of you,' Apsalar said. 'Be quiet and wait here until I return.'

Telorast slumped down against the wall's foundation stones and crossed its arms. 'Yes, yes. Go on. We don't care.'

Apsalar quickly made her way across the tumbled stone wreckage, intending to put as much distance between herself and the two ghosts as possible, before seeking out the hidden trail that would, if all went well, lead her to her victim. She cursed the sentimentality that left her so weakened of resolve that she now found herself shackled with two insane ghosts. It would not do, she well knew, to abandon them. Left to their own devices, they would likely unleash mayhem upon Ehrlitan. They worked too hard to convince her of their harmlessness, and, after all, they had been chained in the Shadow Realm for a reason — a warren rife with eternally imprisoned creatures, few of whom could truly claim injustice.

There was no distinct Azath House in the warren of Shadow, and so, accordingly, more mundane methods had been employed in the negation of threats. Or so it seemed to Apsalar. Virtually every permanent feature in Shadow was threaded through with unbreakable chains, and bodies lay buried in the dust, shackled to those chains. Both she and Cotillion had come across menhirs, tumuli, ancient trees, stone walls and boulders, all home to nameless prisoners — demons, ascendants, revenants and wraiths. In the midst of one stone circle, three dragons were chained, to all outward appearances dead, yet their flesh did not wither or rot, and dust sheathed eyes that remained open. That dread place had been visited by Cotillion, and some faint residue of disquiet clung to the memory — there had been more to that encounter, she suspected, but not all of Cotillion's life remained within the grasp of her recollection.

She wondered who had been responsible for all those chainings. What unknown entity possessed such power as to overwhelm three dragons? So much of the Shadow Realm defied her understanding. As it did Cotillion's, she suspected.

Curdle and Telorast spoke the language of the Tiste Andii. Yet betrayed intimate knowledge of the
draconean realm of Starvald Demelain. They had met the Mistress of Thieves, who had vanished from the pantheon long ago, although, if the legends of Darujhistan held any truth, she had reappeared briefly less than a century past, only to vanish a second time.

She sought to steal the moon. One of the first stories Crokus had told her, following Cotillion's sudden departure from her mind. A tale with local flavour to bolster the cult in the region, perhaps. She admitted to some curiosity. The goddess was her namesake, after all. An Imass? There are no iconic representations of the Mistress — which is odd enough, possibly a prohibition enforced by the temples. What are her symbols? Oh, yes. Footprints. And a veil. She resolved to question the ghosts more on this subject.

In any case, she was fairly certain that Cotillion would not be pleased that she had freed those ghosts. Shadowthrone would be furious. All of which might have spurred her motivation. I was possessed once, but no longer. I still serve, but as it suits me, not them.

Bold claims, but they were all that remained that she might hold on to. A god uses, then casts away. The tool is abandoned, forgotten. True, it appeared that Cotillion was not as indifferent as most gods in this matter, but how much of that could she trust?

Beneath moonlight, Apsalar found the secret trail winding through the ruins. She made her way along it, silent, using every available shadow, into the heart of the Jen'rahb. Enough of the wandering thoughts. She must needs concentrate, lest she become this night's victim.

Betrayals had to be answered. This task was more for Shadowthrone than Cotillion, or so the Patron of Assassins had explained. An old score to settle. The schemes were crowded and confused enough as it was, and that situation was getting worse, if Shadowthrone's agitation of late was any indication. Something of that unease had rubbed off on Cotillion. There had been mutterings of another convergence of powers. Vaster than any that had occurred before, and in some way Shadowthrone was at the centre of it. All of it.

She came within sight of the sunken temple dome, the only nearly complete structure this far into the Jen'rahb. Crouching behind a massive block whose surfaces were crowded with arcane glyphs, she settled back and studied the approach. There were potential lines of sight from countless directions. It would be quite a challenge if watchers had been positioned to guard the hidden entrance to that temple. She had to assume those watchers were there, secreted in cracks and fissures on all sides.

As she watched, she caught movement, coming out from the temple and moving furtively away to her left. Too distant to make out any details. In any case, one thing was clear. The spider was at the heart of its nest, receiving and sending out agents. Ideal. With luck, the hidden sentinels would assume she was one of those agents, unless, of course, there were particular paths one must use, a pattern altered each night.

Another option existed. Apsalar drew out the long, thin scarf known as the telab, and wrapped it about her head until only her eyes were left exposed. She unsheathed her knives, spent twenty heartbeats studying the route she would take, then bolted forward. A swift passage held the element of the unexpected, and made her a more difficult target besides. As she raced across the rubble, she waited for the heavy snap of a crossbow, the whine of the quarrel as it cut through the air. But none came. Reaching the temple, she saw the fissured crack that served as the entrance and made for it.

She slipped into the darkness, then paused.

The passageway stank of blood.

Waiting for her eyes to adjust, she held her breath and listened. Nothing. She could now make out the sloping corridor ahead. Apsalar edged forward, halted at the edge of a larger chamber. A body was lying on the dusty floor, amidst a spreading pool of blood. At the chamber's opposite end was a curtain, drawn across a doorway. Apart from the body, a few pieces of modest furniture were visible in the room. A brazier cast fitful, orange light. The air was bitter with death and smoke.

She approached the body, eyes on the curtained doorway. Her senses told her there was no-one behind it, but if she was in error then the mistake could prove fatal. Reaching the crumpled figure, she sheathed one knife, then reached out with her hand and pulled the body onto its back. Enough to see its face.
Mebra. It seemed that someone had done her work for her.

A flit of movement in the air behind her. Apsalar ducked and rolled to her left as a throwing star flashed over her, punching a hole through the curtain. Regaining her feet in a crouch, she faced the outside passage.

Where a figure swathed in tight grey clothing stepped into the chamber. Its gloved left hand held another iron star, the multiple edges glittering with poison. In its right hand was a kethra knife, hooked and broad-bladed. A telab hid the assassin's features, but around its dark eyes was a mass of white-etched tattoos against black skin.

The killer stepped clear of the doorway, eyes fixed on Apsalar. 'Stupid woman,' hissed a man's voice, in accented Ehrlii.

'South Clan of the Semk,' Apsalar said. 'You are far from home.'

'There were to be no witnesses.' His left hand flashed.

Apsalar twisted. The iron star whipped past to strike the wall behind her.

The Semk rushed in behind the throw. He chopped down and crossways with his left hand to bat aside her knife-arm, then thrust with the kethra, seeking her abdomen, whereupon he would tear the blade across in a disembowelling slash. None of which succeeded.

Even as he swung down with his left arm, Apsalar stepped to her right. The heel of his hand cracked hard against her hip. Her movement away from the kethra forced the Semk to attempt to follow with the weapon. Long before he could reach her, she had driven her knife between ribs, the point piercing the back of his heart.

With a strangled groan, the Semk sagged, slid off the knife-blade, and pitched to the floor. He sighed out his last breath, then was still.

Apsalar cleaned her weapon across the man's thigh, then began cutting away his clothing. The tattoos continued, covering every part of him. A common enough trait among warriors of the South Clan, yet the style was not Semk. Arcane script wound across the assassin's brawny limbs, similar to the carving she had seen in the ruins outside the temple.

The language of the First Empire.

With growing suspicion, she rolled the body over to reveal the back. And saw a darkened patch, roughly rectangular, over the Semk's right shoulder-blade. Where the man's name had once been, before it had been ritually obscured.

This man had been a priest of the Nameless Ones.

*Oh, Cotillion, you won't like this at all.*

'Well?'

Telorast glanced up. 'Well what?'

'She is a pretty one.'

'We're prettier.'

Curdle snorted. 'At the moment, I'd have to disagree.'

'All right. If you like the dark, deadly type.'

'What I was asking, Telorast, is whether we stay with her.'

'If we don't, Edgewalker will be very unhappy with us, Curdle. You don't want that, do you? He's been unhappy with us before, or have you forgotten?'
'Fine! You didn't have to bring that up, did you? So it's decided. We stay with her.'

'Yes,' Telorast said. 'Until we can find a way to get out of this mess.'

'You mean, cheat them all?'

'Of course.'

'Good,' Curdle said, stretching out along the ruined wall and staring up at the strange stars. 'Because I want my throne back.'

'So do I.'

Curdle sniffed. 'Dead people. Fresh.'

'Yes. But not her.'

'No, not her.' The ghost was silent a moment, then added, 'Not just pretty, then.'

'No,' Telorast glumly agreed, 'not just pretty.'
CHAPTER TWO

It must be taken as given that a man who happens to be the world's most powerful, most terrible, most deadly sorcerer, must have a woman at his side. But it does not follow, my children, that a woman of similar proportions requires a man at hers.

Now then, who wants to be a tyrant?

Mistress Wu
Malaz City School of Waifs and Urchins
1152 Burn's Sleep

Insubstantial, fading in and out of sight, smoky and wisp-threaded, Ammanas fidgeted on the ancient Throne of Shadow. Eyes like polished haematite were fixed on the scrawny figure standing before it. A figure whose head was hairless except for a wild curly grey and black tangle over the ears and round the back of the subtly misshapen skull. And twin eyebrows that rivalled the fringe in chaotic waywardness, beetling and knotting to match the baffling and disquieting melee of emotions on the wrinkled face beneath them.

The subject was muttering, not quite under his breath, 'He's not so frightening, is he? In and out, off and on, here and elsewhere, a wavering apparition of wavering intent and perhaps wavering intellect – best not let him read my thoughts – look stern, no, attentive, no, pleased! No, wait. Cowed. Terrified. No, in awe. Yes, in awe. But not for long, that's tiring. Look bored. Gods, what am I thinking? Anything but bored, no matter how boring this might be, what with him looking down on me and me looking up at him and Cotillion over there with his arms crossed, leaning against that wall and smirking – what kind of audience is he? The worst kind, I say. What was I thinking? Well, at least I was thinking. I am thinking, in fact, and one might presume that Shadowthrone is doing the same, assuming of course that his brain hasn't leaked away, since he's nothing but shadows so what holds it in? The point is, I am well advised to remind myself, as I am now doing, the point is, he summoned me. And so here I am. Rightful servant. Loyal. Well, more or less loyal. Trustworthy. Most of the time. Modest and respectful, always. To all outward appearances, and what is outward in appearance is all that matters in this and every other world. Isn't it? Smile! Grimace. Look helpful. Hopeful. Harried, hirsute, happenstance. Wait, how does one look happenstance? What kind of expression must that one be? I must think on that. But not now, because this isn't happenstance, it's circumstance—'

'Silence.'

'My lord? I said nothing. Oh, best glance away now, and think on this. I said nothing. Silence. Perhaps he's making an observation? Yes, that must be it. Look back, now, deferentially, and say aloud: Indeed, my lord. Silence. There. How does he react? Is that growing apoplexy? How can one tell, with all those shadows? Now, if I sat on that throne—'

'Iskaral Pust!'

'Yes, my lord?'

'I have decided.'

'Yes, my lord? Well, if he's decided something, why doesn't he just say it?'

'I have decided, Iskaral Pust—'

'He's doing some more! Yes, my lord?'

'That you ...' Shadowthrone paused and seemed to pass a hand over his eyes. 'Oh my ...' he added in a murmur, then straightened. 'I have decided that you will have to do.'
'My lord? Flick eyes away! This god is insane. I serve an insane god! What kind of expression does that warrant?'

'Go! Get out of here!'

Iskaral Pust bowed. 'Of course, my lord. Immediately!' Then he stood, waiting. Looking around, one pleading glance to Cotillion. 'I was summoned! I can't leave until this foaming idiot on the throne releases me! Cotillion understands – that might be amusement in those horribly cold eyes – oh, why doesn't he say something? Why doesn't he remind this blathering smudge on this throne—'

A snarl from Ammanas, and the High Priest of Shadow, Iskaral Pust, vanished.

Shadowthrone then sat motionless for a time, before slowly turning his head to regard Cotillion. 'What are you looking at?' he demanded.

'Not much,' Cotillion replied. 'You have become rather insubstantial of late.'

'I like it this way.' They studied each other for a moment. 'All right, I'm a little stretched!' The shriek echoed away, and the god subsided. 'Do you think he'll get there in time?'

'No.'

'Do you think, if he does, he'll be sufficient?'

'No.'

'Who asked you!?'

Cotillion watched as Ammanas seethed, fidgeted and squirmed on the throne. Then the Lord of Shadow fell still, and slowly raised a single, spindly finger. 'I have an idea.'

'And I shall leave you to it,' Cotillion said, pushing himself from the wall. 'I am going for a walk.'

Shadowthrone did not reply.

Glancing over, Cotillion saw that he had vanished. 'Oh,' he murmured, 'that was a good idea.'

Emerging from Shadowkeep, he paused to study the landscape beyond. It was in the habit of changing at a moment's notice, although not when one was actually looking, which, he supposed, was a saving grace. A line of forested hills to the right, gullies and ravines directly ahead, and a ghostly lake to the left, on which rode a half-dozen grey-sailed ships in the distance. Artorallah demons, off to raid the Aptorian coastal villages, he suspected. It was rare to find the lake region appearing so close to the keep, and Cotillion felt a moment of unease. The demons of this realm seemed to do little more than bide their time, paying scant attention to Shadowthrone, and more or less doing as they pleased. Which generally involved feuds, lightning attacks on neighbours and pillaging.

Ammanas could well command them, if he so chose. But he hardly ever did, perhaps not wanting to test the limits of their loyalty. Or perhaps just preoccupied with some other concern. With his schemes.

Things were not well. A little stretched, are you, Ammanas? I am not surprised. Cotillion could sympathize, and almost did. Momentarily, before reminding himself that Ammanas had invited most of the risks upon himself. And, by extension, upon me as well.

The paths ahead were narrow, twisted and treacherous. Requiring utmost caution with every measured step.

So be it. After all, we have done this before. And succeeded. Of course, far more was at stake this time. Too much, perhaps.

Cotillion set off for the broken grounds opposite him. Two thousand paces, and before him was a trail leading into a gully. Shadows roiled between the rough rock walls. Reluctant to part as he walked the track, they slid like seaweed in shallows around his legs.
So much in this realm had lost its rightful ... place. Confusion triggered a seething tumult in pockets where shadows gathered. Faint cries whispered against his ears, as if from a great distance, the voice of multitudes drowning. Sweat beaded Cotillion's brow, and he quickened his pace until he was past the sinkhole.

The path sloped upward and eventually opened out onto a broad plateau. As he strode into the clear, eyes fixed on a distant ring of standing stones, he felt a presence at his side, and turned to see a tall, skeletal creature, bedecked in rags, walking to match his pace. Not close enough to reach out and touch, but too close for Cotillion's comfort nonetheless. 'Edgewalker. It has been some time since I last saw you.'

'I cannot say the same of you, Cotillion. I walk—'

'Yes, I know, Cotillion cut in, 'you walk paths unseen.'

'By you. The Hounds do not share your failing.'

Cotillion frowned at the creature, then glanced back, to see Baran thirty paces back, keeping its distance. Massive head low to the ground, eyes glowing bruised crimson. 'You are being stalked.'

'It amuses them, I imagine,' Edgewalker said.

They continued on for a time, then Cotillion sighed. 'You have sought me out?' he asked. 'What do you want?'

'From you? Nothing. But I see your destination, and so would witness.'

'Witness what?'

'Your impending conversation.'

Cotillion scowled. 'And if I'd rather you did not witness?'

The skeletal face held a permanent grin, but in some way it seemed to broaden slightly. 'There is no privacy in Shadow, Usurper.'

Usurper. I'd have long since killed this bastard if he wasn't already dead. Long since.

'I am not your enemy,' Edgewalker said, as if guessing Cotillion's thoughts. 'Not yet.'

'We have more than enough enemies as it is. Accordingly, Cotillion continued, 'we have no wish for more. Unfortunately, since we have no knowledge as to your purpose, or your motivations, we cannot predict what might offend you. So, in the interests of peace between us, enlighten me.'

'That I cannot do.'

'Cannot, or will not?'

'The failing is yours, Cotillion, not mine. Yours, and Shadowthrone's.'

'Well, that is convenient.'

Edgewalker seemed to consider Cotillion's sardonic observation for a moment, then he nodded. 'Yes, it is.'

Long since ...

They approached the standing stones. Not a single lintel left to bridge the ring, just rubble scattered about down the slopes, as if some ancient detonation at the heart of the circle had blasted the massive structure – even the upright stones were all tilted outward, like the petals of a flower.

'This is an unpleasant place,' Edgewalker said as they swung right to take the formal approach, an avenue lined with low, rotted trees, each standing upended with the remnant roots clutching the air.

Cotillion shrugged. 'About as unpleasant as virtually anywhere else in this realm.'
'You might believe that, given you have none of the memories I possess. Terrible events, long, long ago, yet the echoes remain.'

'There is little residual power left here,' Cotillion said as they neared the two largest stones, and walked between them.

'That is true. Of course, that is not the case on the surface.'

'The surface? What do you mean?'

'Standing stones are always half-buried, Cotillion. And the makers were rarely ignorant of the significance of that. Overworld and underworld.'

Cotillion halted and glanced back, studying the upended trees lining the avenue. 'And this manifestation we see here is given to the underworld?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'Is the overworld manifestation to be found in some other realm? Where one might see an inward-tilting ring of stones, and right-side-up trees?'

'Assuming they are not entirely buried or eroded to nothing by now. This circle is very old.'

Cotillion swung round again and observed the three dragons opposite them, each at the base of a standing stone, although their massive chains reached down into the rough soil, rather than into the weathered rock. Shackled at the neck and at the four limbs, with another chain wrapped taut behind the shoulders and wings of each dragon. Every chain drawn so tight as to prevent any movement, not even a lifting of the head. 'This,' Cotillion said in a murmur, 'is as you said, Edgewalker. An unpleasant place. I'd forgotten.'

'You forget every time,' Edgewalker said. 'Overcome by your fascination. Such is the residual power in this circle.'

Cotillion shot him a quick look. 'I am ensorcelled?'

The gaunt creature shrugged in a faint clatter of bones. 'It is a magic without purpose beyond what it achieves. Fascination ... and forgetfulness.'

'I have trouble accepting that. All sorcery has a desired goal.'

Another shrug. 'They are hungry, yet unable to feed.'

After a moment, Cotillion nodded. 'The sorcery belongs to the dragons, then. Well, I can accept that. Yet, what of the circle itself? Has its power died? If so, why are these dragons still bound?'

'Not dead, simply not acting in any manner upon you, Cotillion. You are not its intent.'

'Well enough.' He turned as Baran padded into view, swinging wide to avoid Edgewalker's reach, then fixing its attention on the dragons. Cotillion saw its hackles stiffen. 'Can you answer me this,' he said to Edgewalker, 'why will they not speak with me?'

'Perhaps you have yet to say anything worth a reply.'

'Possibly. What do you think the response will be, then, if I speak of freedom?'

'I am here,' said Edgewalker, 'to discover that for myself.'

'You can read my thoughts?' Cotillion asked in a low voice.

Baran's huge head slowly swung round to regard Edgewalker. The Hound took a single step closer to the creature.

'I possess no such omniscience,' Edgewalker calmly replied, seeming to take no notice of Baran's attention.
'Although to one such as you, it might appear so. But I have existed ages beyond your reckoning, Cotillion. All patterns are known to me, for they have been played out countless times before. Given what approaches us all, it was not hard to predict. Especially given your uncanny prescience.' The dead pits that were Edgewalker's eyes seemed to study Cotillion. 'You suspect, do you not, that dragons are at the heart of all that will come?'

Cotillion gestured at the chains. 'They reach through to the overworld presumably? And that warren is what?'

'What do you think?' Edgewalker countered.

'Try reading my mind.'

'I cannot.'

'So, you are here because you are desperate to know what I know, or even what I suspect.'

Edgewalker's silence was answer enough to that question. Cotillion smiled. 'I think I will make no effort to communicate with these dragons after all.'

'But you will, eventually,' Edgewalker replied. 'And when you do, I will be here. Thus, what does it avail you to remain silent now?'

'Well, in order to irritate you, I suppose.'

'I have existed ages beyond your—'

'So you have been irritated before, yes, I know. And will be again, without question.'

'Make your effort, Cotillion. Soon if not now. If you wish to survive what is to come.'

'All right. Provided you tell me the names of these dragons.'

A clearly grudging reply: 'As you wish—'

'And why they have been imprisoned here, and by whom.'

'That I cannot do.'

They studied each other, then Edgewalker cocked its head, and observed, 'It seems we are at an impasse, Cotillion. What is your decision?'

'Very well. I will take what I can get.'

Edgewalker faced the three dragons. 'These are of the pure blood. Eleint. Ampelas, Kalse and Eloth. Their crime was ... ambition. It is a common enough crime.' The creature turned back to Cotillion. 'Perhaps endemic'

In answer to that veiled judgement, Cotillion shrugged. He walked closer to the imprisoned beasts. 'I shall assume you can hear me,' he said in a low voice. 'A war is coming. Only a few years away. And it will, I suspect, draw into its fray virtually every ascendant from all the realms. I need to know, should you be freed, upon which side shall you fight.'

There was silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then a voice rasped in Cotillion's mind. 'You come here, Usurper, in a quest for allies.'

A second voice cut through, this one distinctly female, 'Bound by gratitude for freeing us. Were I to bargain from your position, I would be foolish to hope for loyalty, for trust.'

'I agree,' said Cotillion, 'that that is a problem. Presumably, you will suggest I free you before we bargain.'

'It is only fair,' the first voice said.

'Alas, I am not that interested in being fair.'
'You fear we will devour you?'

'In the interest of brevity,' Cotillion said, 'and I understand that your kind delight in brevity'

The third dragon spoke then, a heavy, deep voice: 'Freeing us first would indeed spare us the effort of then negotiating. Besides, we are hungry.'

'What brought you to this realm?' Cotillion asked.

There was no reply.

Cotillion sighed. 'I shall be more inclined to free you – assuming I am able – if I have reason to believe your imprisonment was unjust.'

The female dragon asked, 'And you presume to make that decision?'

'This hardly seems the right moment to be cantankerous,' he replied in exasperation. 'The last person who made that judgement clearly did not find in favour of you, and was able to do something about it. I would have thought that all these centuries in chains might have led you three to reevaluate your motivations. But it seems your only regret is that you were unequal to the last entity that presumed to judge you.'

'Yes,' she said, 'that is a regret. But it is not our only one.'

'All right. Let's hear some of the others.'

'That the Tiste Andii who invaded this realm were so thorough in their destruction,' the third dragon said, 'and so absolute in their insistence that the throne remain unclaimed.'

Cotillion drew a slow, long breath. He glanced back at Edgewalker, but the apparition said nothing. 'And what,' he asked the dragons, 'so spurred their zeal?

'Vengeance, of course. And Anomandaris.'

'Ahh, I think I can now assume I know who imprisoned the three of you.'

'He very nearly killed us,' said the female dragon. 'An overreaction on his part. After all, better Eleint on the Throne of Shadow than another Tiste Edur, or worse, a usurper.'

'And how would Eleint not be usurpers?'

'Your pedantry does not impress us.'

'Was all this before or after the Sundering of the Realm?'

'Such distinctions are meaningless. The Sundering continues to this day, and as for the forces that conspired to trigger the dread event, those were many and varied. Like a pack of enkar'al closing on a wounded dryphara. What is vulnerable attracts ... feeders.'

'Thus,' said Cotillion, 'if freed, you would once again seek the Shadow Throne. Only this time, someone occupies that throne.'

'The veracity of that claim is subject to debate,' the female dragon said.

'A matter,' added the first dragon, 'of semantics. Shadows cast by shadows.'

'You believe that Ammanas is sitting on the wrong Shadow Throne.'

'The true throne is not even in this fragment of Emurlahn.'

Cotillion crossed his arms and smiled. 'And is Ammanas?'

The dragons said nothing, and he sensed, with great satisfaction, their sudden disquiet.
'That, Cotillion,' said Edgewalker behind him, 'is a curious distinction. Or are you simply being disingenuous?'

'That I cannot tell you,' Cotillion said, with a faint smile.

The female dragon spoke, 'I am Eloth, Mistress of Illusions – Meanas to you – and Mockra and Thyr. A Shaper of the Blood. All that K'rul asked of me, I have done. And now you presume to question my loyalty?'

'Ah,' Cotillion said, nodding, 'then I take it you are aware of the impending war. Are you also aware of the rumours of K'rul's return?'

'His blood is growing sickly,' said the third dragon. 'I am Ampelas, who shaped the Blood in the paths of Emurlahn. The sorcery wielded by the Tiste Edur was born of my will – do you now understand, Usurper?'

'That dragons are prone to grandiose claims and sententiousness? Yes, I do indeed understand, Ampelas. And I should now presume that for each of the warrens, Elder and new, there is a corresponding dragon? You are the flavours of K'rul's blood? What of the Soletaken dragons, such as Anomandaris and, more relevantly, Scabandari Bloodeye?'

'We are surprised,' said the first dragon after a moment, 'that you know that name.'

'Because you killed him so long ago?'

'A poor guess, Usurper, poorer for that you have revealed the extent of your ignorance. No, we did not kill him. In any case, his soul remains alive, although tormented. The one whose fist shattered his skull and so destroyed his body holds no allegiance to us, nor, we suspect, to anyone but herself.'

'You are Kalse, then,' Cotillion said. 'And what path do you claim?'

'I leave the grandiose claims to my kin. I have no need to impress you, Usurper. Furthermore, I delight in discovering how little you comprehend.'

Cotillion shrugged. 'I was asking about the Soletaken. Scabandari, Anomandaris, Osserc, Olar Ethil, Draconus—'

Edgewalker spoke behind him: 'Cotillion, surely you have surmised by now that these three dragons sought the Shadow Throne for honourable reasons?'

'To heal Emurlahn, yes, Edgewalker, I understand that.'

'And is that not what you seek as well?'

Cotillion turned to regard the creature. 'Is it?'

Edgewalker seemed taken aback for a moment, then, head cocking slightly, it said, 'It is not the healing that concerns you, it is who will be sitting on the Throne afterwards.'

'As I understand things,' Cotillion replied, 'once these dragons did what K'rul asked of them, they were compelled to return to Starvald Demelain. As the sources of sorcery, they could not be permitted to interfere or remain active across the realms, lest sorcery cease to be predictable, which in turn would feed Chaos – the eternal enemy in this grand scheme. But the Soletaken proved a problem. They possessed the blood of Tiam, and with it the vast power of the Eleint. Yet, they could travel as they pleased. They could interfere, and they did. For obvious reasons. Scabandari was originally Edur, and so he became their champion—'

'After murdering the royal line of the Edur!' Eloth said in a hiss. 'After spilling draconean blood in the heart of Kur ald Emurlahn! After opening the first, fatal wound upon that warren! What did he think gates were?'

'The Tiste Andii for Anomandaris,' Cotillion continued. 'Tiste Liosan for Osserc. The T'lan Imass for Olar Ethil. These connections and the loyalties born of them are obvious. Draconus is more of a mystery, of course, since he has been gone a long time—'
‘The most reviled of them all!’ Eloth shrieked, the voice filling Cotillion’s skull so that he winced.

Stepping back, he raised a hand. ‘Spare me, please. I am not really interested in all that, to be honest. Apart from discovering if there was enmity between Eleint and Soletaken. It seems there is, with the possible exception of Silanah—’

‘Seduced by Anomandaris’s charms,’ snapped Eloth. ‘And Olar Ethil’s endless pleadings …’

‘To bring fire to the world of the Imass,’ Cotillion said. ‘For that is her aspect, is it not? Thyr?’

Ampelas observed, ‘He is not so uncomprehending as you believed, Kalse.’

‘Then again,’ Cotillion continued, ‘you too claim Thyr, Eloth. Ah, that was clever of K’rul, forcing you to share power.’

‘Unlike Tiam,’ Ampelas said, ‘when we’re killed we stay dead.’

‘Which brings me to what I truly need to understand. The Elder Gods. They are not simply of one world, are they?’

‘Of course not.’

‘And how long have they been around?’

‘Even when Darkness ruled alone,’ Ampelas replied, ‘there were elemental forces. Moving unseen until the coming of Light. Bound only to their own laws. It is the nature of Darkness that it but rules itself.’

‘And is the Crippled God an Elder?’

Silence.

Cotillion found he was holding his breath. He had taken a twisted path to this question, and had made discoveries along the way – so much to think about, in fact, that his mind was numb, besieged by all that he had learned. ‘I need to know,’ he said in a slow release of his breath.

‘Why?’ Edgewalker asked.

‘If he is,’ Cotillion said, ‘then another question follows. How does one kill an elemental force?’

‘You would shatter the balance?’

‘It’s already been shattered, Edgewalker! That god was brought down to the surface of a world. And chained. His power torn apart and secreted in minuscule, virtually lifeless warrens, but all of them linked to the world I came from—’

‘Too bad for that world,’ Ampelas said.

The smug disregard in that reply stung Cotillion. He breathed deep and remained silent, until the anger passed. Then he faced the dragons again. ‘And from that world, Ampelas, he is poisoning the warrens. Every warren. Are you capable of fighting that?’

‘Were we freed—’

‘Were you freed,’ Cotillion said, with a hard smile, ‘you would resume your original purpose, and there would be more draconean blood spilled in the Realm of Shadow.’

‘And you and your fellow usurper believe you are capable of that?’

‘You as much as admitted it,’ Cotillion said. ‘You can be killed, and when you have been killed, you stay dead. It is no wonder Anomandaris chained the three of you. In obstinate stupidity you have no equals—’

‘A sundered realm is the weakest realm of all! Why do you think the Crippled God is working through it?’
'Thank you,' said Cotillion to Ampelas in a quiet tone. 'That is what I needed to know.' He turned away and began walking back down the approach.

'Wait!'

'We will speak again, Ampelas,' he said over a shoulder, 'before it all goes to the Abyss.'

Edgewalker followed.

As soon as they were clear of the ring of stones, the creature spoke: 'I must chide myself. I have underestimated you, Cotillion.'

'It's a common enough mistake.'

'What will you do now?'

'Why should I tell you?'

Edgewalker did not immediately reply. They continued down the slope, strode out onto the plain. 'You should tell me,' the apparition finally said, 'because I might be inclined to give you assistance.'

'That would mean more to me if I knew who – what – you are.'

'You may consider me ... an elemental force.'

A dull chill seeped through Cotillion. 'I see. All right, Edgewalker. It appears that the Crippled God has launched an offensive on multiple fronts. The First Throne of the T'lan Imass and the Throne of Shadow are the ones that concern us the most, for obvious reasons. In these two, we feel we are fighting alone – we cannot even rely upon the Hounds, given the mastery the Tiste Edur seem to hold over them. We need allies, Edgewalker, and we need them now.'

'You have just walked away from three such allies—'

'Allies who won't rip our heads off once the threat's been negated.'

'Ah, there is that. Very well, Cotillion, I will give the matter some consideration.'

'Take your time.'

'That seems a contrary notion.'

'If one is lacking a grasp of sarcasm, I imagine it does at that.'

'You do interest me, Cotillion. And that is a rare thing.'

'I know. You have existed longer ...' Cotillion's words died away. An elemental force. I guess he has at that. Damn it.

There were so many ways of seeing this dreadful need, the vast conspiracy of motivations from which all shades and casts of morality could be culled, that Mappo Runt was left feeling overwhelmed, from which only sorrow streamed down, pure and chilled, into his thoughts. Beneath the coarse skin of his hands, he could feel the night's memory slowly fading from the stone, and soon this rock would know the assault of the sun's heat – this pitted, root-tracked underbelly that had not faced the sun in countless millennia.

He had been turning over stones. Six since dawn. Roughly chiselled dolomite slabs, and beneath each one he had found a scatter of broken bones. Small bones, fossilized, and though in countless pieces after the interminable crushing weight of the stone, the skeletons were, as far as Mappo could determine, complete.

There were, had been, and would always be, all manner of wars. He knew that, in all the seared, scar-hardened places in his soul, so there was no shock in his discovery of these long-dead Jaghut children. And
horror had run a mercifully swift passage through his thoughts, leaving at the last his old friend, sorrow.

Streaming down, pure and chilled.

Wars in which soldier fought soldier, sorcerer clashed with sorcerer. Assassins squared off, knife-blades flickering in the night. Wars in which the lawful battled the wilfully unlawful, in which the sane stood against the sociopath. He had seen crystals growing up in a single night from the desert floor, facet after facet revealed like the petals of an opening flower, and it seemed to him that brutality behaved in a like manner. One incident leading to another, until a conflagration burgeoned, swallowing everyone in its path.

Mappo lifted his hands from the slab's exposed underside and slowly straightened. To look over at his companion, still wading the warm shallows of the Raraku Sea. Like a child unfolding to a new, unexpected pleasure. Splashing about, running his hands through the reeds that had appeared as if remembered into existence by the sea itself.

Icarium.

*Mycrystal.*

When the conflagration consumed children, then the distinction between the sane and the sociopath ceased to exist. It was his flaw, he well knew, to yearn to seek the truth of every side, to comprehend the myriad justifications for committing the most brutal crimes. Imass had been enslaved by deceitful Jaghut tyrants, led down paths of false worship, made to do unspeakable things. Until they had uncovered the deceivers. Unleashing vengeance, first against the tyrants, then against all Jaghut. And so the crystal grew, facet after facet...

Until this ... He glanced down once more upon the child's bones. Pinned beneath dolomite slabs. Not limestone, for dolomite provided a good surface for carving glyphs, and though soft, it absorbed power, making it slower to erode than raw limestone, and so it held those glyphs, faded and soft-edged after all these thousands of years to be sure, but discernible still.

The power of those wards persisted, long after the creature imprisoned by them had died.

Dolomite was said to hold memories. A belief among Mappo's own people, at least, who in their wanderings had encountered such Imass edifices, the impromptu tombs, the sacred circles, the sight-stones on hill summits – encountered, and then studiously avoided. For the hauntings in these places was a palpable thing.

*Or so we managed to convince ourselves.*

He sat here, on the edge of Raraku Sea, in the place of an ancient crime, and beyond what his own thoughts conjured, there was nothing. The stone he had set his hands upon seemed possessed of the shortest of memories. The cold of darkness, the heat of the sun. That, and nothing more.

The shortest of memories.

Splash, and Icarium was striding up onto the shoreline, his eyes bright with pleasure. 'Such a worthy boon, yes, Mappo? I am enlivened by these waters. Oh, why will you not swim and so be blessed by Raraku's gift?'

Mappo smiled. 'Said blessing would quickly wash off this old hide, my friend. I fear the gift would be wasted, and so will not risk disappointing the awakened spirits.'

'I feel,' Icarium said, 'as if the quest begins anew. I will finally discover the truth. Who I am. All that I have done. I will discover, too,' he added as he approached, 'the reason for your friendship – that you should always be found at my side, though I lose myself again and again. Ah, I fear I have offended you – no, please, do not look so glum. It is only that I cannot understand why you have sacrificed yourself so. As far as friendships go, this must be a most frustrating one for you.'

'No, Icarium, there is no sacrifice involved. Nor frustration. This is what we are, and this is what we do. That is all.'
Icarium sighed and turned to look out over the new sea. ‘If only I could be as restful of thought as you, Mappo...’

‘Children have died here.’

The Jhag swung round, his green eyes studying the ground behind the Trell. ‘I saw you pitching rocks. Yes, I see them. Who were they?’

Some nightmare the night before had scoured away Icarium’s memories. This had been happening more often of late. Troubling. And ... crushing. ‘Jagut. From the wars with the T’lan Imass.’

‘A terrible thing to have done,’ Icarium said. The sun was fast drying the water beaded on his hairless, green-grey skin. ‘How is it that mortals can be so cavalier with life? Look at this freshwater sea, Mappo. The new shoreline burgeons with sudden life. Birds, and insects, and all the new plants, there is so much joy revealed, my friend, that my heart feels moments from bursting.’

‘Infinite wars,’ Mappo said. ‘Life’s struggles, each trying to push the other aside, and so win out.’

‘You are grim company this morning, Mappo.’

‘Aye, I am at that. I am sorry, Icarium.’

‘Shall we remain here for a time?’

Mappo studied his friend. Bereft of his upper garments, he looked more savage, more barbaric than usual. The dye with which he had disguised the colour of his skin had mostly faded away. ‘As you like. This journey is yours, after all.’

‘Knowledge is returning,’ Icarium said, eyes still on the sea. ‘Raraku’s gift. We were witness to the rise of the waters, here on this west shore. Further west, then, there will be a river, and many cities—’

Mappo’s gaze narrowed. ‘Only one, now, to speak of,’ he said.

‘Only one?’

‘The others died thousands of years ago, Icarium.’

‘N’karaphal? Trebur? Inath’an Merusin? Gone?’

‘Inath’an Merusin is now called Mersin. It is the last of the great cities lining the river.’

‘But there were so many, Mappo. I recall all their names. Vinith, Hedori Kwil, Tramara ...’

‘All practising intensive irrigation, drawing the river’s waters out onto the plains. All clearing forests to build their ships. Those cities are dead now, my friend. And the river, its waters once so clear and sweet, is now heavy with silts and much diminished. The plains have lost their topsoil, becoming the Lato Odhan to the east of the Mersin River, and Ugarat Odhan to the west.’

Icarium slowly raised his hands, set them against his temples, and closed his eyes. ‘That long, Mappo?’ he asked in a frail whisper.

‘Perhaps the sea has triggered such memories. For it was indeed a sea back then, freshwater for the most part, although there was seepage through the limestone escarpment from Longshan Bay – that vast barrier was rotting through, as it will do again, I imagine, assuming this sea reaches as far north as it once did.’

‘The First Empire?’

‘It was falling even then. There was no recovery.’ Mappo hesitated, seeing how his words had wounded his friend. ‘But the people returned to this land, Icarium. Seven Cities – yes, the name derives from old remembrances. New cities have grown from the ancient rubble. We are only forty leagues from one right now. Lato Revae. It is on the coast—’
Icarium turned away suddenly. 'No,' he said. 'I am not yet ready to leave, to cross any oceans. This land holds secrets – my secrets, Mappo. Perhaps the antiquity of my memories will prove advantageous. The lands of my mindscape are the lands of my own past, after all, and they might well yield truths. We shall walk those ancient roads.'

The Trell nodded. 'I will break camp, then.'

'Trebur.'

Mappo turned, waited with growing dread.

Icarium's eyes were fixed on him now, the vertical pupils narrowed to black slivers by the bright sunlight. 'I have memories of Trebur. I spent time there, in the City of Domes. I did something. An important thing.' He frowned. 'I did ... something.'

'It is an arduous journey ahead of us, then,' Mappo said. 'Three, maybe four days to the edge of the Thalas Mountains. Ten more at the least to reach the Mersin River's Wend. The channel has moved from the site of ancient Trebur. A day's travel west of the river, then, and we will find those ruins.'

'Will there be villages and such on our route?'

Mappo shook his head. 'These Odhans are virtually lifeless now, Icarium. Occasionally, Vedanik tribes venture down from the Thalas Mountains, but not at this time of year. Keep your bow at the ready – there are antelope and hares and drolig.'

'Waterholes, then?'

'I know them,' Mappo said.

Icarium walked over to his gear. 'We have done this before, haven't we?'

Yes. 'Not for a long while, my friend.' Almost eighty years, in fact. But the last time, we stumbled onto it – you remembered nothing. This time, I fear, it will be different. Icarium paused, the horn-rimmed bow in his hands, and looked over at Mappo. 'You are so patient with me,' he said, with a faint, sad smile, 'whilst I wander, ever lost.'

Mappo shrugged. 'It is what we do.'

The Path'Apur Mountains rimmed the far horizon to the south. It had been almost a week since they had left the city of Pan'potsun, and with each day the number of villages they passed through had dwindled, whilst the distance between them lengthened. Their pace was torturously slow, but that was to be expected, travelling on foot as they did, and with a man in their company who had seemingly lost his mind.

Sun-darkened skin almost olive beneath the dust, the demon Greyfrog clambered onto the boulder and squatted at Cutter's side.

'Declaration. It is said that the wasps of the desert guard gems and such. Query. Has Cutter heard such tales? Anticipatory pause.'

'Sounds more like someone's bad idea of a joke,' Cutter replied. Below them was a flat clearing surrounded by massive rock outcroppings. It was the place of their camp. Scillara and Felisin Younger sat in view, tending the makeshift hearth. The madman was nowhere to be seen. Off wandering again, Cutter surmised. Holding conversations with ghosts, or, perhaps more likely, the voices in his head. Oh, Heboric carried curses, the barbs of a tiger on his skin, the benediction of a god of war, and those voices in his head might well be real. Even so, break a man's spirit enough times ...


Frowning, Cutter glanced over at the demon. Its flat, hairless head and broad, four-eyed face were lumpy and
swollen with wasp stings. 'You didn't. You did.'

'Irate is their common state, I now believe. Breaking open their cave made them more so. We clashed in buzzing disagreement. I fared the worse, I think.'

'Black wasps?'

'Tilt head, query. Black? Dreaded reply, why yes, they were. Black. Rhetorical, was that significant?'

'Be glad you're a demon,' Cutter said. 'Two or three stings from those will kill a grown man. Ten will kill a horse.'

'A horse – we had those – you had them. I was forced to run. Horse. Large four-legged animal. Succulent meat.'

'People tend to ride them,' Cutter said. 'Until they drop. Then we eat them.'

'Multiple uses, excellent and unwasteful. Did we eat yours? Where can we find more such creatures?'

'We have not the money to purchase them, Greyfrog. And we sold ours for food and supplies in Pan'potsun.'

'Obstinate reasonableness. No money. Then we should take, my young friend. And so hasten this journey to its muchawaited conclusion. Latter tone indicating mild despair.'

'Still no word from L'oric?'

'Worriedly. No. My brother is silent.'

Neither spoke for a time. The demon was picking the serrated edges of its lips, where, Cutter saw upon a closer look, grey flecks and crushed wasps were snagged. Greyfrog had eaten the wasp nest. No wonder the wasps had been irate. Cutter rubbed at his face. He needed a shave. And a bath. And clean, new clothes.

And a purpose in life. Once, long ago, when he had been Crokus Younghand of Darujhistan, his uncle had begun preparing the way for a reformed Crokus. A youth of the noble courts, a figure of promise, a figure inviting to the young, wealthy, pampered women of the city. A shortlived ambition, in every way. His uncle dead, and dead, too, Crokus Younghand. No heap of ashes left to stir.

What I was is not what I am. Two men, identical faces, but different eyes. In what they have seen, in what they reflect upon the world.

'Bitter taste,' Greyfrog said in his mind, long tongue slithering out to collect the last fragments. A heavy, gusty sigh. 'Yet oh so filling. Query. Can one burst from what one has inside?'

I hope not. 'We'd best find Heboric, if we are to make use of this day.'

'Noted earlier. Ghost Hands was exploring the rocks above. The scent of a trail led him onward and upward.'

'A trail?'

'Water. He sought the source of the spring we see pooling below near the fleshy women who, said jealously, so adore you.'

Cutter straightened. 'They don't seem so fleshy to me, Greyfrog.'

'Curious. Mounds of flesh, water storage vessels, there on the hips and behind. On the chest—'

'All right. That kind of fleshy. You are too much the carnivore, demon.'

'Yes. Fullest delicious agreement. Shall I go find Ghost Hands?'

'No, I will. I think those riders who passed us yesterday on the track are not as far away as they should be,
and I would be relieved to know you are guarding Scillara and Felisin.'

'None shall take them away,' Greyfrog said.

Cutter looked down at the squatting demon. 'Scillara and Felisin are not horses.'

Greyfrog's large eyes blinked slowly, first the two side-by-side, then the pair above and below. Tongue darted. 'Blithe. Of course not. Insufficient number of legs, worthyly observed.'

Cutter edged to the back of the boulder, then leapt across to another one tucked deeper into the talus-heaped cliff-side. He grasped a ledge and pulled himself up. Little different from climbing a balcony, or an estate wall. Adore me, do they? He had trouble believing that. Easier to rest eyes upon, he imagined, than an old man and a demon, but that was not adoration. He could make no sense of those two women. Bickering like sisters, competing over everything in sight, and over things Cutter couldn't see or comprehend. At other times, unaccountably close, as if sharing a secret. Both fussed over Heboric Ghost Hands, Destriant of Treach.

Maybe war needs nurturers. Maybe the god is happy with this. The priest needs acolytes, after all. That might have been expected with Scillara, since Heboric had drawn her out of a nightmarish existence, and indeed had healed her in some as-yet unspecified way – if Cutter had surmised correctly from the meagre comments overheard now and then. Scillara had a lot to be grateful for. And for Felisin, there had been something about revenge, delivered to her satisfaction against someone who had done her a terrible wrong. It was complicated. So, a moment's thought, and it's obvious they do possess secrets. Too many of them. Oh, what do I care? Women are nothing but a mass of contradictions surrounded by deadly pitfalls. Approach at your own risk. Better yet, approach not at all.

He reached a chimney in the cliff-side and began working his way up it. Water trickled down vertical cracks in the rock. Flies and other winged insects swarmed him; the corners of the chimney were thickly webbed by opportunistic spiders. By the time he climbed free of it, he had been thoroughly bitten and was covered in thick, dusty strands. He paused to brush himself off, then looked around. A rough trail continued upward, winding between collapsed shelves of stone. He headed up the path.

At their meandering, desultory pace, they were months from the coast, as far as he could determine. Once there, they would have to find a boat to take them across to Otataral Island. A forbidden journey, and Malazan ships patrolled those waters diligently – or at least they did before the uprising. It might be that they were yet to fully reorganize such things.

They would begin the passage at night, in any case.

Heboric had to return something. Something found on the island. It was all very vague. And for some reason Cotillion had wanted Cutter to accompany the Destriant. Or, rather, to protect Felisin Younger. A path to take, when before there had been none. Even so, it was not the best of motivations. A flight from despair was pathetic, especially since it could not succeed.

Adore me, do they? What is here to adore?

A voice ahead: 'All that is mysterious is as a lure to the curious. I hear your steps, Cutter. Come, see this spider.'

Cutter stepped round an outcrop and saw Heboric, kneeling beside a stunted scrub oak.

'And where there is pain and vulnerability bound into the lure, it becomes all the more attractive. See this spider? Below this branch, yes? Trembling on its web, one leg dismembered, thrashing about as if in pain. Its quarry, you see, is not flies, or moths. Oh no, what she hunts is fellow spiders.'

'Who care nothing for pain or mystery, Heboric,' Cutter said, crouching down to study the creature. The size of a child's hand. 'That's not one of its legs. It's a prop.'

'You are assuming other spiders can count. She knows better.'

'All very interesting,' Cutter said, straightening, 'but we must get going.'
'We're all watching this play out,' Heboric said, leaning back and studying the strangely pulsing, taloned hands that flitted in and out of existence at the ends of his wrists.

We? Oh, yes, you and your invisible friends. 'I wouldn't think there'd be many ghosts in these hills.'

'Then you would be wrong. Hill tribes. Endless warfare – it's those who fall in battle that I see, only those who fall in battle.' The hands flexed. 'The mouth of the spring is just ahead. They fought over control of it.' His toad-like features twisted. 'There's always a reason, or reasons. Always.'

Cutter sighed, studied the sky. 'I know, Heboric'

'Knowing means nothing.'

'I know that, too.'

Heboric rose. 'Treach's greatest comfort, understanding that there are infinite reasons for waging war.'

'And are you comforted by that, too?'

The Distriant smiled. 'Come. That demon who speaks in our heads is obsessing about flesh at the moment, with watering mouth.'

They made their way down the trail. 'He won't eat them.'

'I am not convinced that is the nature of his appetite.'

Cutter snorted. 'Heboric, Greyfrog is a four-handed, four-eyed, oversized toad.'

'With a surprisingly boundless imagination. Tell me, how much do you know of him?'

'Less than you.'

'It has not occurred to me, until now,' Heboric said, as he led Cutter onto a path offering a less precarious climb – but more roundabout – than the one the Daru had used, 'that we know virtually nothing of who Greyfrog was, and what he did, back in his home realm.'

This was proving an unusually long lucid episode for Heboric. Cutter wondered if something had changed – he hoped it would stay this way. 'Then we could ask him.'

'I shall'

In the camp, Scillara kicked sand over the few remaining coals of the cookfire. She walked over to her pack and sat down, settling her back against it as she pushed more rustleaf into her pipe and drew hard until smoke streamed from it. Across from her, Greyfrog squatted in front of Felisin, making strange whimpering sounds.

She had seen so little for so long. Drugged insensate by durhang, filled with infantile thoughts by her old master, Bidithal. And now she was free, and still wide-eyed with the complexities of the world. The demon lusted after Felisin, she believed. Either to mate with or to devour – it was hard to tell. While Felisin regarded Greyfrog as if it was a dog better to stroke than kick. Which might in turn be giving the demon the wrong notions.

It spoke with the others in their minds, but had yet to do so with Scillara. Out of courtesy to her, the ones the demon addressed replied out loud, although of course they did not have to – and perhaps didn't more often than not. There was no way for Scillara to tell. She wondered why she had been set apart – what did Greyfrog see within her that so affected its apparent loquaciousness?

Well, poisons do linger. I may be ... unpalatable. In her old life, she might have felt some resentment, or suspicion, assuming she felt anything at all. But now, it appeared to her that she didn't much care. Something had taken shape within her, and it was self-contained and, oddly enough, self-assured.
Perhaps that came with being pregnant. Just beginning to show, and that would only get worse. And this time there would be no alchemies to scour the seed out of her. Although other means were possible, of course. She was undecided on whether to keep the child, whose father was probably Korbolo Dom but could have been one of his officers, or someone else. Not that that mattered, since whoever he had been he was probably dead now, a thought that pleased her.

The constant nausea was wearying, although the rustleaf helped. There was the ache in her breasts, and the weight of them made her back ache, and that was unpleasant. Her appetite had burgeoned, and she was getting heavier, especially on the hips. The others had simply assumed that such changes were coming with her returning health – she hadn't coughed in over a week, and all this walking had strengthened her legs – and she did not disabuse them of their assumptions.

A child. What would she do with it? What would it expect of her? What was it mothers did anyway? Sell their babies, mostly. To temples, to slavers, to the harem merchants if it's a girl. Or keep it and teach it to beg. Steal. Sell its body. This, born of sketchy observations and the stories told by the waifs of Sha'ik's encampment. Meaning, a child was an investment of sorts, which made sense. A return on nine months of misery and discomfort.

She supposed she could do something like that. Sell it. Assuming she let it live that long.

It was a dilemma indeed, but she had plenty of time to think on it. To make her decision.

Greyfrog's head twisted round, looking past Scillara's position. She turned to see four men emerge and halt at the edge of the clearing. The fourth one was leading horses. The riders who had passed them yesterday. One was carrying a loaded crossbow, the weapon trained on the demon.

'Be sure,' the man said in a growl to Felisin, 'that you keep that damned thing away from us.'

The man on his right laughed. 'A four-eyed dog. Yes, woman, get a leash on it ... now. We don't want any blood spilled. Well,' he added, 'not much.'

'Where are the two men you were with?' the man with the crossbow asked.

Scillara set down her pipe. 'Not here,' she said, rising and tugging at her tunic. 'Just do what you've come here to do and then leave.'

'Now that's accommodating. You, with the dog, are you going to be as nice as your friend here?'

Felisin said nothing. She had gone white.

'Never mind her,' Scillara said. 'I'm enough for all of you.'

'But maybe you ain't enough, as far as we're concerned,' the man said, smiling.

It wasn't even an ugly smile, she decided. She could do this. 'I plan on surprising you, then.'

The man handed the crossbow over to one of his comrades and unclasped the belt of his telaba. 'We'll see about that. Guthrim, if that dog-thing moves, kill it.'

'It's a lot bigger than most dogs I've seen,' Guthrim replied.

'Quarrel's poisoned, remember? Black wasp.'

'Maybe I should just kill it now.'

The other man hesitated, then nodded. 'Go ahead.'

The crossbow thudded.

Greyfrog's right hand intercepted the quarrel, plucking it out of the air, then the demon studied it, and slithered out its tongue to lick the poison.
'The Seven take me!' Guthrim whispered in disbelief.

'Oh,' Scillara said to Greyfrog, 'don't make a mess of this. There's no problem here—'

'He disagrees,' Felisin said, her voice thin with fear.

'Well, convince him otherwise.' I can do this. Just like it was before. Doesn't matter, they're just men.

'I can't, Scillara.'

Guthrim was reloading the crossbow, whilst the first man and the one not holding the reins of the horses both drew scimitars.

Greyfrog bounded forward, appallingly fast, and leapt upward, mouth opening wide. That mouth clamped onto Guthrim's head. The demon's lower jaw slipped out from its hinges and the man's head disappeared. Greyfrog's momentum and weight toppled him. Horrific crunching sounds, Guthrim's body spasming, spraying fluids, then sagging limp.

Greyfrog's jaws closed with a scraping, then snapping sound, then the demon clambered away, leaving behind a headless corpse.

The remaining three men had stared in shock during this demonstration. But now they acted. The first one cried out, a strangled, terror-filled sound, and rushed forward, raising his scimitar.

Spitting out a mangled, crushed mess of hair and bone, Greyfrog jumped to meet him. One hand caught the man's sword-arm, twisted hard until the elbow popped, flesh tore, and blood spurted. Another hand closed on his throat and squeezed, crushing cartilage. The man's scream never reached the air. Eyes bulging, face rushing to a shade of dark grey, tongue jutting like some macabre creature trying to climb free, he collapsed beneath the demon. A third hand held the other arm. Greyfrog used the fourth one to reach back and scratch itself.

The remaining swordsman fled to where the fourth man was already scrabbling onto his horse.

Greyfrog leapt again. A fist cracked against the back of the swordsman's head, punching the bone inward. He sprawled, weapon flying. The demon's charge caught the last man with one leg in the stirrup.

The horse shied away with a squeal, and Greyfrog dragged the man down, then bit his face.

A moment later this man's head vanished into the demon's maw as had the first one. More crunching sounds, more twitching kicks, grasping hands. Then, merciful death.

The demon spat out shattered bone still held in place by the scalp. It fell in such a way that Scillara found herself looking at the man's face – no flesh, no eyes, just the skin, puckered and bruised. She stared at it a moment longer, then forced herself to look away.

At Felisin, who had backed up as far as she could against the stone wall, knees drawn up, hands covering her eyes.

'It's done,' Scillara said. 'Felisin, it's over.'

The hands lowered, revealing an expression of terror and revulsion.

Greyfrog was dragging bodies away, round behind a mass of boulders, moving with haste. Ignoring the demon for the moment, Scillara walked over to crouch in front of Felisin. 'It would have been easier my way,' she said. 'At least a lot less messy.'

Felisin stared at her. 'He sucked out their brains.'

'I could see that.'

'Delicious, he said.'
'He's a demon, Felisin. Not a dog, not a pet. A demon.'

'Yes.' The word was whispered.

'And now we know what he can do.'

A mute nod.

'So,' Scillara said quietly, 'don't get too friendly.' She straightened, and saw Cutter and Heboric clambering down from the ridge.

'Triumph and pride! We have horses!'

Cutter slowed. 'We heard a scream—'

'Horses,' Heboric said as he walked towards the skittish animals. 'That's a bit of luck.'

'Innocent. Scream? No, friend Cutter. Was Grey frog ... breaking wind.'

'Really. And did these horses just wander up to you?'

'Bold. Yes! Most curious!'

Cutter headed over to study some odd stains in the scuffled dust. Greyfrog's palm-prints were evident in the effort to clean up the mess. 'Some blood here ...'

'Shock, dismay ... remorse.'

'Remorse. At what happened here, or at being found out?'

'Sly. Why, the former, of course, friend Cutter.'

Grimacing, Cutter glanced over at Scillara and Felisin, studied their expressions. 'I think,' he said slowly, 'that I am glad I was not here to see what you two saw.'

'Yes,' Scillara replied. 'You should be.'

'Best keep your distance from these beasts, Greyfrog,' Heboric called out. 'They may not like me, much, but they really don't like you.'

'Confident. They just don't know me yet.'

'I wouldn't feed this to a rat,' Smiles said, picking desultorily at the fragments of meat on the tin plate resting in her lap. 'Look, even the flies are avoiding it.'

'It's not the food they're avoiding,' Koryk said. 'It's you.'

She sneered across at him. 'That's called respect. A foreign word to you, I know. Seti are just failed Wickans. Everybody knows that. And you, you're a failed Seti.' She took her plate and sent it skidding across the sand towards Koryk. 'Here, stick it in your half-blood ears and save it for later.'

'She's so sweet after a day's hard riding,' Koryk said to Tarr, with a broad, white smile.

'Keep baiting her,' the corporal replied, 'and you'll probably regret it.' He too was eyeing what passed for supper on his plate, his normally placid expression wrinkling into a slight scowl. 'It's horse, I'm sure of it.'

'Dug up from some horse cemetery,' Smiles said, stretching out her legs. 'I'd kill for some grease-fish, baked in clay over coals down on the beach. Yellow-spiced, weedwrapped. A jug of Meskeri wine and some worthy lad from the inland village. A farm-boy, big—'
‘Hood’s litany, enough!’ Koryk leaned forward and spat into the fire. ‘You rounding up some pig-swiller with fluff on his chin is the only story you know, that much is obvious. Dammit, Smiles, we’ve heard it all a thousand times. You crawling out of Father’s estate at night to get your hands and knees wet down on the beach. Where was all this again? Oh, right, little-girl dream-land, I’d forgotten—’

A knife thudded into Koryk’s right calf. Bellowing, he scrambled back, then sank down to clutch at his leg.

Soldiers from nearby squads looked over, squinting through the dust that suffused the entire camp. A moment’s curiosity, quickly fading.

As Koryk loosed a stream of indignant curses, both hands trying to stem the bleeding, Bottle sighed and rose from where he sat. ‘See what happens when the old men leave us to play on our own? Hold still, Koryk,’ he said as he approached. ‘I’ll get you mended – won’t take long—’

‘Make it soon,’ the half-blood Seti said in a growl, ‘so I can slit that bitch’s throat.’

Bottle glanced over at the woman, then leaned in close to Koryk. ‘Easy. She’s looking a little pale. A bad throw—’

‘Oh, and what was she aiming at?’

Corporal Tarr climbed to his feet. ‘Strings won’t be happy with you, Smiles,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘He moved his leg—’

‘And you threw a knife at him.’

‘It was that little-girl thing. I was provoked.’

‘Never mind how it started. You might try apologizing – maybe Koryk will leave it at that—’

‘Sure,’ Koryk said. ‘The day Hood climbs into his own grave.’

‘Bottle, you stopped the bleeding yet?’

‘Pretty much, Corporal.’ Bottle tossed the knife over towards Smiles. It landed at her feet, the blade slick.

‘Thanks, Bottle,’ Koryk said. ‘Now she can try again.’

The knife thudded into the ground between the halfblood’s boots.

All eyes snapped to stare at Smiles.

Bottle licked his lips. That damned thing had come all too close to his left hand.

‘That’s where I was aiming,’ Smiles said.

‘What did I tell you?’ Koryk asked, his voice strangely high.

Bottle drew a deep breath to slow his pounding heart.

Tarr walked over and pulled the knife from the ground. ‘I’ll keep this for a while, I think.’

‘I don’t care,’ Smiles said. ‘I got plenty more.’

‘And you will keep them sheathed.’

‘Aye, Corporal. So long as no-one provokes me.’

‘She’s insane,’ Koryk muttered.

‘She’s not insane,’ Bottle replied. ‘Just lonely for ...’
'Some farm-boy from the inland village,' Koryk finished, grinning.

'Probably a cousin,' Bottle added, low so that only Koryk heard.

The man laughed.

There. Bottle sighed. Another hairy moment on this endless march passed by, with only a little blood spilled. The Fourteenth Army was tired. Miserable. It didn't like itself, much. Deprived of delivering fullest vengeance upon Sha'ik and the murderers, rapists and cut-throats who followed her, and now in slow pursuit of the last remnant of that rebel army, along crumbling, dusty roads in a parched land, through sandstorms and worse, the Fourteenth still waited for a resolution. It wanted blood, but so far most of the blood spilled had been its own, as altercations turned into feuds and things got ugly.

The Fists were doing their best to keep things under control, but they were as worn down as everyone else. It didn't help that there were very few captains worthy of the rank in the companies.

*And we don't have one at all, now that Keneb got moved.* There was the rumour of a new contingent of recruits and officers disembarking at Lato Revae and now somewhere behind them, hurrying to catch up, but that rumour had begun ten days ago. The fools should have caught them by now.

Messengers had been coming and going in the last two days, pelting along the track from their wake, then back again. Dujek Onearm and the Adjunct were doing a lot of talking, that much was clear. What wasn't was what they were talking about. Bottle had thought about eavesdropping on the command tent and its occupants, as he had done many times before, between Aren and Raraku, but the presence of Quick Ben made him nervous. A High Mage. If Quick turned over a rock and found Bottle under it, there'd be Hood to pay.

The damned bastards fleeing ahead of them could run for ever, and probably would if their commander had any brains. He could have chosen a last stand at any time. Heroic and inspiring in its pointlessness. But it seemed he was too clever for that. Westward, ever westward, out into the wastes.

Bottle returned to where he had been sitting, collecting handfuls of sand to scrub Koryk's blood from his fingers and palms. *We're just getting on each other's nerves. That's all.* His grandmother would know what to do about this situation, but she was long dead and her spirit was anchored to the old farm outside Jakata, a thousand leagues from here. He could almost see her, shaking her head and squinting in that half-crazed genius way she'd had. Wise in the ways of mortals, seeing through to every weakness, every flaw, reading unconscious gestures and momentary expressions, cutting through the confused surface to lay bare the bones of truth. Nothing was hidden from her.

He could not talk with her, however.

*But there's another woman ... isn't there?* Despite the heat, Bottle shivered. She still haunted his dreams, that Eres'al witch. Still showed him the ancient hand-axes spread out over this land like the stone leaves of a world-encompassing tree, scattered by the winds of countless passing ages. He knew, in fact, that fifty or so paces south of this track, there was a basin cluttered with the damned things. Out there, a short walk, waiting for him.

*I see them, but I do not yet understand their significance. That's the problem. I'm not equal to this.*

His eyes caught movement down by his boots and he saw a locust, swollen with eggs and crawling slowly. Bottle leaned forward and picked it up by pinching together its folded wings. With his other hand he reached into his pack, and removed a small black wooden box, its lid and sides pierced through with small holes. He flicked open the clasp and lifted the lid.

Joyful Union, their prized Birdshit scorpion. In the sudden light, the creature's tail lifted as it backed into a corner.

Bottle tossed the locust into the box.

The scorpion had known what was coming, and it darted forward, and moments later was feeding on the still-kicking insect.
‘Simple for you, isn’t it?’ Bottle said under his breath.

Something thumped into the sand beside him — a karybral fruit, round and dusty-lime-coloured. Bottle looked up to find Cuttle standing over him.

The sapper had an armful of the fruit. ‘A treat,’ he said.

Grimacing, Bottle closed the lid on Joyful Union. ‘Thanks. Where did you get them?’

‘Went for a walk.’ Cuttle nodded southward. ‘A basin, karybral vines everywhere.’ He started tossing them to the others in the squad.

A basin. ‘Plenty of hand-axes, too, right?’

Cuttle squinted. ‘Didn’t notice. Is that dried blood on your hands?’

‘That would be mine,’ Koryk said in a growl, already husking the fruit.

The sapper paused, studied the rough circle of soldiers around him, finishing on Corporal Tarr, who shrugged. This seemed sufficient, as Cuttle flung the last karybral globe over to Smiles.

Who caught it on a knife.

The others, Cuttle included, watched as she proceeded to slice the skin away with deft strokes.

The sapper sighed. ‘Think I’ll go find the sergeant.’

‘Good idea,’ Bottle said.

‘You should let Joyful out for the occasional walk,’ Cuttle said. ‘Stretch the old legs. Maybe and Lutes have found a new scorpion – never seen its like before. They’re talking re-match.’

‘Scorpions can’t stretch their legs,’ Bottle replied.

‘A figure of speech.’

‘Oh.’

‘Anyway,’ Cuttle said, then ambled off.

Smiles had managed to remove the entire husk in one strip, which she lobbed in Koryk's direction. He had been looking down, and he jumped at the motion in the edge of his vision.

She snorted. ‘There you go. Add it to your collection of charms.’

The half-Seti set down his karybral and slowly stood, then winced and threw Bottle a glare. ‘I thought you healed this damned thing.’

‘I did. It's still going to be sore, though.’

‘Sore? I can barely stand.’

‘It’ll get better.’

‘She’s liable to run,’ Tarr observed. ‘It should be amusing, Koryk, seeing you hobbling after her.’

The big man subsided. ‘I'm patient enough,’ he said, sitting back down.

‘Ooh,’ Smiles said, ‘I'm all in a sweat.’

Bottle climbed to his feet. ‘I'm going for a walk,’ he said. ‘Nobody kill anybody until I get back.’

‘If someone gets killed,’ Tarr pointed out, ‘your healing skills won't be much help.’
'I wasn't thinking about healing, just watching.'

They had ridden north, out of sight of the encamped column, over a low ridge and onto a flat, dusty plain. Three gulindinha trees rose from a low knoll two hundred paces distant, and they had reined in beneath the shade of the leathery, broad leaves, unpacking food and a jug of Gredfalan ale Fiddler had procured from somewhere, and there they awaited the High Mage's arrival.

Something of Fiddler's old spirit had been dampened, Kalam could see. More grey in the russet beard, a certain far-off look in his pale blue eyes. True, the Fourteenth was an army filled with resentful, bitter soldiers, the glory of an empire's vengeance stolen from them the very night before battle; and this march wasn't helping. These things alone could suffice to explain Fiddler's condition, but Kalam knew better.

Tanno song or no, Hedge and the others were dead. Ghosts on the other side. Then again, Quick Ben had explained that the official reports were slightly inaccurate. Mallet, Picker, Antsy, Blend, Spindle, Bluepearl ... there were survivors, retired and living soft in Darujhistan. Along with Captain Ganoes Paran. So, some good news, and it had helped. A little.

Fiddler and Hedge had been as close as brothers. When together, they had been mayhem. A conjoined mindset more dangerous than amusing most of the time. As legendary as the Bridgeburners themselves. It had been a fateful decision back there on the shoreline of Lake Azur, their parting. Fateful for all of us, it turns out.

Kalam could make little sense of the ascendancy. This Spiritwalker's blessing on a company of soldiers, the parting of the fabric at Raraku. He was both comforted and uneasy with the notion of unseen guardians – Fiddler's life had been saved by Hedge's ghost ... but where was Whiskeyjack? Had he been there as well?

That night in the camp of Sha'iik had been nightmarish. Too many knives to count had been unsheathed in those dark hours. And he had seen some of those ghosts with his own eyes. Bridgeburners long dead, come back grim as a hangover and as ugly as they had been in life. If he ever met that Tanno Spiritwalker Fid had talked to ...

The sapper was pacing in the shade of the trees.

Crouching, Kalam Mekhar studied his old friend. 'All right, Fid, out with it.'

'Bad things,' the sapper muttered. 'Too many to count. Like storm-clouds, gathering on every horizon.'

'No wonder you've been miserable company.'

Fiddler squinted over at him. 'You ain't been much better.'

The assassin grimaced. 'Pearl. He's keeping out of my sight, but he's hovering nonetheless. You'd think that Pardu woman – what's her name?'

'Lostara Yil.'

'Her. You'd think she'd have unhorsed him by now.'

'The game those two play is all their own,' Fiddler said, 'and they're welcome to it. Anyway, it's clear he's still here because the Empress wants someone close to Tavore.'

'That was always her problem,' Kalam said, sighing.

'Trust.'

Kalam regarded the sapper. 'You've marched with Tavore since Aren. Any sense of her? Any at all?'

'I'm a sergeant, Kalam.'

'Exactly.' The assassin waited.
Fiddler scratched his beard, tugged at the strap of his battered helm, then unclasped it and tossed it to one side. He continued pacing, kicking at the leaves and nutshells in the sand. He waved at an errant bloodfly hovering in front of his face. 'She's cold iron, Kalam. But it's untested. Can she think in battle? Can she command on the run? Hood knows, her favoured Fist, that old man Garnet, he couldn't.

Which doesn't bode well for her judgement.'

'She knew him from before, didn't she?'

'Someone she trusted, aye, there's that. He was worn out, that's all. I ain't as generous as I used to be.'

Kalam grinned, looking away. 'Oh yes, generous, that's Fid all right.' He gestured at the finger bones hanging from the sapper's belt. 'What about those?'

'She walked straight with that, it's true. Oponn's shove, maybe.'

'Or maybe not.'

Fiddler shrugged. His hand snapped out and closed on the bloodfly. He smeared it to death between his palms with evident satisfaction.

Looking older, true enough, but fast and mean as ever. A wash of gritty, dead air sent the leaves scrabbling over the sand, the air audibly splitting a few paces away, and Quick Ben emerged from a warren. Coughing.

Kalam collected the jug of ale and walked over. 'Here.'

The wizard drank, coughed once more, then spat. 'Gods below, that imperial warren is awful.' He swallowed another mouthful.

'Send me in there,' Fiddler said, striding over, 'then I can drink some of that, too.'

'Glad to see your mood's improved,' Quick Ben said, handing the jug over. 'We will be having some company in a short while ... after we eat, that is,' he added, spying the wrapped foodstuffs and heading over. 'I'm so hungry I could eat bloodflies.'

'Lick my palm,' Fiddler said.

The wizard halted, looked over. 'You've lost your mind. I'd sooner lick the hand of a camel-dung hawker.' He began unwrapping the leaves protecting the food.

'How was your meeting with Tavore?' Kalam asked, joining him.

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Quick Ben replied. 'I've seen people under siege before, but she's raised walls so thick and so high I doubt a dozen irate dragons would get through ... and not an enemy in sight, either.'

'You might be wrong there,' the assassin said. 'Was Pearl around?'

'Well, one curtain moved a bit.'

Fiddler snorted. 'He ain't that obvious. Was probably T'amber.'

'I wasn't being literal, Fid. Somebody in a warren, close and watchful.'

'Tavore wasn't wearing her sword, then,' Kalam said.

'No, she never does when talking with me, thank the gods.'

'Ah, considerate, then!'

The wizard shot a dark glare at Kalam. 'Doesn't want to suck everything out of her High Mage, you mean.'

'Stop,' Fiddler said. 'I don't like the images popping into my head. Hand me a chunk of that sepah bread – no,
not the one you've taken a bite out of, Quick, thanks anyway. There – oh, never mind.' He reached across.

'Hey, you're raining sand on my food!'

Kalam settled back on his haunches. Fiddler was looking younger by the minute. Especially with that scowl. This break away from the army and all that went with it was long overdue.

'What?' Fiddler demanded. 'Worried you'll wear your teeth down? Better stop chewing on that bread, then.'

'It's not that hard,' the wizard replied in a mouth-full muffle.

'No, but it's full of grit, Quick Ben. From the millstones. Anyway, I'm always raining sand these days. I got sand in places you wouldn't imagine—'

'Stop, images popping into my head and all that.'

'After this,' Fiddler continued remorselessly, 'a year's worth of sitting sweet in Darujhistan and I'll still be shitting gritty bricks—'

'Stop, I said!'

Kalam's eyes narrowed on the sapper. 'Darujhistan? Planning on joining the others, then?'

The sapper's gaze shied away. 'Some day ...'

'Some day soon?'

'I ain't planning on running, Kalam.'

The assassin met Quick Ben's eyes, just a flicker of contact, and Kalam cleared his throat. 'Well ... maybe you should, Fid. If I was giving advice—'

'If you're giving advice then I know we're all doomed. Thanks for ruining my day. Here, Quick, some more of that ale, please, I'm parched.'

Kalam subsided. All right, at least that's cleared up.

Quick Ben brushed crumbs from his long-fingered hands and sat back. 'She has ideas about you, Kalam ...'

'I've got one wife too many as it is.'

'Maybe she wants you to put together a squad of assassins?'

'A what? From this lot?'

'Hey,' Fiddler growled, 'I know this lot.'

'And?'

'And you're right, is all. They're a mess.'

'Even so,' the wizard said, shrugging. 'And she probably wants you to do it on the sly—'

'With Pearl listening in on your conversation, right.'

'No, that was later. The second half of our meetings is for our audience. The first half, before Pearl and whoever else arrives, is when we talk privately. She makes these meetings as impromptu as possible. Uses Grub as a messenger.' The wizard made a warding gesture.

'Just a foundling,' Fiddler said.

But Quick Ben simply shook his head.
'So she wants her own cadre of assassins,' Kalam said. 'Unknown to the Claw. Oh, I don't like where this is going, Quick.'

'Whoever is hiding behind those walls might be scared, Kal, but stupid it ain't.'

'This whole thing is stupid,' Fiddler pronounced. 'She crushed the rebellion – what more does Laseen want?'

'Strong, when it comes to dealing with our enemies,' Kalam said. 'And weak when it comes to popularity.'

'Tavore ain't the popular sort of person, so what's the problem?'

'She might get popular. A few more successes – ones where it's clear it's not dumb luck. Come on, Fid, you know how fast an army can turn round.'

'Not this army,' the sapper said. 'It barely got up off the ground to start with. We're a damned shaky bunch – Quick Ben, does she have any idea of that?'

The wizard considered for a time, then he nodded. 'I think so. But she doesn't know what to do about it, beyond catching Leoman of the Flails and obliterating him and his army. Thoroughly.'

Fiddler grunted. 'That's what Cuttle is afraid of. He's convinced we're all going to end up wearing Ranal before this is done.'

'Ranal? Oh, right.'

'He's being a right pain about it, too,' Fiddler went on. 'Keeps talking about the cusser he's holding back, the one he'll sit on when the doom descends on us all. You should see the look on the recruits' faces when he goes on like that.'

'Sounds like Cuttle needs a talking to.'

'He needs a fist in the face, Kal. Believe me, I've been tempted ...'

'But sappers don't do that to each other.'

'I'm a sergeant, too.'

'But you need him still on your side.'

Glumly, 'Aye.'

'All right,' Kalam said, 'I'll put him right.'

'Careful, he might toss a sharper at your feet. He don't like assassins.'

'Who does?' Quick Ben commented.

Kalam frowned. 'And here I thought I was popular ... at least with my friends.'

'We're only playing it safe, Kalam.'

'Thanks, Quick, I'll remember that.'

The wizard rose suddenly. 'Our guests are about to arrive ...'

Fiddler and Kalam stood as well, turning to see the imperial warren open once more. Four figures strode out.

The assassin recognized two of them, and felt both tension and pleasure rising within him; the sudden hackles for High Mage Tayschrenn, and the genuine pleasure at seeing Dujek Onearm. Flanking Tayschrenn were two bodyguards, one an aged Seti with a waxed moustache – vaguely familiar in some distant way, as if Kalam had perhaps seen him once before, long ago. The other was a woman somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five, lithe and athletic beneath tight silks. The eyes were soft and dark brown, watchful; her hair was
cut short in the imperial fashion around her heart-shaped face.

'Relax,' Quick Ben murmured low beside Kalam. 'Like I said before, Tayschrenn's role in ... things past ... was misunderstood.'

'So you say.'

'And he did try to protect Whiskeyjack.'

'But was too late.'

'Kalam...'

'All right, I'll be civil. Is that Seti his old bodyguard – from the days of the Emperor?'

'Aye.'

'Miserable bastard? Never said anything?'

'That's him.'

'Looks like he's mellowed some.'

Quick Ben snorted.

'Something amusing you, High Mage?' Dujek asked as the group approached.

'Welcome, High Fist,' Quick Ben said, straightening, adding a slightly deferential bow to Tayschrenn.

'Colleague ...'

Tayschrenn's thin, almost hairless brows rose. 'A field promotion, wasn't it? Well, perhaps long overdue. Nonetheless, I do not believe the Empress has sanctioned that title as yet.'

Quick Ben offered him a broad, white smile. 'Do you recall, High Mage, a certain other High Mage, sent by the Emperor, early on in the Blackdog Campaign? Kribalah Rule?'

'Rule the Rude? Yes, he died after a month or so—'

'In a horrible conflagration, aye. Well, that was me. Thus, I've been a High Mage before, colleague ...'

Tayschrenn was frowning, clearly thinking back, then the frown became a scowl. 'And the Emperor knew this? He must have, having sent you – unless, of course, he didn't send you at all.'

'Well, granted, there were some improprieties involved, and had one set out on that particular trail they might well have been noted. But you did not feel the need to do so, evidently, since, although briefly, I more than held my own – pulling you out of trouble once, I seem to recall ... something about Tiste Andii assassin-mages—'

'When I lost a certain object containing a demon lord ...'

'You did? Sorry to hear that.'

'The same demon that later died by Rake's sword in Darujhistan.'

'Oh, how unfortunate.'

Kalam leaned close to Quick Ben. 'I thought,' he said in a whisper, 'you told me to relax.'

'Long ago and far away,' Dujek Onearm said gruffly, 'and I'd slap my hands together if I had more than one. Tayschrenn, rein in that Seti before he does something stupid. We have things to discuss here. Let's get on with it.'

Kalam glanced across at Fiddler and winked. Just like old times ...
Lying flat at the crest of the ridge, Pearl grunted. 'That's Dujek Onearm out there,' he said. 'He's supposed to be in G'danisban right now.'

Beside him, Lostara Yil hissed and began slapping about her body. 'Chigger fleas, damn you. They're swarming this ridge. I hate chigger fleas—'

'Why not jump up and dance about, Captain?' Pearl asked. 'Just to make certain they know we're here.'

'Spying is stupid. I hate this, and I am rediscovering my hatred for you, too, Claw.'

'You say the sweetest things. Anyway, the bald one's Tayschrenn, with Hattar and Kiska this time, meaning he's serious about the risks. Oh, why did they have to do this, now?'

'Do what now?'

'Whatever it is they're doing, of course.'

'So run back to Laseen like the eager puppy you are, Pearl, and tell her all about it.'

He edged back down the side of the ridge, twisted round and sat up. 'No need for haste. I have to think.'

Lostara clambered down the slope until she could stand. She began scratching under her armour. 'Well, I'm not waiting around for that. I need a milk bath, with escura leaves, and I need it now.'

He watched her stalk away, back towards the encampment. A nice walk, apart from the sudden twitches.

A simple cantrip, keeping the fleas away from his body. Perhaps he should have extended the courtesy to her.

*No. This is much better.*

*Gods, we're made for each other.*
CHAPTER THREE

Yareth Ghanatan, the city stands still
First and last and where the old causeway
Curves in its half-circle there are towers
Of sand seething with empires and
Marching armies, broken wing banners
And the dismembered lining the walkways
Are soon the bones of the edifices, warriors
And builders both, the city ever stands
To house insect hordes, oh those towers
Rear so proud, rising as dreams on the
Heated breath of the sun, Yareth Ghanatan.
The city is the empress, wife and lover,
Crone and child of the First Empire,
And I yet remain, with all my kin,
The bones in the walls, the bones
Beneath the floor, the bones that cast
Down this gentle shade – first and last,
I see what comes, all that has gone,
And the clay of my flesh has felt your hands
The old warmth of life, for the city,
My city, it stands still, and it stands,
Stands ever still.

‘I can be this urn.’

‘You don’t want to be that urn.’

‘It’s got legs.’

‘Stubby ones, and I don’t think they move. They’re just for show. I remember things like that.’

‘But it’s pretty.’

‘And she pees in it.’

‘Pees? Are you sure? Have you seen her pee in it?’

‘Take a look, Curdle. That’s her pee in it. You don’t want to be that urn. You want something alive. Really alive, with legs that work. Or wings ...’

They were still whispering when Apsalar removed the last bar in the window and set it down. She climbed onto the sill, twisting sideways to reach up to the nearest roof-post.

‘Where are you going?’ Telorast demanded.

‘To the roof.’

‘Shall we join you?’

Bones in the Walls
(stela fragment, circa First Empire)
Author unknown
Apsalar pulled herself upward and moments later was crouched on the sun-baked clay, the stars glistening overhead. Dawn was not far off, and the city below was silent and motionless like a thing dead in the night. Ehrlitan. The first city they had come to in this land, the city where this particular journey had begun, a group fated to break apart beneath a host of burdens. Kalam Mekhar, Fiddler, Crokus and herself. Oh, Crokus had been so angry to discover that their companions had come with hidden motives – not just escorting her home, not just righting an old wrong. He had been so naive.

She wondered how he was faring, thought to ask Cotillion the next time the god visited, then decided she would not do so. It would not do to let herself continue to care about him; even to think on him, achieving little more than loosing the flood-gates of yearning, desire and regret.

Other, more immediate issues demanded her thought. Mebra. The old spy was dead, which was what Shadowthrone had wanted, although the why of it escaped Apsalar. Granted, Mebra had been working all sides, serving the Malazan Empire at one moment, Sha'ilk's cause the next. And ... someone else. That someone else's identity was important, and, she suspected, it was the true reason for Shadowthrone's decision.

The Nameless Ones? Had the Semk assassin been sent to cover a trail? Possible, and it made sense. No witnesses, the man had said. To what? What service could Mebra have provided the Nameless Ones? Hold off pursuing an answer to that. Who else?

Adherents to the old cult of Shadow in Seven Cities no doubt remained, survivors of the purges that had accompanied the conquest. Another possible employer of Mebra's many skills, and more likely to have caught Shadowthrone's attention, as well as his ire.

She had been told to kill Mebra. She had not been told why, nor had she been told to initiate any investigations on her own. Suggesting Shadowthrone felt he knew enough. The same for Cotillion. Or, conversely, they were both woefully ignorant, and Mebra had simply switched sides once too often.

There were more targets on her list, a random collection of names, all of which could be found in Cotillion's memories. She was expected simply to proceed from one to the next, with the final target the most challenging of all ... but that one was in all likelihood months away, and she would need to do some deft manoeuvring to get close enough to strike, a slow, careful stalking of a very dangerous individual. For whom she felt no enmity.

This is what an assassin does. And Cotillion's possession has made me an assassin. That and nothing else. I have killed and will continue to kill. I need think of nothing else. It is simple. It should be simple.

And so she would make it so.

Still, what made a god decide to kill some lowly mortal? The minor irritation of a stone in a moccasin. The slap of a branch on a wooded trail. Who thinks twice plucking that stone out and tossing it away? Or reaching out and snapping that branch? It seems I do, for I am that god's hand in this.

Enough. No more of this weakness ... this ... uncertainty. Complete the tasks, then walk away. Vanish. Find a new life.

Only ... how does one do that?

There was someone she could ask – he was not far off, she knew, having culled his identity from Cotillion's memories.

She had moved to sit with her legs dangling on the roof's edge. Someone now sat at her side.

'Well?' Cotillion asked.

'A Semk assassin of the Nameless Ones completed my mission for me.'

'This very night?'
'I met him, but was unable to question him.'

The god slowly nodded. 'The Nameless Ones again. This is unexpected. And unwelcome.'

'So they were not the reason for killing Mebra.'

'No. Some stirrings of the old cult. Mebra was positioning himself to become a High Priest. The best candidate – we're not worried about the others.'

'Cleaning house.'

'Necessary, Apsalar. We're in for a scrap. A bad one.'

'I see.'

They were silent for a time, then Cotillion cleared his throat. 'I have not yet had time to check on him, but I know he is hale, although understandably dispirited.'

'All right.'

He must have sensed she wanted it left at that, for, after a pause, he then said, 'You freed two ghosts ...'

She shrugged.

Sighing, Cotillion ran a hand through his dark hair. 'Do you know what they once were?'

'Thieves, I think.'

'Yes, that.'

'Tiste Andii?'

'No, but they lingered long over those two bodies and so ... absorbed certain essences.'

'Ah.'

'They are now agents of Edgewalker. I am curious to see what they will do.'

'For the moment they seem content to accompany me.'

'Yes. I think Edgewalker's interests include you, Apsalar, because of our past ... relationship.'

'Through me, to you.'

'I seem to warrant his curiosity.'

'Edgewalker. That apparition seems a rather passive sort,' she observed.

'We first met him,' Cotillion said slowly, 'the night we ascended. The night we made passage into the realm of Shadow. He made my spine crawl right then, and it's been crawling ever since.'

She glanced over at him. 'You are so unsuited to be a god, Cotillion, did you know that?'

'Thank you for the vote of confidence.'

She reached up with one hand and brushed the line of his jaw, the gesture close to a caress. She caught the sudden intake of his breath, the slight widening of his eyes, but he would not look at her. Apsalar lowered her hand. 'I'm sorry. Another mistake. It's all I seem to make these days.'

'It's all right,' he replied. 'I understand.'

'You do? Oh, of course you do.'
'Complete your mission, and all that is asked of you will end. You will face no more demands from me. Or Shadowthrone.'

There was something in his tone that gave her a slight shiver. Something like ... remorse. 'I see. That is good. I'm tired. Of who I am, Cotillion.'

'I know.'

'I was thinking of a detour. Before my next task.'

'Oh?'

'The coastal road, east. Just a few days by Shadow.'

He looked across at her, and she saw his faint smile and was unaccountably pleased by it. 'Ah, Apsalar ... that should be fun. Send him my greetings.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely. He needs a little shaking up.' He straightened. 'I must leave. It's almost dawn. Be careful, and do not trust those ghosts.'

'They are bad liars.'

'Well, I know a High Priest who employs a similar tactic to confound others.'

Iskaral Pust. Now it was Apsalar who smiled, but she said nothing, for Cotillion was gone.

The east horizon was in flames with the rising of the sun.

'Where did the darkness go?' Curdle demanded.

Apsalar stood near the bed, running through her assortment of concealed weapons. She would need to sleep soon – perhaps this afternoon – but first she would make use of the daylight. There was something important hidden within the killing of Mebra by the Semk. Cotillion had been shaken by that detail. Although he had not asked her to pursue it, she would nonetheless, for a day or two at least. 'The sun has risen, Curdle.'

'The sun? By the Abyss, there's a sun in this world? Have they gone mad?'

Apsalar glanced over at the cowering ghost. It was dissolving in the grainy light. Huddled in a shadow nearby, Telorast looked on, mute with terror. 'Has who gone mad?' Apsalar asked Curdle.

'Well, them! The ones who created this place!'

'We're fading!' Telorast hissed. 'What does it mean? Will we cease to exist?'

'I don't know,' Apsalar replied. 'Probably you will lose some substance, assuming you have any, but it will be temporary. Best you two remain here, and be silent. I will be back before dusk.'

'Dusk! Yes, excellent, we will wait here for dusk. Then night and all that darkness, and the shadows, and things to possess. Yes, fearful woman, we shall wait here.'

She headed down, paid for another night, then emerged onto the dusty street. The market-bound citizens were already on the move, hawkers dragging burdened mules, carts crowded with caged songbirds or slabs of salted meat or casks of oil or honey. Old men laboured beneath bundles of firewood, baskets of clay. Down the centre of the street strode two Red Blades – feared sentinels of order and law once again now that the empire's presence had been emphatically reasserted. They were headed in the same direction as Apsalar – and indeed as most of the people – towards the vast sprawl of caravan camps beyond the city wall just south of the harbour.

The Red Blades were provided a wide berth, and the swagger of their stride, their gauntleted hands resting on
the grips of their sheathed but not peace-strapped tulwars, made of their arrogance a deliberate, provocative affront. Yet they passed unchallenged.

Moments before she caught up with them, Apsalar swung left down a side passage. There was more than one route to the caravan camps.

A merchant employing Pardu and Gral guards, and appearing to display unusual interest in the presence of a Shadow Dancer in the city, made him or herself in turn the subject of interest. It might simply be that the merchant was a buyer and seller of information, but even that could prove useful to Apsalar — not that she was prepared to pay for any information she gleaned. The tribal guards suggested extensive overland travel, between distant cities and the rarely frequented tracks linking them. That merchant would know things.

And so, indeed, might those guards.

She arrived at the outskirts of the first camp. If seen from the sky, the caravan city would look pockmarked, as merchants came and went in a steady stream of wagons, horse-warriors, herd dogs and camels. The outer edges were home to lesser merchants, their positions fixed according to some obscure hierarchy, whilst the high-status caravans occupied the centre.

Entering the main thoroughfare from a side path between tents, Apsalar began the long search.

At midday she found a tapu-hawker and sat at one of the small tables beneath an awning eating the skewered pieces of fruit and meat, the grease running hot tracks down her hands. She had noted a renewed energy among the merchant camps she had visited so far. Insurrection and strife were bad for business, obviously. The return of Malazan rule was a blessing on trade in all its normal avaricious glory, and she had seen the exultation on all sides. Coins were flowing in a thousand streams.

Three figures caught her eye. Standing before the entrance to a large tent and arguing, it seemed, over a cage of puppies. The two Pardu women and one of the Gral tribesmen she had seen at the tavern. They were too preoccupied to have spied her, she hoped. Wiping her hands on her thighs, Apsalar rose and walked, keeping to the shadier areas, out from under the awning and away from the guards and the merchant's tent.

It was enough to have found them, for now. Before she would endeavour to interrogate the merchant, or the guards, another task awaited her.

The long walk back to the inn was uneventful, and she climbed the stairs and made her way to her room. It was midafternoon, and her mind was filled with thoughts of sleep.

'She's back!'

The voice, Curdle's, came from under the wood-framed cot.

'Is it her?' asked Telorast from the same place.

'I recognize the moccasins, see the sewn-in ridges of iron? Not like the other one.'

Apsalar paused her removing of her leather gloves. 'What other one?'

'The one who was here earlier, a bell ago—'

'A bell?' Telorast wondered. 'Oh, those bells, now I understand. They measure the passing of time. Yes, Not-Apsalar, a bell ago. We said nothing. We were silent. That one never knew we were here.'

'The innkeeper?'

'Boots, stirrup-worn and threaded with bronze scales, they went here and there — and crouched to look under here, but saw naught of us, of course, and naught of anything else, since you have no gear for him to rifle through—'

'It was a man, then.'
' Didn't we say earlier? Didn't we, Curdle?'

'We must have. A man, with boots on, yes.'

'How long did he stay?' Apsalar asked, looking around the room. There was nothing there for the thief to steal, assuming he had been a thief.

'A hundred of his heartbeats.'

'Hundred and six, Telorast.'

'Hundred and six, yes.'

'He came and went by the door?'

'No, the window – you removed the bars, remember? Down from the roof, isn't that right, Telorast?'

'Or up from the alley.'

'Or maybe from one of the other rooms, thus from the side, right or left.'

Apsalar frowned and crossed her arms. 'Did he come in by the window at all?'

'No.'

'By warren, then.'

'Yes.'

'And he wasn't a man,' Curdle added. 'He was a demon. Big, black, hairy, with fangs and claws.'

'Wearing boots,' Telorast said.

'Exactly. Boots.'

Apsalar pulled off her gloves and slapped them down on the bed-stand. She sprawled on the cot. 'Wake me if he returns.'

'Of course, Not-Apsalar. You can depend upon us.'

When she awoke it was dark. Cursing, Apsalar rose from the cot. 'How late is it?'

'She's awake!' The shade of Telorast hovered nearby, a smeared body-shape in the gloom, its eyes dully glowing.

'Finally!' Curdle whispered from the window sill, where it crouched like a gargoyle, head twisted round to regard Apsalar still seated on the cot. 'It's two bells after the death of the sun! We want to explore!'  

'Fine,' she said, standing. 'Follow me, then.'

'Where to?'

'Back to the Jen'rahb.'

'Oh, that miserable place.'

'I won't be there long.'

'Good.'

She collected her gloves, checked her weapons once more – a score of aches from knife pommels and scabbards attested that they remained strapped about her person – and headed for the window.
'Shall we use the causeway?'

Apsalar stopped, studied Curdle. 'What causeway?'

The ghost moved to hug one edge of the window and pointed outward. 'That one.'

A shadow manifestation, something like an aqueduct, stretched from the base of the window out over the alley and the building beyond, then curving – towards the heart of the Jen'rahb. It had the texture of stone, and she could see pebbles and pieces of crumbled mortar along the path. 'What is this?'

'We don't know.'

'It is from the Shadow Realm, isn't it? It has to be. Otherwise I would be unable to see it.'

'Oh yes. We think. Don't we, Telorast?'

'Absolutely. Or not.'

'How long,' Apsalar asked, 'has it been here?'

'Fifty-three of your heartbeats. You were stirring to wakefulness, right, Curdle? She was stirring.'

'And moaning. Well, one moan. Soft. A half-moan.'

'No,' Telorast said, 'that was me.'

Apsalar clambered up onto the sill, then, still gripping the edges of the wall, she stepped out onto the causeway. Solid beneath her feet. 'All right,' she muttered, more than a little shaken as she released her hold on the building behind her. 'We might as well make use of it.'

'We agree.'

They set out, over the alley, the tenement, a street and then the rubble of the ruins. In the distance rose ghostly towers. A city of shadow, but this one thoroughly unlike the one of the night before. Vague structures lay over the wreckage below – canals, the glimmer of something like water. Lower bridges spanned these canals. A few thousand paces distant, to the southeast, rose a massive domed palace, and beyond it what might have been a lake, or a wide river. Ships plied those waters, square-sailed and sleek, the wood midnight black. She saw tall figures crossing a bridge fifty paces away.

Telorast hissed. 'I recognize them!'

Apsalar crouched low, suddenly feeling terribly vulnerable here on this high walkway.

'Tiste Edur!'

'Yes,' she half-breathed.

'Oh, can they see us?'

I don't know. At least none walked the causeway they were on ... not yet. 'Come on, it's not far. I want us away from this place.'

'Agreed, oh yes, agreed.'

Curdle hesitated. 'Then again ...'

'No,' Apsalar said. 'Attempt nothing, ghost.'

'Oh all right. It's just that there's a body in the canal below.'

Damn this. She edged to the low wall and looked down. 'That's not Tiste Edur.'
'No,' Curdle confirmed. 'It most certainly isn't, Not-Apsalar. It is like you, yes, like you. Only more bloated, not long dead – we want it—'

'Don't expect help if trying for it attracts attention.'

'Oh, she has a point, Curdle. Come on, she's moving away from us! Wait! Don't leave us here!'

Reaching a steep staircase, Apsalar quickly descended. As soon as she stepped onto the pale dusty ground, the ghostly city vanished. In her wake the two shades appeared, sinking towards her.

'A most dreadful place,' Telorast said.

'But there was a throne,' Curdle cried. 'I sensed it! A most delicious throne!' Telorast snorted. 'Delicious? You have lost your mind. Naught but pain. Suffering. Affliction—'

'Quiet,' Apsalar commanded. 'You will tell me more about this throne you two sensed, but later. Guard this entrance.'

'We can do that. We're very skilled guards. Someone died down there, yes? Can we have the body?'

'No. Stay here.' Apsalar entered the half-buried temple.

The chamber within was not as she had left it. The Semk's corpse was gone. Mebra's body had been stripped of its clothing, the clothing itself cut apart. What little furnishings occupied the room had been methodically dismantled. Cursing under her breath, Apsalar walked to the doorway leading to the inner chamber – the curtain that had covered it had been torn away. In the small room beyond – Mebra's living quarters – the searcher or searchers had been equally thorough. Indifferent to the absence of light, she scanned the detritus. Someone had been looking for something, or deliberately obscuring a trail.

She thought about the Semk assassin's appearance last night. She had assumed he'd somehow seen her sprint across the rubble and so was compelled to return. But now she wondered. Perhaps he'd been sent back, his task only half-completed. In either case, he had not been working alone that night. She had been careless, thinking otherwise.

From the outer chamber came a wavering whisper, 'Where are you?'

Apsalar stepped back through the doorway. 'What are you doing here, Curdle? I told you to—'

'Two people are coming. Women, like you. Like us, too. I forgot. Yes, we're all women here—'

'Find a shadow and hide,' Apsalar cut in. 'Same for Telorast.'

'You don't want us to kill them?'

'Can you?'

'No.'

'Hide yourselves.'

'A good thing we decided to guard the door, isn't it?'

Ignoring the ghost, Apsalar positioned herself beside the outer entrance. She drew her knives, set her back against the sloping stone, and waited.

She heard their quick steps, the scuffing as they halted just outside, their breathing. Then the first one stepped through, in her hands a shuttered lantern. She strode in further as she flipped back one of the hinged shutters, sending a shaft of light against the far wall. Behind her entered the second woman, a scimitar unsheathed and held out.

The Pardu caravan guards.
Apsalar stepped close and drove the point of one dagger into the woman's elbow joint on the sword-arm, then swung the other weapon, pommel-forward, into the woman's temple.

She dropped, as did her weapon.

The other spun round.

A high swinging kick caught her above the jaw. She reeled, lantern flying to crack against the wall.

Sheathing her knives, Apsalar closed in on the stunned guard. A punch to the solar plexus doubled her over. The guard dropped to her knees, then fell onto one side, curling up around the pain.

'This is convenient,' Apsalar said, 'since I was intending to question you anyway.'

She walked back to the first woman and checked on her condition. Unconscious, and likely would remain so for some time. Even so, she kicked the scimitar into a corner, then stripped her of the knives she found hidden under her arms. Walking back to the other Pardu, she looked down on the groaning, motionless woman for a moment, then crouched and dragged her to her feet.

She grasped the woman's right arm, the one she used to hold a weapon, and, with a sharp twist, dislocated it at the elbow.

The woman cried out.

Apsalar closed a hand on her throat and slammed her against the wall, the head cracking hard. Vomit spilled onto the assassin's glove and wrist. She held the Pardu there. 'Now you will answer my questions.'

'Please!'

'No pleading. Pleading only makes me cruel. Answer me to my satisfaction and I might let you and your friend live. Do you understand?'

The Pardu nodded, her face smeared with blood and an elongated bump swelling below her right eye where the iron-embedded moccasin had struck.

Sensing the arrival of the two ghosts, Apsalar glanced over her shoulder. They were hovering over the body of the other Pardu.

'One of us might take her,' Telorast whispered.

'Easy,' agreed Curdle. 'Her mind is addled.'

'Absent.'

'Lost in the Abyss.'

Apsalar hesitated, then said, 'Go ahead.'

'Me!' hissed Curdle.

'No, me!' snarled Telorast.

'Me!'

'I got to her first!'

'You did not!'

'I choose,' said Apsalar. 'Acceptable?'

'Yes.'
'Oh yes, you choose, dearest Mistress—'

'You're grovelling again!'

'Am not!'

'Curdle,' Apsalar said. 'Possess her.'

'I knew you'd pick her!'

'Patience, Telorast. This night's not yet done.'

The Pardu woman before her was blinking, a wild look in her eyes. 'Who are you talking to? What language is that? Who's out there – I can't see—'

'Your lantern's out. Never mind. Tell me about your master.'

'Gods below, it hurts—'

Apsalar reached down and twisted the dislocated arm again.

The woman shrieked, then sagged, unconscious.

Apsalar let her slide down the wall until the woman was roughly in a sitting position. Then she drew out a flask and splashed water into the Pardu's face.

The eyes opened, comprehension returned, and with it, terror.

'I don't want to hear about what hurts,' Apsalar said. 'I want to hear about the merchant. Your employer. Now, shall we try again?'

The other Pardu was sitting up near the entrance, making grunting noises, then coughing, until she spat out bloody phlegm. 'Ah!' Curdle cried. 'Better! Oh, everything aches, oh, the arm!'

'Be quiet,' Apsalar commanded, then fixed her attention once more on the woman in front of her. 'I am not a patient person.'

'Trygalle Trade Guild,' the woman said in a gasp.

Apsalar slowly leaned back on her haunches. A most unexpected answer. 'Curdle, get out of that body.'

'What?'

'Now.'

'Just as well, she was all broken. Ah, free of pain again! This is better – I was a fool!'

Telorast's laughter was a rasp. 'And you still are, Curdle. I could have told you, you know. She wasn't right for you.'

'No more talking,' Apsalar said. She needed to think on this. The Trygalle Trade Guild's centre of operations was Darujhistan. It had been a long time since they'd visited the fragment of the Shadow Realm with munitions for Fiddler, assuming it was the same caravan – and she suspected it was. As purveyors of items and information, it now seemed obvious that more than one mission had brought them to Seven Cities. On the other hand, perhaps they were doing little more than recovering here in the city – given their harrowing routes through the warrens – and the merchant-mage had instructed his guards to deliver any and all unusual information. Even so, she needed to be certain. 'The Trygalle merchant – what brought him or her here to Ehrlitan?'

The swelling was closing the Pardu's right eye. 'Him.'

'His name?'
'Karpolan Demesand.'

At that, Apsalar allowed herself a faint nod.

'We, uh, we were making a delivery – us guards, we're shareholders—'

'I know how the Trygalle Trade Guild works. A delivery, you said.'

'Yes, to Coltaire. During the Chain of Dogs.'

'That was some time ago.'

'Yes. I'm sorry, the pain, it hurts to talk.'

'It'll hurt more if you don't.'

The Pardu grimaced, and it was a moment before Apsalar realized it had been a smile. 'I do not doubt you, Shadow Dancer. Yes, there was more. Altar stones.'

'What?'

'Cut stones, to line a holy pool ...'

'Here in Ehrlitan?'

The woman shook her head, winced, then said, 'No. Y'Ghatan.'

'Are you on your way there, or returning?'

'Returning. Outward journeys are through warrens. We're ... uh ... resting.'

'So Karpolan Demesand's interest in a Shadow Dancer is just passing.'

'He likes to know ... everything. Information buys us advantages. No-one likes rearguard on the Ride.'

'The Ride.'

'Through the warrens. It's ... hairy.'

*I imagine it would be.* 'Tell your master,' Apsalar said, 'that this Shadow Dancer does not appreciate the attention.'

The Pardu nodded.

Apsalar straightened. 'I am done with you.'

The woman flinched back, up against the wall, her left forearm rising to cover her face.

The assassin looked down on the guard, wondering what had set her off.

'We understand that language now,' Telorast said. 'She thinks you are going to kill her, and you are, aren't you?'

'No. That should be obvious, if she's to deliver a message to her master.'

'She's not thinking straight,' Curdle said. 'Besides, what better way to deliver your message than with two corpses?'

Apsalar sighed, said to the Pardu, 'What brought you to this place? To Mebra's?'

Muffled from behind the forearm, the woman replied, 'Purchasing information ... but he's dead.'

'What information?'
'Any. All. Comings and goings. Whatever he was selling. But you've killed Mebra—'

'No, I did not. By way of peace between me and your master, I will tell you this. An assassin of the Nameless Ones murdered Mebra. There was no torture involved. A simple assassination. The Nameless Ones weren't looking for information.'

The Pardu's lone visible eye, now above the guarding wrist, was fixed on her. 'The Nameless Ones? Seven Holies protect us!'

'Now,' Apsalar said, drawing her knife, 'I need some time.' With that she struck the woman with the pommel of her knife, hard against the temple, and watched the Pardu's eye roll up, the body slump over.

'Will she live?' Telorast demanded, slinking closer.

'Leave her alone.'

'She may wake up not remembering anything you told her.'

'It doesn't matter,' Apsalar replied, sheathing her knife. 'Her master will glean all he needs to know anyway.'

'A sorcerer. Ah, they travel the warrens, they said. Risky. This Karpolan Demesand must be a formidable wielder of magic – you have made a dangerous enemy.'

'I doubt he will pursue this, Telorast. I let his shareholders live, and I have provided him with information.'

'And what of the tablets?' Curdle asked.

Apsalar turned. 'What tablets?'

'The ones hidden under the floor.'

'Show me.'

The shade drifted towards Mebra's naked corpse. 'Under him. A secret cache, beneath this pavestone. Hard clay, endless lists, they probably mean nothing.'

Apsalar rolled the body over. The stone was easily pried loose, and she wondered at the carelessness of the searchers. Then again, perhaps Mebra had had some control over where he would die. He had been lying directly over it. A rough pit had been excavated, and it was crowded with clay tablets. In one corner sat a damp burlap sack filled with soft clay, and a half-dozen bone scribes bound in twine.

She rose and retrieved the lantern. When it had struck the wall, the shutter had closed – the flame within remained. She pulled the top ring to draw up the hinged shutters part-way. Returning to the secret cache, she collected the topmost dozen tablets then sat cross-legged beside the pit within the small circle of light, and began reading.

Attending the Grand Meeting of the Cult of Rashan was Bridthok of G'danisban, Septhune Anabhin of Omari, Sradal Purthu of Y'Ghatan, and Torahaval Delat of Karashimesh. Fools and charlatans one and all, although it must be said, Sradal is a dangerous fool. Torahaval is a bitch, with nothing of the humour of her cousin, nor his deadliness. She plays at this and nothing more, but she will make a fine head-piece, a High Priestess with seductive charms and so the acolytes shall flock. Of Septhune and Bridthok, the latter is my nearest rival, leaning heavily on his bloodline to that madman Bidithal, but I know well his weaknesses now and soon he shall be eliminated from the final vote by misfortune. Septhune is a follower and no more need be said of him.

Two of these cultists numbered among Apsalar's targets for assassination. She memorized the other names, in case the opportunity arose.

The second, third and fourth tablets contained lists of contacts made in the past week, with notes and observations that made it plain that Mebra had been busy weaving his usual web of extortion among a host of dimwitted victims. Merchants, soldiers, amorous wives, thieves and thugs.
The fifth tablet proved interesting.

Sribin, my most trusted agent, has confirmed it. The outlawed Gral, Taralack Veed, was in Ehrlitan one month past. Truly a man to be feared, the most secret dagger of the Nameless Ones. This only reinforces my suspicion that they have done something, an unleashing of some ancient, terrible demon. Even as the Khundryl wanderer said, and so it was no lie, that harrowing tale of the barrow and the fleeing dragon. A hunt has begun. Yet, who is the prey? And what role has Taralack Veed in all this? Oh, the name alone, scribed here in damp clay, fills my bones with ice. Dessimbelackis curse the Nameless Ones. They never play fair.

'How much longer are you going to do that?' Curdle demanded beside her.

Ignoring the shade, Apsalar continued working her way through the tablets, now seeking the name of Taralack Veed. The ghosts wandered about, sniffing every now and then at the two unconscious Pardu, slipping outside occasionally then returning, muttering in some unknown language.

There were thirty-three tablets in the pit, and as she removed the last one, she noted something odd about the pit's base. She brought the lantern closer. Shattered pieces of dried clay. Fragments of writing in Mebra's hand. 'He destroys them,' she said under her breath. 'Periodically.' She studied the last tablet in her hand. It was dustier by far than all the others, the script more faded by wear. 'But he saved this one.' Another list. Only, in this one she recognized names. Apsalar began reading aloud: 'Duiker has finally freed Heboric Light Touch. Plan ruined by the rebellion, and Heboric lost. Coltaine marches with his refugees, yet there are vipers among the Malazans. Kalam Mehkar sent to Sha'ik, the Red Blades following. Kalam will deliver the Book into Sha'ik's hands. The Red Blades will kill the bitch. I am well pleased.' The next few lines had been carved into the clay after it had hardened, the script looking ragged and hurried. 'Heboric is with Sha'ik. Known now as Ghost Hands, and in those hands is the power to destroy us all. This entire world. And none can stop him.'

Written in terror and panic. Yet ... Apsalar glanced over at the other tablets. Something must have happened to have eased his mind. Was Heboric now dead? She did not know. Had someone else stumbled on the man's trail, someone aware of the threat? And how in Hood's name had Heboric – a minor historian of Unta – ended up in Sha'ik's company?

Clearly the Red Blades had failed in their assassination attempt. After all, the Adjunct Tavore had killed the woman, hadn't she? In front of ten thousand witnesses.

'This woman is waking up.'

She looked over at Telorast. The shade was hovering over the Pardu guard lying near the entrance. 'All right,' Apsalar said, pushing the heap of tablets back into the pit and replacing the stone. 'We're leaving.'

'Finally! It's almost light outside!'

'No causeway?'

'Nothing but ruin, Not-Apsalar. Oh, this place looks too much like home.'

Curdle hissed. 'Quiet, Telorast, you idiot! We don't talk about that, remember?'

'Sorry.'

'When we reach my room,' Apsalar said, 'I want you two to tell me about that throne.'

'She remembered.'

'I don't,' Curdle said.

'Me neither,' Telorast said. 'Throne? What throne?'

Apsalar studied the two ghosts, the faintly luminous eyes peering up at her. 'Oh, never mind.'

The Falah'd was a head shorter than Samar Dev – and she was of barely average height – and he likely weighed
less than would one of her legs cut clean away at the hip. An unpleasant image, she allowed, but one frighteningly close to reality. A fierce infection had set in the broken bones and it had taken four witches to draw the malign presence out. That had been the night before and she still felt weak and light-headed, and standing here in this blistering sun wasn't helping.

However short and slight the Falah'd was, he worked hard at presenting a noble, imposing figure, perched there atop his long-legged white mare. Alas, the beast was trembling beneath him, flinching every time Karsa Orlong's Jhag stallion tossed its head and rolled its eyes menacingly in the mare's direction. The Falah'd gripped the saddle horn with both hands, his thin dark lips pinched and a certain timidity in his eyes. His ornate, jewel-studded telaba was dishevelled, and the round, silken and padded hat on his head was askew as he looked on the one known to all as Toblakai, once-champion of Sha'ik. Who, standing beside his horse, was still able, had he so chosen, to look down on the ruler of Ugarat.

Fifty palace guards accompanied the Falah'd, none of them – nor their mounts – at ease.

Toblakai was studying the massive edifice known as Moraval Keep. An entire flat-topped mesa had been carved hollow, the rock walls shaped into imposing fortifications. A deep, steep-walled moat surrounded the keep. Moranth munitions or sorcery had destroyed the stone bridge spanning it, and the doors beyond, battered and scorched, were of solid iron. A few scattered windows were visible, high up and unadorned, each sealed by iron doors barbed with angled arrow-slits.

The besieging encampment was squalid, a few hundred soldiers sitting or standing near cookfires and looking on with vaguely jaded interest. Off to one side, just north of the narrow road, sprawled a rough cemetery of a hundred or so makeshift, shin-high wooden platforms, each holding a cloth-wrapped corpse.

Toblakai finally turned to the Falah'd. 'When last was a Malazan seen at the battlements?'

The young ruler started, then scowled. 'I am to be addressed,' he said in his piping voice, 'in a manner due my authority as Holy Falah'd of Ugarat—'

'When?' Toblakai demanded, his expression darkening.

'Well, uh, well – Captain Inashan, answer this barbarian!' With a quick salute, the captain walked over to the soldiers in the encampment. Samar watched him speaking with a half-dozen besiegers, saw the various shrugs in answer to his question, saw Inashan's back straighten and heard his voice get louder. The soldiers started arguing amongst themselves.

Toblakai made a grunting sound. He pointed at his horse. 'Stay here, Havok. Kill nothing.' Then the warrior strode to the edge of the moat.

Samar Dev hesitated, then followed.

He glanced at her when she stopped at his side. 'I will assault this keep alone, witch.'

'You certainly will,' she replied. 'I'm just here for a closer look.'

'I doubt there will be much to see.'

'What are you planning, Toblakai?'

'I am Karsa Orlong, of the Teblor. You know my name and you will use it. To Sha'ik I was Toblakai. She is dead. To Leoman of the Flails, I was Toblakai, and he is as good as dead. To the rebels I was—'

'All right, I understand. Only dead or nearly dead people called you Toblakai, but you should know, it is only that name that has kept you from rotting out the rest of your life in the palace pits.'

'That pup on the white horse is a fool. I could break him under one arm—'

'Yes, that likely would break him. And his army?'
'More fools. I am done speaking, witch. Witness.'

And so she did.

Karsa clambered down into the moat. Rubble, broken weapons, siege-stones and withered bodies. Lizards scampered on the rocks, capemoths rising like pale leaves caught in an updraught. He made his way to a point directly beneath the two massive iron doors. Even with his height he could barely reach the narrow ledge at their base. He scanned the wreckage of the bridge around him, then began piling stones, choosing the larger fragments and fashioning rough steps.

Some time later he was satisfied. Drawing his sword, he climbed the steps, and found himself at the same level as the broad, riveted locking mechanism. Raising his stone sword in both hands, he set the point in the join, in front of where he judged the lock to be. He waited a moment, until the position of his arms and the angle of the blade was set in his mind, then he lifted the sword away, edged back as far as he could on the makeshift platform of rubble, drew the weapon back, and swung.

The blow was true, the unbreakable chalcedony edge driving into the join between the doors. Momentum ceased with a snapping sound as the blade jammed in an unseen, solid iron bar, the reverberations pounding through Karsa's arms and into his shoulders.

He grunted, waited until the pain ebbed, then tugged the weapon free in a screech of metal. And took aim once again.

He both felt and heard the crack of the bar.

Karsa pulled the sword loose then threw his shoulder against the doors.

Something fell with a loud clang, and the door on the right swung back.

On the other side of the moat, Samar Dev stared. She had just witnessed something ... extraordinary.

Captain Inashan came up alongside her. 'The Seven Holies protect us,' he whispered. 'He just cut through an iron door.'

'Yes, he did.'

'We need ...'

She glanced over. 'We need what, Captain?'

'We need to get him out of Ugarat. Away, as soon as possible.'

Darkness in the funnel within – angled walls, chutes and arrow-slits. Some mechanism had lowered the arched ceiling and narrowed the walls – he could see that they were suspended, perhaps a finger's width from contact with each other and with the paved floor. Twenty murderous paces to an inner gate, and that gate was ajar.

Karsa listened but heard nothing. The air smelled rank, bitter. He squinted at the arrow-slits. They were dark, the hidden chambers to either side unlit.

Readying the sword in his hands, Karsa Orlong entered the keep.

No hot sand from the chutes, no arrows darting out from the slits, no boiling oil. He reached the gate. A courtyard beyond, one third sharply bathed in white sunlight. He strode forward until he was past the gate and then looked up. The rock had been hollowed out indeed – above was a rectangle of blue sky, the fiery sun filling one corner. The walls on all four sides were tiered with fortified landings and balconies, countless windows. He could make out doorways on those balconies, some yawning black, others closed. Karsa counted twenty-two levels on the wall opposite him, eighteen on the one to his left, seventeen to the right, and behind
him – the outer wall – twelve in the centre flanked by projections each holding six more. The keep was a veritable city.

And, it seemed, lifeless.

A gaping pit, hidden in the shadow in one corner of the courtyard, caught his attention. Pavestones lifted clear and piled to the sides, an excavated shaft of some sort, reaching down into the foundations. He walked over.

The excavators had cleared the heavy pavestones to reach what looked to be bedrock but had proved to be little more than a cap of stone, perhaps half an arm's length thick, covering a hollowed-out subterranean chamber. That stank.

A wooden ladder led down into the vault.

A makeshift cesspit, he suspected, since the besiegers had likely blocked the out-drains into the moat, in the hopes of fostering plague or some such thing. The stench certainly suggested that it had been used as a latrine. Then again, why the ladder? 'These Malazans have odd interests,' he muttered. In his hands he could feel a tension building in the stone sword – the bound spirits of Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord were suddenly restive. 'Or a chance discovery,' he added. 'Is this what you warn me of, kindred spirits?'

He eyed the ladder. 'Well, as you say, brothers, I have climbed into worse.' Karsa sheathed his sword and began his descent.

Excrement smeared the walls, but not, fortunately, the rungs of the ladder. He made his way past the broken shell of stone, and what little clean air drifted down from above was overwhelmed by a thick, pungent reek. There was more to it than human waste, however. Something else ...

Reaching the floor of the chamber, Karsa waited, ankle-deep in shit and pools of piss, for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Eventually, he could make out the walls, rounded, the stones bearing horizontal undulations but otherwise unadorned. A beehive tomb, then, but not in a style Karsa had seen before. Too large, for one thing, and there was no evidence of platforms or sarcophagi. No grave-goods, no inscriptions.

He could see no formal entranceway or door revealed on any of the walls. Sloshing through the sewage for a closer look at the stonework, Karsa almost stumbled as he stepped off an unseen ledge – he had been standing on a slightly raised dais, extending almost out to the base of the walls. Back-stepping, he edged carefully along its circumference. In the process he discovered six submerged iron spikes, driven deep into the stone in two sets of three. The spikes were massive, thicker across than Karsa's wrists.

He made his way back to the centre, stood near the base of the ladder. Were he to lie down with the middle spike of either set under his head, he could not have reached the outer ones with arms outstretched. Half again as tall and he might manage it. Thus, if something had been pinned here by these spikes, it had been huge.

And, unfortunately, it looked as if the spikes had failed—

A slight motion through the heavy, turgid air, a shadowing of the faint light leaking down. Karsa reached for his sword.

An enormous hand closed on his back, a talon lancing into each shoulder, two beneath his ribs, one larger one stabbing down and around, just under his left clavicle. The fingers clenched and he was being hauled straight up, the ladder passing in a blur. The sword was pinned against his back. Karsa reached up with both hands and they closed about a scaled wrist thicker than his upper arm.

He cleared the hole in the capstone, and the tugs and tearing in his muscles told him the beast was clambering up the side of the pit, nimble as a bhok'aral. Something heavy and scaled slithered across his arms.

Then into bright sunlight.

The beast flung the Teblor across the courtyard. He landed hard, skidding until he crashed up against the keep's outer wall.
Spitting blood, every bone in his back feeling out of place, Karsa Orlong pushed himself to his feet, reeled until he could lean against the sun-heated stone.

Standing beside the pit was a reptilian monstrosity, two-legged, the hanging arms oversized and overlong, talons scraping the pavestones. It was tailed, but that tail was stunted and thick. The broad-snouted jaws were crowded with interlocking rows of dagger-long fangs, above them flaring cheekbones and brow-ridges protecting deep-set eyes that glistened like wet stones on a strand. A serrated crest bisected the flat, elongated skull, pale yellow above the dun green hide. The beast reared half again as tall as the Toblakai.

Motionless as a statue, it studied him, blood dripping from the talons of its left hand.

Karsa took a deep breath, then drew his sword and flung it aside.

The creature's head twitched, a strange sideways tilt, then it charged, leaning far over as the massive legs propelled it forward.

And Karsa launched himself straight at it.

Clearly, an unanticipated response, as he found himself inside those raking hands and beneath the snapping jaws. He flung his head straight up, cracking hard against the underside of the beast's jaw, then ducked back down, sliding his right arm between the legs, wrapping it about the creature's right one. Shoulder pounding into its belly, his hands closing tight on the other side of the captured leg. Then lifting, a bellow escaping him as he heaved the beast up until it tottered on one leg.

The taloned hands hammered down on his back, slicing through the bear fur, ravaging his flesh in a frenzy.

Karsa planted his right leg behind the beast's left one, then pushed hard in that direction.

It crashed down and he heard bones snap.

The short tail whipped round, struck him in his midsection. Air exploded from Karsa's four lungs, and once more he was spinning through the air, striking the pavestones and leaving most of the skin of his right shoulder and hip on the hard stone as he skidded another four paces—

Over the edge of the pit. Down, cracking hard against one edge of the capstone, breaking it further, then landing face first in the pool of sewage in the tomb, rubble splashing on all sides.

He lifted himself, twisting into a half-seated position, spitting out foul fluids even as he tried to draw air into his lungs. Coughing, choking, he crawled towards one side of the tomb, away from the hole in the ceiling.

Moments later he managed to restore his breathing. Shaking the muck from his head, he peered at the shaft of sunlight reaching down around the ladder. The beast had not come after him ... or had not seen him fall.

He rose and made his way to the ladder. Looked straight up, and saw nothing but sunlight.

Karsa climbed. As he drew level with the pit's edge, he slowed, then lifted himself until he could just see the courtyard. The creature was nowhere in sight. He clambered quickly onto the pavestones. Spitting again, he shook himself, then made his way towards the keep's inner entrance. Hearing no screams from beyond the moat, he assumed that the beast had not gone in that direction. Which left the keep itself.

The double doors were ajar. He entered a broad chamber, its floor tiled, the walls bearing the ghosts of long-faded murals.

Pieces of mangled armour and bits of blood-crusted clothing lay scattered about. Nearby stood a boot, twin bones jutting from it.

Directly opposite, twenty paces away, was another doorway, both doors battered down and smashed. Karsa padded towards it, then froze upon hearing the scrape of claws on tile in the gloom beyond. From his left, close by the entrance. He backed up ten paces, then sprinted forward. Through the doorway. Hands slashed down in his wake, and he heard a frustrated hiss – even as he collided with a low divan, propelling him forward, down
onto a low table. The wooden legs exploded beneath his weight. He rolled onward, sending a high-backed chair cartwheeling, then sliding on a rug, the thump and click of the creature's clawed feet grew louder as it lunged in pursuit.

Karsa got his feet under him and he dove sideways, once more evading the descending claws. Up against another chair, this one massive. Grasping the legs, Karsa heaved it into the path of the creature – it had launched itself into the air. The chair caught both its outstretched legs, snapped them out to the side.

The beast crashed down, cracking its head, broken tiles flying.

Karsa kicked it in the throat.

The beast kicked him in the chest, and he was pitched backward once more, landing on a discarded helmet that rolled, momentarily, sending him back further, up against a wall.

Pain thundering in his chest, the Toblakai climbed to his feet.

The beast was doing the same, slowly, wagging its head from side to side, its breath coming in rough wheezes punctuated by sharp, barking coughs.

Karsa flung himself at it. His hands closed on its right wrist and he ducked under, twisting the arm as he went, then spun round yet again, turning the arm until it popped at the shoulder.

The creature squealed.

Karsa clambered onto its back, his fists hammering on the dome of its skull. Each blow shook the beast's bones. Teeth snapped, the head driven down at each blow, springing back up in time to meet the next one. Staggering beneath him, the right arm hanging limp, the left one attempting to reach up to scrape him off, the creature careened across the room.

Karsa continued swinging, his own hands numb by the impacts.

Finally, he heard the skull crack.

A rattling gasp of breath – from him or the beast, he wasn't sure which – then the creature dropped and rolled.

Most of its immense weight settled for a brief moment between Karsa's thighs, and a roar burst from his throat as he clenched the muscles of his legs to keep that ridged spine away from his crotch. Then the reptile pitched sideways, pinning his left leg. He reached up to wrap an arm around its thrashing neck.

Rolling further, it freed its own left arm, scythed it up and around. Talons sank into Karsa's left shoulder. A surge of overpowering strength dragged the Toblakai off, sending him tumbling into the wreckage of the collapsed table.

Karsa's grasping hand found one of the table legs. He scrambled up and swung it hard against the beast's outstretched arm.

The leg shattered, and the arm was snatched back with a squeal.

The beast reared upright once more.

Karsa charged again.

Was met by a kick, high on his chest.

Sudden blackness.

His eyes opened. Gloom. Silence. The stink of faeces and blood and settling dust. Groaning, he sat up.

A distant crash. From somewhere above.
He studied his surroundings, until he spied the side doorway. He rose, limped towards it. A wide hallway beyond, leading to a staircase.

'Was that a scream, Captain?'
'I am not sure, Falah'd.'

Samar Dev squinted in the bright light at the soldier beside her. He had been muttering under his breath since Toblakai's breach of the iron doors. Stone swords, iron and locks seemed to have been the focus of his private monologue, periodically spiced with some choice curses. That, and the need to get the giant barbarian as far away from Ugarat as possible.

She wiped sweat from her brow, returned her attention to the keep's entrance. Still nothing.

'They're negotiating,' the Falah'd said, restless on the saddle as servants stood to either side, alternately sweeping the large papyrus fans to cool Ugarat's beloved ruler.

'It did sound like a scream, Holy One,' Captain Inashan said after a moment.

'Then it is a belligerent negotiation, Captain. What else can be taking so long? Were they all starved and dead, that barbarian would have returned. Unless, of course, there's loot. Hah, am I wrong in that? I think not! He's a savage, after all. Cut loose from Sha'ik's leash, yes? Why did he not die protecting her?'

'If the tales are true,' Inashan said uncomfortably, 'Sha'ik sought a personal duel with the Adjunct, Falah'd.'

'Too much convenience in that tale. Told by the survivors, the ones who abandoned her. I am unconvinced by this Toblakai. He is too rude.'

'Yes, Falah'd,' Inashan said, 'he is that.'

Samar Dev cleared her throat. 'Holy One, there is no loot to be found in Moraval Keep.'

'Oh, witch? And how can you be so certain?'

'It is an ancient structure, older even than Ugarat itself. True, alterations have been made every now and then – all the old mechanisms were beyond our understanding, Falah'd, even to this day, and all we have now from them is a handful of pieces. I have made long study of those few fragments, and have learned much—'

'You bore me, now, witch. You have still not explained why there is no loot.'

'I am sorry, Falah'd. To answer you, the keep has been explored countless times, and nothing of value has ever been found, barring those dismantled mechanisms—'

'Worthless junk. Very well, the barbarian is not looting. He is negotiating with the squalid, vile Malazans – whom we shall have to kneel before once again. I am betrayed into humiliation by the cowardly rebels of Raraku. Oh, one can count on no-one these days.'

'It would seem not, Falah'd,' Samar Dev murmured.

Inashan shot her a look.

Samar wiped another sheath of sweat from her brow.

'Oh!' the Falah'd cried suddenly. 'I am melting!'

'Wait!' Inashan said. 'Was that a bellow of some sort?'

'He's probably raping someone!'

He found the creature hobbling down a corridor, its head wagging from side to side, pitching into one wall then
the other. Karsa ran after it.

It must have heard him, for it wheeled round, jaws opening in a hiss, moments before he closed. Battering a raking hand aside, the Toblakai kneeled the beast in the belly. The reptile doubled over, chest-ridge cracking down onto Karsa's right shoulder. He drove his thumb up under its left arm, where it found doeskin-soft tissue. Puncturing it, the thumb plunging into meat, curling round ligaments. Closing his hand, Karsa yanked on those ligaments.

Dagger-sharp teeth raked the side of his head, slicing a flap of skin away. Blood gushed into Karsa's right eye. He pulled harder, throwing himself back.

The beast plumped with him. Twisting to one side, Karsa narrowly escaped the crashing weight, and was close enough to see the unnatural splaying of its ribs at the impact.

It struggled to rise, but Karsa was faster. Straddling it once more. Fists hammering down on its skull. With each blow the lower jaws cracked against the floor, and he could feel a sagging give in the plates of the skull's bones beneath his fists. He kept pounding.

A dozen wild heartbeats later and he slowed, realizing the beast was no longer moving beneath him, the head flat on the floor, getting wider and flatter with each impact of his battered fists. Fluids were leaking out. Karsa stopped swinging. He drew in a ragged, agony-filled breath, held it against the sudden waves of darkness thundering through his brain, then released it steady and long. Another mouthful of bloody phlegm to spit out, onto the dead beast's shattered skull.

Lifting his head, Karsa glared about. A doorway on his right. In the room beyond, a long table and chairs. Groaning, he slowly rose, stumbled into the chamber.

A jug of wine sat on the table. Cups were lined up in even rows down both sides, each one opposite a chair. Karsa swept them from the table, collected the jug, then lay down on the stained wood surface. He stared up at the ceiling, where someone had painted a pantheon of unknown gods, all looking down.

Mocking expressions one and all.

Karsa pushed the flap of loose skin back against his temple, then sneered at the faces on the ceiling, before lifting the jug to his lips.

Blessed cool wind, now that the sun was so close to the horizon. Silence for a while now, too, since that last bellow. A number of soldiers, standing for bell after bell all afternoon, had passed out and were being tended to by the lone slave the Falah'd had relinquished from his entourage.

Captain Inashan had been assembling a squad to lead into the keep for some time now.

The Falah'd was having his feet massaged and bathed in mint-leaves chewed in mouthfuls of oil by the slaves. 'You are taking too long, Captain!' he said. 'Look at that demonic horse, the way it eyes us! It will be dark by the time you storm the keep!'

'Torches are being brought along, Falah'd,' Inashan said. 'We're almost ready. '

His reluctance was almost comical, and Samar Dev dared not meet his eye again, not after the expression her wink earlier had elicited.

A shout from the besiegers' encampment.

Toblakai had appeared, climbing down from the ledge, back onto the makeshift steps. Samar Dev and Inashan made their way to the moat, arriving in time to see him emerge. The bear fur was in ribbons, dark with blood. He had tied a strip of cloth about his head, holding the skin in place over one temple. Most of his upper clothing had been torn away, revealing countless gouges and puncture wounds.

And he was covered in shit.
From the Falah'd twenty paces behind them came a querulous enquiry: 'Toblakai! The negotiations went well?'

In a low voice, Inashan said, 'No Malazans left, I take it?'

Karsa Orlong scowled. 'Didn't see any.' He strode past them.

Turning, Samar Dev flinched at the horror of the warrior's ravaged back. 'What happened in there?' she demanded.

A shrug that jostled the slung stone sword. 'Nothing important, witch.'

Not slowing, not turning, he continued on.

A smudge of light far to the south, like a cluster of dying stars on the horizon, marked the city of Kayhum. The dust of the storm a week past had settled and the night sky was bright with the twin sweeps of the Roads of the Abyss. There were scholars, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas had heard, who asserted that those broad roads were nothing more than stars, crowded in multitudes beyond counting, but Corabb knew that was folly. They could be naught but celestial roads, the paths walked by the dragons of the deep, and Elder Gods and the blacksmiths with suns for eyes who hammered stars into life; and the worlds spinning round those stars were simply dross, cast-offs from the forges, pale and smudged, on which crawled creatures preening with conceit.

Preening with conceit. An old seer had told him that once, and for some reason the phrase lodged in Corabb's mind, allowing him to pull it free every now and then to play with, his inner eye bright with shining wonder. People did that, yes. He had seen them, again and again. Like birds. Obsessed with self-importance, thinking themselves tall, as tall as the night sky. That seer had been a genius, to have seen so clearly, and to manage so much in three simple words. Not that conceit was a simple thing, and Corabb recalled having to ask an old woman what the word meant, and she had cackled and reached under his tunic to tug on his penis, which had been unexpected and, instinctive response notwithstanding, unwelcome. A faint wave of embarrassment accompanied the recollection, and he spat into the fire flickering before him.

Leoman of the Flails sat opposite him, a hookah filled with wine-soaked durhang at the man's side, at his thin lips the mouthpiece of hard wood carved into the semblance of a woman's nipple and stained magenta to add to the likeness. His leader's eyes glistened dark red in the fire's light, the lids low, the gaze seemingly fixed on the licking flames.

Corabb had found a piece of wood the length of his arm, light as a woman's breath – telling him that a birit slug dwelt within – and he had just dug it out with the point of his knife. The creature squirmed on the blade's tip, and it had been the sight of this that had, alas, reminded him of the debacle with his penis. Feeling morose, he bit the slug in half and began chewing, juices spurting down into his beard. 'Ah,' he said around the mouthful, 'she has roe. Delicious.'

Leoman looked over, then he drew once more on the mouthpiece. 'We're running out of horses,' he said.

Corabb swallowed. The other half of the slug was writhing on the knife tip, threads of pink eggs dangling like tiny pearls. 'We'll make it, Commander,' he said, then poked out his tongue to lap up the roe, following up by inserting the rest of the slug into his mouth. He chewed, then swallowed. 'Four, five days, I would judge.'

Leoman's eyes glittered. 'You know, then.'

'Where we're going? Yes.'

'Do you know why?'

Corabb tossed the piece of wood onto the fire. 'Y'Ghatan. The First Holy City. Where Dassem Ultor, curse his name, died in betrayal. Y'Ghatan, the oldest city in the world. Built atop the forge of a blacksmith of the Abyss, built on his very bones. Seven Y'Ghatans, seven great cities to mark the ages we have seen, the one we see now crouched on the bones of the other six. City of the Olive Groves, city of the sweet oils—' Corabb paused, frowned. 'What was your question, Commander?'
'Why.'

'Oh, yes. Do I know why you have chosen Y’Ghatan? Because we invite a siege. It is a difficult city to conquer. The fool Malazans will bleed themselves to death attempting to storm its walls. We shall add their bones to all the others, to Dassem Ultor's very own—'

'He didn't die there, Corabb.'

'What? But there were witnesses—'

'To his wounding, yes. To the assassination ... attempt. But no, my friend, the First Sword did not die, and he lives still.'

'Then where is he?'

'Where doesn't matter. You should ask: Who is he? Ask that, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, and I will give you answer.'

Corabb thought about that. Even swimming in the fumes of durhang, Leoman of the Flails was too smart for him. Clever, able to see all that Corabb could not. He was the greatest commander Seven Cities had ever produced. He would have defeated Coltaine. Honourably. And, had he been left to it, he would have crushed Adjunct Tavore, and then Dujek Onearm. There would have been true liberation, for all Seven Cities, and from here the rebellion against the damned empire would have rippled outward, until the yoke was thrown off by all. This was the tragedy, the true tragedy. 'Blessed Dessembrae hounds our heels ...'

Leoman coughed a cloud of smoke. He doubled over, still coughing.

Corabb reached for a skin of water and thrust it into his leader's hands. The man finally drew breath, then drank deep. He leaned back with a gusty sigh, and then grinned. 'You are a wonder, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas! To answer you, I certainly hope not!'

Corabb felt sad. He said, 'You mock me, Commander.'

'Not at all, you Oponn-blessed madman – my only friend left breathing – not at all. It is the cult, you see. The Lord of Tragedy. Dessembrae. That is Dassem Ultor. I don't doubt you understood that, but consider this – for there to be a cult, a religion, with priests and such, there must be a god. A living god.'

'Dassem Ultor is ascended?'

'I believe so, although he is a reluctant god. A denier, like Anomander Rake of the Tiste Andii. And so he wanders, in eternal flight, and in, perhaps, eternal hunt as well.'

'For what?'

Leoman shook his head. Then said, 'Y’Ghatan. Yes, my friend. There, we will make our stand, and the name shall be a curse among the Malazans, for all time, a curse, bitter on their tongues.' His eyes hardened suddenly on Corabb. 'Are you with me? No matter what I command, no matter the madness that will seem to afflict me?'

Something in his leader's gaze frightened Corabb, but he nodded. 'I am with you, Leoman of the Flails. Do not doubt that.'

A wry smile. 'I shall not hold you to that. But I thank you for your words nonetheless.'

'Why would you doubt them?'

'Because only I know what I intend to do.'

'Tell me.'

'No, my friend. This burden is mine.'
'You lead us, Leoman of the Flails. We shall follow. As you say, you carry all of us. We are the weight of history, of liberty, and yet you are not bowed—'

'Ah, Corabb ...'

'I only say what is known but has never before been said aloud, Commander.'

'There is mercy in silence, my friend. But no mind. It is done, you have indeed spoken.'

'I have assailed you further. I am sorry, Leoman of the Flails.'

Leoman drank again from the waterskin, then spat into the fire. 'We need say no more of it. Y'Gh. an. This shall be our city. Four, five days. It is just past crushing season, yes?'

'The olives? Yes, we shall arrive when the grovers have gathered. A thousand merchants will be there, and workers out on the road leading to the coast, setting new stones. And potters, and barrel-makers, and wagoners and caravans. The air shall be gold with dust and dusted with gold—'

'You are a poet indeed, Corabb. Merchants, and their hired guards. Tell me, will they bow to my authority, do you think?'

'They must.'

'Who is the city's Falah'd?'

'Vedor.'

'Which one?'

'The ferret-faced one, Leoman. His fish-faced brother was found dead in his lover's bed, the whore nowhere to be found, but likely rich and in hiding or in a shallow grave. It's the old story among the Fala'dhan.'

'And we are certain Vedor continues to deny the Malazans?'

'No fleet or army could have reached them yet. You know this, Leoman of the Flails.'

The man slowly nodded, eyes once more on the flames.

Corabb looked up at the night sky. 'One day,' he said, 'we shall walk the Roads to the Abyss. And so witness all the wonders of the universe.'

Leoman squinted upward. 'Where the stars are thick as veins?'

'They are roads, Leoman. Surely you do not believe those insane scholars?'

'All scholars are insane, yes. They say nothing worth believing. The roads, then. The trail of fire.'

'Of course,' Corabb continued, 'that shall be many years from now ...'

'As you say, friend. Now, best get some sleep.'

Corabb rose, bones cracking. 'May you dream of glory this night, Commander.'

'Glory? Oh, yes, my friend. Our trail of fire ...'

'Aai, that slug has given me indigestion. It was the roe.'

'The bastard's heading for Y'Ghatan.'

Sergeant Strings glanced over at Bottle. 'You've been thinking, haven't you? That's not good, soldier. Not good at all.'
'Can't help it.'

'That's even worse. Now I have to keep an eye on you.'

Koryk was on his hands and knees, head lowered as he sought to breathe life back into the bed of coals from the night just past. He suddenly coughed as he inhaled a cloud of ashes and ducked away, blinking and hacking.

Smiles laughed. 'The wise plainsman does it again. You were asleep, Koryk, but I should tell you, Tarr pissed that fire out last night.'

'What!?!'

'She's lying,' Tarr said from where he crouched beside his pack, repairing a strap. 'Even so, it was a good one. You should have seen your expression, Koryk.'

'How can anyone, with that white mask he's wearing? Shouldn't you be painting death lines through that ash, Koryk? Isn't that what Seti do?'

'Only when going into battle, Smiles,' the sergeant said. 'Now, leave off, woman. You're as bad as that damned Hengese lapdog. It bit a Khundryl's ankle last night and wouldn't let go.'

'Hope they skewered it,' Smiles said.

'Not a chance. Bent was standing guard. Anyway, they had to get Temul to pry the thing off. My point is, Smiles, you ain't got a Wickan cattle-dog to guard your back, so the less you snipe the safer you'll be.'

No-one mentioned the knife Koryk had taken in the leg a week past.

Cuttle came wandering into the camp. He'd found a squad that had already brewed some foul-smelling tea and was sipping from his tin cup. 'They're here,' he said.

'Who?' Smiles demanded.

Bottle watched as their sergeant settled back down, leaning against his pack. 'All right,' Strings said, sighing. 'March will be delayed. Someone help Koryk get the fire going – we're going to have a real breakfast. Cuttle the cook.'

'Me? All right, just don't blame me.'

'For what?' Strings asked with an innocent smile.

Cuttle walked over to the hearth, reaching into a pouch. 'Got some sealed Flamer dust—'

Everyone scattered, Strings included. Suddenly, Cuttle was alone, looking round bemusedly at his fellow soldiers, now one and all at least fifteen paces distant. He scowled. 'A grain or two, nothing more. Damn, do you think I'm mad?'

Everyone looked to Strings, who shrugged. 'Instinctive reaction, Cuttle. Surprised you ain't used to it by now.'

'Yeah? And how come you were the first belting out of here, Fid?'

'Who'd know better than me?'

Cuttle crouched down beside the hearth. 'Well,' he muttered, 'I'm absolutely crushed.' He withdrew a small clay disk from the pouch. It was a playing piece for the board-game called Troughs, the game being Cuttle's favourite pastime. The sapper spat on it, then tossed it into the coals. And quickly backed away.

No-one else moved.

'Hey,' Koryk said, 'that wasn't a real Troughs piece, was it?'
Cuttle glanced over. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘Because those things get thrown around!’

‘Only when I lose,’ the sapper replied.

A burst of ash, sudden flames. Cuttle walked back and began flinging pieces of dung on the fire. ‘All right, somebody tend to this. I’ll get what passes for food around here and figure something out.’

‘Bottle has some lizards,’ Smiles said.

‘Forget it,’ Bottle shot back. ‘They’re my, uh, friends.’ He flinched as the other squad members turned to regard him.

‘Friends?’ Strings asked. He scratched his beard, studying his soldier.

‘What,’ Smiles said, ‘the rest of us too smart for you, Bottle? All these confounding words we use? The fact we can read those squiggly etchings on clay and wax tablets and scrolls? Well, except for Koryk, of course. Anyway. Feeling insufficient, Bottle? I don’t mean physically – that goes without saying. But, mentally, right? Is that the problem?’

Bottle glared at her. ‘You’ll regret all that, Smiles.’

‘Oh, he’s going to send his lizard friends after me! Help!’

‘That’s enough, Smiles,’ Strings said in a warning growl.

She rose, ran her hands through her still-unbound hair. ‘Well, I’m off to gossip with Flashwit and Uru Hela. Flash said she saw Neffarias Bredd a couple of days ago. A horse had died and he carried it back to his squad’s camp. They roasted it. Nothing but bones left.’

‘The squad ate an entire horse?’ Koryk snorted. ‘How come I’ve never seen this Neffarias Bredd, anyway? Has anybody here seen him?’

‘I have,’ Smiles replied.

‘When?’ Koryk demanded.

‘A few days ago. I’m bored talking to you. Your fire’s going out.’ She walked off.

The sergeant was still tugging at his beard. ‘Gods below, I need to hack this thing off,’ he muttered.

‘But the chicks ain’t left the nest yet,’ Cuttle said, settling down with an armful of foodstuffs. ‘Who’s been collecting snakes?’ he asked, letting the various objects drop. He picked up a long, rope-like thing. ‘They stink —’

‘That’s the vinegar,’ Koryk said. ‘It’s an old Seti delicacy. The vinegar cooks the meat, you see, for when you ain’t got the time to smoke it slow.’

‘What are you doing killing snakes?’ Bottle demanded. ‘They’re useful, you know.’

Strings rose. ‘Bottle, walk with me.’

*Oh damn. I’ve got to ham to say nothing. ‘Aye, Sergeant.’*

They crossed the ditch and headed onto the broken sweep of the Lato Odhan, the mostly level, dusty ground home to a scattering of shattered rock, no piece larger than a man’s head. Somewhere far to the southwest was the city of Kayhum, still out of sight, whilst behind them rose the Thalas Mountains, treeless for centuries and now eroded like rotting teeth. No cloud relieved the bright morning sun, already hot.

‘Where do you keep your lizards?’ Strings asked.
'In my clothes, out of the sun, during the day, I mean. They wander at night.'

'And you wander with them.'

Bottle nodded.

'That's a useful talent,' the sergeant commented, then went on, 'especially for spying. Not on the enemy, of course, but on everyone else.'

'So far. I mean, we haven't been close enough to the enemy—'

'I know. And that's why you ain't told nobody yet about it. So, you've listened in on the Adjunct much? I mean, since that time you learned about the fall of the Bridgeburners.'

'Not much, to tell the truth.' Bottle hesitated, wondering how much he should say.

'Out with it, soldier.'

'It's that Claw ...'

'Pearl.'

'Aye, and, well, uh, the High Mage.'

'Quick Ben.'

'Right, and now there's Tayschrenn, too—'

Strings grasped Bottle's arm and pulled him round. 'He left. He was only here for a few bells, and that was a week ago—'

'Aye, but that doesn't mean he can't come back, at any time, right? Anyway, all these powerful, scary mages, well, they make me nervous.'

'You're making me nervous, Bottle!'

'Why?'

The sergeant squinted at him, then let go of his arm and resumed walking.

'Where are we going?' Bottle demanded.

'You tell me.'

'Not that way.'

'Why?'

'Uh. Nil and Nether, just the other side of that low rise.'

Strings loosed a half-dozen dockside curses. 'Hood take us! Listen, soldier, I ain't forgotten anything, you know. I remember you playing dice with Meanas, making dolls of Hood and the Rope. Earth-magic and talking with spirits – gods below, you're so much like Quick Ben it makes my hair stand on end. Oh, right, it all comes from your grandmother – but you see, I know where Quick got his talents!'

Bottle frowned at the man. 'What?'

'What do you mean what?'

'What are you talking about, Sergeant? You've got me confused.'

'Quick's got more warrens to draw on than any mage I've ever heard about. Except,' he added in a frustrated snarl, 'except maybe you.'
'But I don't even like warrens!'

'No, you're closer to Nil and Nether, aren't you? Spirits and stuff. When you're not playing with Hood and Shadow, that is!'

'They're older than warrens, Sergeant.'

'Like that! What do you mean by that?'

'Well. Holds. They're holds. Or they were. Before warrens. It's old magic, that's what my grandmother taught me. Real old. Anyway, I've changed my mind about Nil and Nether. They're up to something and I want to see it.'

'But you don't want them to see us.'

Bottle shrugged. 'Too late for that, Sergeant. They know we're here.'

'Fine, lead on, then. But I want Quick Ben to meet you. And I want to know all about these holds you keep talking about.'

No you don't. 'All right.' Quick Ben. A meeting. That was bad. Maybe I could run away. No, don't be an idiot. You can't run away, Bottle. Besides, what were the risks of talking with the High Mage? He wasn't doing anything wrong, exactly. Not really. Not so anybody would know, anyway. Except a sneaky bastard like Quick Ben. Abyss, what if he finds out who's walking in my shadow? Well, it's not like I asked for the company, is it?

'Whatever you're thinking,' Strings said in a growl, 'it's got my skin crawling.'

'Not me. Nil and Nether. They've begun a ritual. I've changed my mind again – maybe we should go back.'

'No.'

They began ascending the gentle slope.

Bottle felt sudden sweat trickling beneath his clothes. 'You've got some natural talent, haven't you, Sergeant? Skin crawling and all that. You're sensitive to ... stuff.'

'I had a bad upbringing.'

'Where's Gesler's squad gone?'

Strings shot him a glance. 'You're doing it again.'

'Sorry.'

'They're escorting Quick and Kalam – they've gone ahead. So, your dreaded meeting with Quick is still some time off, you'll be glad to know.'

'Gone ahead. By warren? They shouldn't be doing that, you know. Not now. Not here—'  

'Why?'

'Well. Because.'

'For the first time in my career as a soldier of the Malazan Empire, I truly want to strangle a fellow soldier.'

'Sorry.'

'Stop saying that name!'

'It's not a name. It's a word.'

The sergeant's battered hands clenched into fists.
Bottle fell silent. Wondering if Strings might actually strangle him.

They reached the crest. Thirty paces beyond, the Wickan witch and warlock had arranged a circle of jagged stones and were seated within it, facing each other. 'They're travelling,' Bottle said. 'It's a kind of Spiritwalking, like the Tanno do. They're aware of us, but only vaguely.'

'I assume we don't step within that ring.'

'Not unless we need to pull them out.'

Strings looked over.

'Not unless I need to pull them out, I mean. If things go wrong. If they get in trouble.'

They drew nearer. 'What made you join the army, Bottle?'

She insisted. 'My grandmother thought it would be a good idea. She'd just died, you see, and her spirit was, um, agitated a little. About something.' Oh, steer away from this, Bottle.

'Selling dolls to pilots and sailors on the docks—'

'Where?'

'Jakatakan.'

'What kind of dolls?'

'The kind the Stormriders seem to like. Appeasement.'

'Stormriders? Gods below, Bottle, I didn't think anything worked with them lately. Not for years.'

'The dolls didn't always work, but they sometimes did, which was better than most propitiations. Anyway, I was making good coin, but it didn't seem enough—'

'Are you feeling cold all of a sudden?'

Bottle nodded. 'It makes sense, where they've gone.'

'And where is that?'

'Through Hood's Gate. It's all right, Sergeant. I think. Really. They're pretty sneaky, and so long as they don't attract the wrong attention ...'

'But ... why?'

Bottle glanced over. The sergeant was looking pale. Not surprising. Those damned ghosts at Raraku had rattled him. 'They're looking for ... people. Dead ones.'

'Sormo E'nath?'

'I guess. Wickans. Ones who died on the Chain of Dogs. They've done this before. They don't find them—' He stopped as a gust of bitter cold wind swirled up round the circle of stones. Sudden frost limned the ground. 'Oh, that's not good. I'll be right back, Sergeant.'

Bottle ran forward, then leapt into the ring.

And vanished.

Or, he assumed he had, since he was no longer on the Lato Odhan, but ankle-deep in rotting, crumbling bones, a sickly grey sky overhead. Someone was screaming. Bottle turned at the sound and saw three figures thirty paces away. Nil and Nether, and facing them, a horrific apparition, and it was this lich that was doing the screaming. The two young Wickans were flinching before the tirade.
A language Bottle did not understand. He walked closer, bone-dust puffing with each step.

The lich suddenly reached out and grasped both Wickans, lifting them into the air, then shaking them.

Bottle ran forward. *And what do I do when I get there?*

The creature snarled and flung Nil and Nether to the ground, then abruptly disappeared amidst the clouds of dust.

He reached them as they were climbing to their feet. Nether was swearing in her native tongue as she brushed dust from her tunic. She glared over at Bottle as he arrived. 'What do you want?'

'Thought you were in trouble.'

'We're fine,' Nil snapped, yet there was a sheepish expression on his adolescent face. 'You can lead us back, mage.'

'Did the Adjunct send you?' Nether demanded. 'Are we to have no peace?'

'Nobody sent me. Well, Sergeant Strings – we were just out walking—'

'Strings? You mean Fiddler.'

'We're supposed to—'

'Don't be an idiot,' Nether said. 'Everybody knows.'

'We're not idiots. It clearly hasn't occurred to either of you that maybe Fiddler wants it that way. Wants to be called Strings, now, because his old life is gone, and with the old name comes bad memories, and he's had enough of those.'

Neither Wickan replied.

After a few more strides, Bottle asked, 'So, was that a Wickan lich? One of the dead you were looking for?'

'You know too much.'

'Was it?'

Nil cursed under his breath, then said, 'Our mother.'

'Your ...' Bottle fell silent.

'She was telling us to stop moping and grow up,' Nil added.

'She was telling you that,' Nether retorted. 'She told me to—'

'To take a husband and get pregnant.'

'That was just a suggestion.'

'Made while she was shaking you?' Bottle asked.

Nether spat at his feet. 'A suggestion. Something I should maybe think about. Besides, I don't have to listen to you, soldier. You're Malazan. A squad mage.'

'He's also the one,' pointed out Nil, 'who rides lifesparks.'

'Small ones. The way we did as children.'

Bottle smiled at her remark.

She caught it. 'What's so amusing?'
'Nothing. Sorry.'
'I thought you were going to lead us back.'
'I thought so, too,' Bottle said, halting and looking round. 'Oh, I think we've been noticed.'
'It's your fault, mage!' Nil accused.
'Probably.'

Nether hissed and pointed.

Another figure had appeared, and to either side padded dogs. Wickan cattle dogs. Nine, ten, twelve. Their eyes gleamed silver. The man in their midst was clearly Wickan, greying and squat and bow-legged. His face was savagely scarred.

'It is Bult,' Nether whispered. She stepped forward.

The dogs growled.

'Nil, Nether, I have been searching for you,' the ghost named Bult said, halting ten paces away, the dogs lining up on either side. 'Hear me. We do not belong here. Do you understand? We do not belong.' He paused and pulled at his nose in a habitual gesture. 'Think hard on my words.' He turned away, then paused and glanced back over a shoulder, 'And Nether, get married and have babies.'

The ghosts vanished.

Nether stamped her foot. Dust rose up around her. 'Why does everyone keep telling me that!'

'Your tribe's been decimated,' Bottle said reasonably. 'It stands to reason—'

She advanced on him.

Bottle stepped back—

And reappeared within the stone circle.

A moment later gasps came from Nil and Nether, their crosslegged bodies twitching.

'I was getting worried,' Strings said behind him, standing just outside the ring.

The two Wickans were slow in getting to their feet.

Bottle hurried to his sergeant's side. 'We should get going,' he said. 'Before she comes fully round, I mean.'

'Why?'

Bottle started walking. 'She's mad at me.'

The sergeant snorted, then followed. 'And why is she mad at you, soldier? As if I need ask.'

'Just something I said.'

'Oh, I am surprised.'

'I don't want to go into it, Sergeant. Sorry.'

'I'm tempted to throw you down and pin you for her.'

They reached the crest. Behind them, Nether began shouting curses. Bottle quickened his pace. Then he halted and crouched down, reaching under his shirt, and gingerly drew out a placid lizard. 'Wake up,' he murmured, then set it down. It scampered off.
Strings watched. ‘It’s going to follow them, isn’t it?’

‘She might decide on a real curse,’ Bottle explained. ‘And if she does, I need to counter it.’

‘Hood’s breath, what did you say to her?’

‘I made a terrible mistake. I agreed with her mother.’

‘We should be getting out of here. Or ...’

Kalam glanced over. ‘All right, Quick.’ He raised a hand to halt the soldiers flanking them and the one trailing behind, then uttered a low whistle to alert the huge, redbearded corporal on point.

The squad members drew in to surround the assassin and the High Mage.

‘We’re being followed,’ Sergeant Gesler said, wiping sweat from his burnished brow.

‘It’s worse than that,’ Quick Ben said.

The soldier named Sands muttered, ‘Isn’t it just.’

Kalam turned and studied the track behind them. He could see nothing in the colourless swirl. ‘This is still the Imperial Warren, isn’t it?’

Quick Ben rubbed at his neck. ‘I’m not so sure.’

‘But how can that happen?’ This from the corporal, Stormy, his forehead buckling and small eyes glittering as though he was about to fly into a berserk rage at any moment. He was holding his grey flint sword as if expecting some demon to come bursting into existence right in front of them.

The assassin checked his long-knives, and said to Quick Ben, ‘Well?’

The wizard hesitated, then nodded. ‘All right.’

‘What did you two just decide?’ Gesler asked. ‘And would it be so hard explaining it to us?’

‘Sarcastic bastard,’ Quick Ben commented, then gave the sergeant a broad, white smile.

‘I’ve punched a lot of faces in my day,’ Gesler said, returning the smile, ‘but never one belonging to a High Mage before.’

‘You might not be here if you had, Sergeant.’

‘Back to business,’ Kalam said in a warning rumble.

‘We’re going to wait and see what’s after us, Gesler. Quick doesn’t know where we are, and that in itself is troubling enough.’

‘And then we leave,’ the wizard added. ‘No heroic stands.’

‘The Fourteenth’s motto,’ Stormy said, with a loud sigh.

‘Which?’ Gesler asked. ‘And then we leave or No heroic stands?’

‘Take your pick.’

Kalam studied the squad, first Gesler, then Stormy, then the lad, Truth, and Pella and the minor mage, Sands. What a miserable bunch.

‘Let’s just go kill it,’ Stormy said, shifting about. ‘And then we can talk about what it was.’

‘Hood knows how you’ve lived this long,’ Quick Ben said, shaking his head.
'Because I'm a reasonable man, High Mage.'

Kalam grunted. *All right, they might grow on me at that. How far away is it, Quick?*

'Closing. Not it. Them.'

Gesler unslung his crossbow and Pella and Truth followed suit. They loaded quarrels, then fanned out.

'Them, you said,' the sergeant muttered, glaring over at Quick Ben. 'Would that be two? Six? Fifty thousand?'

'It's not that,' Sands said in a suddenly shaky voice. 'It's where they've come from. Chaos. I'm right, ain't I, High Mage?'

'So,' Kalam said, 'the warrens really are in trouble.'

'I did tell you that, Kal.'

'You did. And you told the Adjunct the same thing. But she wanted us to get to Y'Ghatan before Leoman. And that means the warrens.'

'There!' Truth hissed, pointing.

Emerging from the grey gloom, something massive, towering, black as a storm-cloud, filling the sky. And behind it, another, and another ...

'Time to go,' Quick Ben said.
All that K'rul created, you understand, was born of the Elder God's love of possibility. Myriad paths of sorcery spun out a multitude of strands, each wild as hairs in the wind, hackled to the wandering beast. And K'rul was that beast, yet he himself was a parody of life, for blood was his nectar, the spilled gift, red tears of pain, and all that he was, was defined by that singular thirst.

For all that, thirst is something we all share, yes?

Brutho and Nullit speak on Nullit's Last Night
Brutho Parlet

The land was vast, but it was not empty. Some ancient cataclysm had torn through the scoured bedrock, splitting it with fissures in a chaotic crisscross skein over the plain. If sand had once covered this place, even filling the chasms, wind or water had swept away the very last grain. The stone looked polished and the sun's light bounced from it in a savage glare.

Squinting, Mappo Runt studied the tormented landscape in front of them. After a time, he shook his head. 'I have never seen this place before, Icarium. It seems as though something has just peeled back the skin of the world. Those cracks ... how can they run in such random directions?'

The half-blood Jaghut standing at his side said nothing for a moment, his pallid eyes scanning the scene as if seeking a pattern. Then he crouched down and picked up a piece of broken bedrock. 'Immense pressures,' he murmured. 'And then ... violence.' He straightened, tossing the rock aside. 'The fissures follow no fault lines – see that nearest one? It cuts directly across the seams in the stone. I am intrigued, Mappo.'

The Trell set down his burlap sack. 'Do you wish to explore?'

'I do.' Icarium glanced at him and smiled. 'None of my desires surprise you, do they? It is no exaggeration that you know my mind better than I. Would that you were a woman.'

'Were I a woman, Icarium, I would have serious concerns about your taste in women.'

'Granted,' the Jhag replied, 'you are somewhat hairy. Bristly, in fact. Given your girth, I believe you capable of wrestling a bull bhederin to the ground.'

'Assuming I had reason to ... although none comes to mind.'

'Come; let us explore.'

Mappo followed Icarium out onto the blasted plain. The heat was vicious, desiccating. Beneath their feet, the bedrock bore twisted swirls, signs of vast, contrary pressures. No lichen clung to the stone. 'This has been long buried.'

'Yes, and only recently exposed.'

They approached the sharp edge of the nearest chasm.

The sunlight reached down part-way to reveal jagged, sheer walls, but the floor was hidden in darkness.

'I see a way down,' Icarium said.

'I was hoping you had missed it,' Mappo replied, having seen the same chute with its convenient collection of ledges, cracks for hand- and foot-holds. 'You know how I hate climbing.'

'Until you mentioned it, no. Shall we?'
‘Let me retrieve my pack,’ Mappo said, turning about. ‘We’ll likely be spending the night down there.’ He made his way back towards the edge of the plain. The rewards of curiosity had diminished for Mappo, over the years since he had vowed to walk at Icarium’s side. It was now a sentiment bound taut with dread. Icarium’s search for answers was not a hopeless one, alas. And if truth was discovered, it would be as an avalanche, and Icarium would not, could not, withstand the revelations. About himself. And all that he had done. He would seek to take his own life, if no-one else dared grant the mercy.

That was a precipice they had both clung to not so long ago. And I betrayed my vow. In the name of friendship. He had been broken, and it shamed him still. Worse, to see the compassion in Icarium’s eyes, that had been a sword through Mappo’s heart, an unhealed wound still haunting him.

But curiosity was a fickle thing, as well. Distractions devoured time, drew Icarium from his relentless path. Yes, time. Delays. Follow where he will lead, Mappo Runt. You can do naught else. Until ... until what? Until he finally failed. And then, another would come, if it was not already too late, to resume the grand deceit.

He was tired. His very soul was weary of the whole charade. Too many lies had led him onto this path, too many lies held him here to this day. I am no friend. I broke my vow – in the name of friendship? Another lie. No. Simple, brutal self-interest, the weakness of my selfish needs.

Whilst Icarium called him friend. Victim of a terrible curse, yet he remained, trusting, honourable, filled with the pleasure of living. And here I am, happily leading him astray, again and again. Oh, the word for it was indeed shame.

He found himself standing before his pack. How long he had stood there, unseeing, unmoving, he did not know. Ah, now that is just, that I begin to lose myself. Sighing, he picked it up and slung it over a shoulder. Pray we cross no-one’s path. No threat. No risk. Pray we never find a way out of the chasm. But to whom was he praying? Mappo smiled as he made his way back. He believed in nothing, and would not presume the conceit of etching a face on oblivion. Thus, empty prayers, uttered by an empty man.

‘Are you all right, my friend?’ Icarium asked as he arrived.

‘Lead on,’ Mappo said. ‘I must secure my pack first.’

A flash of something like concern in the Jhag’s expression, then he nodded and walked over to where the chute debouched, slipped over the edge, and vanished from sight.

Mappo tugged a small belt-pouch free and loosened the drawstrings. He pulled another pouch from the first one and unfolded it, revealing that it was larger than the one it had been stored in. From this second pouch he withdrew another, again larger once unfolded. Mappo then, with some effort, pushed the shoulder pack into this last one. Tightened the strings. He stuffed that pouch into the next smaller and followed by forcing that one into the small belt-pouch, which he tied at his waist. Inconvenient, though temporary. He would have no quick access to his weapons should some calamity arise, at least for the duration of the descent. Not that he could fight clinging like a drunk goat to the cliff-side in any case.

He made his way to the chute and looked over the edge. Icarium was making swift progress, already fifteen or more man-heights down.

What would they find down there? Rocks. Or something that should have remained buried for all time.

Mappo began his descent.

Before long, the passage of the sun swept all light from the crevasse. They continued in deep gloom, the air cool and stale. There was no sound, barring the occasional scrape of Icarium’s scabbard against stone from somewhere below, the only indication that the Jhag still lived, that he had not fallen, for, had he lost his grip and plummeted, Mappo knew that he would make no outcry.

The Trell’s arms were getting tired, the calves of his legs aching, his fingers growing numb, but he maintained his steady pace, feeling strangely relentless, as if this was a descent with no end and he was eager to prove it, the only possible proof being to continue on. For ever. There was something telling in that desire, but
he was not prepared to be mindful of it.

The air grew colder. Mappo watched the plumes of his breath frosting the stone face opposite him, sparkling in some faint, sourceless illumination. He could smell old ice, somewhere below, and a whisper of unease quickened his breathing.

A hand on the heel of his left, down-reaching foot startled him.

'We are here,' Icarium murmured.

'Abyss take us,' Mappo gasped, pushing away from the wall and landing with sagging legs on a slick, slanted floor. He flung his arms out to regain balance, then straightened. 'Are you certain? Perhaps this slope is but a ledge, and should we lose our footing—'

'We will get wet. Come, there is a lake of some sort.'

'Ah, I see it. It ... glows

They edged down until the motionless sweep of water was before them. A vague, greenish-blue illumination, coming from below, revealed the lake's depth. They could see to the bottom, perhaps ten man-heights down, rough and studded with rotted tree stumps or broken stalagmites, pale green and limned in white.

'We descended a third of a league for this?' Mappo asked, his voice echoing, then he laughed.

'Look further in,' Icarium directed, and the Trell heard excitement in his companion's tone.

The stumps marched outward four or five paces, then stopped. Beyond, details indistinct, squatted a massive, blockish shape. Vague patterns marked its visible sides, and its top. Odd, angular projections reached out from the far side, like spider's legs. The breath hissed from Mappo. 'Does it live?' he asked.

'A mechanism of some sort,' Icarium said. 'The metal is very nearly white, do you see? No corrosion. It looks as if it had been built yesterday ... but I believe, my friend, that it is ancient.'

Mappo hesitated, then asked, 'Is it one of yours?'

Icarium glanced at him, eyes bright. 'No. And that is the wonder of it.'

'No? Are you sure? We have found others—'

'I am certain. I do not know how, but there is no doubt in my mind. This was constructed by someone else, Mappo.'

The Trell crouched down and dipped his hand into the water, then snatched it back. 'Gods, that's cold!' 

'No obstacle to me,' Icarium said, smiling, the polished lower tusks sliding into view.

'You mean to swim down and examine it? Never mind, the answer is plain. Very well, I shall seek out some level ground, and pitch our camp.'

The Jhag was tugging off his clothes.

Mappo set off along the slope. The gloom was sufficiently relieved by the glowing water that he was able to make certain of each step he took, moving up until his left hand was brushing the cold stone wall. After fifteen or so paces that hand slipped into a narrow crack, and, upon regaining contact, immediately noted a change of texture and shape in the surface under his blunt fingertips. The Trell halted and began a closer examination along its length.

This stone was basalt, ragged, bulging out until the slope beneath his feet dwindled, then disappeared. Sharp cracks emanated across the angled floor and into the lake, the black fissures reappearing on the lake's bottom. The basalt was some kind of intrusion, he concluded. Perhaps the entire crevasse had been created by its arrival.
Mappo retreated until he had room to sit, perched with his back against the rock, eyes on the now rippled surface of the lake. He drew out a reed and began cleaning his teeth as he considered the matter. He could not imagine a natural process creating such an intrusion. Contrary as earth pressures were, far beneath the land's surface, there was no colliding escarpment shaping things in this part of the subcontinent.

No, there had been a gate, and the basalt formation had come through it. Catastrophically. From its realm ... into solid bedrock on this world.

What was it? But he knew.

A sky keep.

Mappo rose and faced the ravaged basalt once more. And that which Icarium now studies at the bottom of the lake ... it came from this. So it follows, does it not, that there must be some sort of portal. A way in. Now he was curious indeed. What secrets lay within? Among the rituals of inculcation the Nameless Ones had intoned in the course of Mappo's vow were tales of the sky keeps, the dread K'Chain Che'Malle fortresses that floated like clouds in the air. An invasion of sorts, according to the Nameless Ones, in the ages before the rise of the First Empire, when the people who would one day found it did little more than wander in small bands – not even tribes, little different, in fact, from mortal Imass. An invasion that, in this region at least, failed. The tales said little of who or what had opposed them. Jaghut, perhaps. Or Forkrul Assail, or the Elder Gods themselves.

He heard splashing and peered through the gloom to see Icarium pull himself, awkwardly, onto the strand. Mappo rose and approached.

'Dead,' Icarium gasped, and Mappo saw that his friend was racked with shivers.

'The mechanism?'

The Jhag shook his head. 'Omtose Phellack. This water ... dead ice. Dead ... blood.'

Mappo waited for Icarium to recover. He studied the now swirling, agitated surface of the lake, wondering when last that water had known motion, the heat of a living body. For the latter, it had clearly been thirsty.

'There is a corpse inside that thing,' the Jhag said after a time.

'K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'I have found the sky keep it emerged from. Part of it remains exposed, extruding from the wall.'

'A strange creature,' Icarium muttered. 'I have no memory of ever seeing one before, yet I knew its name.'

'As far as I know, friend, you have never encountered them in your travels. Yet you hold knowledge of them, nonetheless.'

'I need to think on this.'

'Yes.'

'Strange creature,' he said again. 'So reptilian. Desiccated, of course, as one would expect. Powerful, I would think. The hind limbs, the forearms. Huge jaws. Stubby tail—'

Mappo looked up. 'Stubby tail. You are certain of that?'

'Yes. The beast was reclined, and within reach were levers – it was a master of the mechanism's operation.'

'There was a porthole you could look through?'

'No. The white metal became transparent wherever I cast my gaze.'

'Revealing the mechanism's inner workings?'
'Only the area where the K'Chain Che'Malle was seated. A carriage of some sort, I believe, a means of transportation and exploration ... yet not intended to accommodate being submerged in water; nor was it an excavating device – the jointed arms would have been insufficient for that. No, the unveiling of Omtose Phellack caught it unawares. Devoured, trapped in ice. A Jaghut arrived, Mappo, to make certain that none escaped.'

Mappo nodded. Icarium’s descriptions had led him to conclude much the same sequence of events. Like the sky keep itself, the mechanism was built to fly, borne aloft by some unknown sorcery. ‘If we are to find level ground,’ he said, ‘it shall have to be within the keep.’

The Jhag smiled. ‘Is that a glimmer of anticipation in your eyes? I am beginning to see the Mappo of old, I suspect. Memory or no, you are no stranger to me, and I have been much chagrined of late, seeing you so forlorn. I understood it, of course – how could I not? I am what haunts you, friend, and for that I grieve. Come, shall we find our way inside this fell keep?’

Mappo watched Icarium stride past, and slowly turned to follow him with his eyes.

*Icarium, the Builder of Mechanisms. Where did such skills come from?* He feared they were about to find out.

The monastery was in the middle of parched, broken wasteland, not a village or hamlet within a dozen leagues in either direction along the faint tracks of the road. On the map Cutter had purchased in G’danisban, its presence was marked with a single wavy line of reddish-brown ink, upright, barely visible on the worn hide. The symbol of D’rek, Worm of Autumn.

A lone domed structure stood in the midst of a lowwalled, rectangular compound, and the sky over it was dotted with circling vultures.

Beside him and hunched in the saddle, Heboric Ghost Hands spat, then said, ‘Decay. Rot. Dissolution. When what once worked suddenly breaks. And like a moth the soul flutters away. Into the dark. Autumn awaits, and the seasons are askew, twisting to avoid all the unsheathed knives. Yet the prisoners of the jade, they are forever trapped. There, in their own arguments. Disputes, bickering, the universe beyond unseen – they care not a whit, the fools. They wear ignorance like armour and wield spite like swords. What am I to them? A curio. Less. So it’s a broken world, why should I care about that? I did not ask for this, for any of this...’

He went on, but Cutter stopped listening. He glanced back at the two women trailing them. Listless, uncaring, brutalized by the heat. The horses beneath them walked with drooped heads; their ribs were visible beneath dusty, tattered hide. Off to one side clambered Greyfrog, looking fat and sleek as ever, circling the riders with seemingly boundless energy.

‘We should visit that monastery,’ Cutter said. ‘Make use of the well, and if there’s any foodstuffs—’

‘They’re all dead,’ Heboric croaked.

Cutter studied the old man, then grunted. ‘Explains the vultures. But we still need water.’

The Destriant of Treach gave him an unpleasant smile.

Cutter understood the meaning of that smile. He was becoming heartless, inured to the myriad horrors of this world. A monastery filled with dead priests and priestesses was as ... nothing. And the old man could see it, could see into him. *His new god is the Tiger of Summer, Lord of War. Heboric Ghost Hands, the High Priest of strife, he sees how cold I have become. And is ... amused.*

Cutter guided his horse up the side track leading to the monastery. The others followed. The Daru reined in in front of the gates, which were closed, and dismounted. ‘Heboric, do you sense any danger to us?’

‘I have that talent?’

Cutter studied him, said nothing.
The Destriant clambered down from his horse. 'Nothing lives in there. Nothing.'

'No ghosts?'

'Nothing. She took them.'

'Who?'

'The unexpected visitor, that's who.' He laughed, raised his hands. 'We play our games. We never expect ... umbrage. Outrage. I could have told them. Warned them, but they wouldn't have listened. The conceit consumes all. A single building can become an entire world, the minds crowding and jostling, then clawing and gouging. All they need do is walk outside, but they don't. They've forgotten that outside exists. Oh, all these faces of worship, none of which is true worship. Never mind the diligence, it does naught but serve the demon hatreds within. The spites and fears and malice. I could have told them.'

Cutter walked to the wall, leading his horse. He climbed onto its back, perched on the saddle, then straightened until he was standing. The top of the wall was within easy reach. He pulled himself up. In the compound beyond, bodies. A dozen or so, black-skinned, mostly naked, lying here and there on the hard-packed, white ground. Cutter squinted. The bodies looked to be ... boiling, frothing, melting. They roiled before his eyes. He pulled his gaze away from them. The domed temple's doors were yawning open. To the right was a low corral surrounding a low, long structure, the mud-bricks exposed for two thirds of the facing wall. Troughs with plaster and tools indicated a task never to be completed. Vultures crowded the flat roof, yet none ventured down to feast on the corpses.

Cutter dropped down into the compound. He walked to the gates and lifted the bar clear, then pulled the heavy doors open.

Greyfrog was waiting on the other side. 'Dispirited and distraught. So much unpleasantness, Cutter, in this fell place. Dismay. No appetite.' He edged past, scuttled warily towards the nearest corpse. 'Ah! They seethe! Worms, aswarm with worms. The flesh is foul, foul even for Greyfrog. Revulsed. Let us be away from this place!'

Cutter spied the well, in the corner between the outbuilding and the temple. He returned to where the others still waited outside the gate. 'Give me your waterskins. Heboric, can you check that outbuilding for feed?'

Heboric smiled. 'The livestock were never let out. It's been days. The heat killed them all. A dozen goats, two mules.'

'Just see if there's any feed.'

The Destriant headed towards the outbuilding.

Scillara dismounted, lifted clear the waterskins from Felisin Younger's saddle and, with her own thrown over a shoulder, approached Cutter. 'Here.'

He studied her. 'I wonder if this is a warning.'

Her brows lifted fractionally, 'Are we that important, Cutter?'

'Well, I don't mean us, specifically. I meant, maybe we should take it as a warning.'

'Dead priests?'

'Nothing good comes of worship.'

She gave him an odd smile, then held out the skins.

Cutter cursed himself. He rarely made sense when trying to talk with this woman. Said things a fool would say. It was the mocking look in her eyes, the expression ever anticipating a smile as soon as he opened his mouth to speak. Saying nothing more, he collected the waterskins and walked back into the compound.
Scillara watched him for a moment, then turned as Felisin slipped down from her horse. 'We need the water.'

The younger woman nodded. 'I know.' She reached up and tugged at her hair, which had grown long. 'I keep seeing those bandits. And now, more dead people. And those cemeteries the track went right through yesterday, that field of bones. I feel we've stumbled into a nightmare, and every day we go further in. It's hot, but I'm cold all the time and getting colder.'

'That's dehydration,' Scillara said, repacking her pipe.

'That thing's not left your mouth in days,' Felisin said.

'Keeps the thirst at bay.'

'Really?'

'No, but that is what I keep telling myself.'

Felisin looked away. 'We do that a lot, don't we?'

'What?'

She shrugged. 'Tell ourselves things. In the hope that it'll make them true.'

Scillara drew hard on the pipe, blew a lungful of smoke upward, watching as the wind took it away.

'You look so healthy,' Felisin said, eyes on her once more. 'Whilst the rest of us wither away.'

'Not Greyfrog.'

'No, not Greyfrog.'

'Does he talk with you much?'

Felisin shook her head. 'Not much. Except when I wake up at night, after my bad dreams. Then he sings to me.'

'Sings?'

'Yes, in his people's language. Songs for children. He says he needs to practise them.'

Scillara shot her a glance. 'Really? Did he say why?'

'No.'

'How old were you, Felisin, when your mother sold you off?'

Another shrug. 'I don't remember.'

That might have been a lie, but Scillara did not pursue it.

Felisin stepped closer. 'Will you take care of me, Scillara?'

'What?'

'I feel as if I am going backwards. I felt ... older. Back in Raraku. Now, with every day, I feel more and more like a child. Smaller, ever smaller.'

Uneasy, Scillara said, 'I have never been much good at taking care of people.'

'I don't think Sha'ik was, either. She had ... obsessions ...'

'She did fine by you.'
'No, it was mostly Leoman. Even Toblakai. And Heboric, before Treach claimed him. She didn't take care of me, and that's why Bidithal ...'

'Bidithal is dead. He got his own balls shoved down his scrawny throat.'

'Yes,' a whisper. 'If what Heboric says really happened. Toblakai ...'

Scillara snorted. 'Think on that, Felisin. If Heboric had said that L'oric had done it, or Sha'ik, or even Leoman, well, you might have some reason to doubt. But Toblakai? No, you can believe it. Gods below, how can you not?'

The question forced a faint smile from Felisin and she nodded. 'You are right. Only Toblakai would have done that. Only Toblakai would have killed him ... in that way. Tell me, Scillara, do you have a spare pipe?'

'A spare pipe? How about a dozen? Want to smoke them all at once?'

Felisin laughed. 'No, just one. So, you'll take care of me, won't you?'

'I will try.' And maybe she would. Like Greyfrog. Practice. She went looking for that pipe.

Cutter lifted the bucket clear and peered at the water. It looked clean, smelling of nothing in particular. Nonetheless, he hesitated.

Footsteps behind him. 'I found feed,' Heboric said. 'More than we can carry.'

'Think this water is all right? What killed those priests?'

'It's fine. I told you what killed them.'

_You did? _'Should we look in the temple?'

'Greyfrog's already in there. I told him to find money, gems, food that hasn't spoiled yet. He wasn't happy about it, so I expect he'll be quick.'

'All right.' Cutter walked to a trough and dumped the water into it, then returned to the well. 'Think we can coax the horses in here?'

'I'll try.' But Heboric made no move to do so.

Cutter glanced over at him, saw the old man's strange eyes fixed on him. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing, I think. I was noticing something. You have certain qualities, Cutter. Leadership, for one.'

The Daru scowled. 'If you want to be in charge, fine, go ahead.'

'I wasn't twisting a knife, lad. I meant what I said. You have taken command, and that's good. It's what we need. I have never been a leader. I've always followed. It's my curse. But that's not what they want to hear. Not from me. No, they want me to lead them out. Into freedom. I keep telling them, I know nothing of freedom.'

'Them? Who? Scillara and Felisin?'

'I'll get the horses,' Heboric said, turning about and walking off in his odd, toad-like gait.

Cutter refilled the bucket and poured the water into the trough. They would feed the horses here with what they couldn't take with them. Load up on water. _And, even now, loot the temple._ Well, he had been a thief once, long ago. Besides, the dead cared nothing for wealth, did they?

A splitting, tearing sound from the centre of the compound behind him. The sound of a portal opening. Cutter spun round, knives in his hands.

A rider emerged from the magical gate at full gallop. Reining in hard, hoofs skidding in clouds of dust, the
dark grey horse a monstrous apparition, the hide worn away in places, exposing tendons, dried muscle and ligaments. Its eyes were empty pits, its mane long and greasy, whipping as the beast tossed its head. Seated in a high-backed saddle, the rider was, if anything, even more alarming in appearance. Black, ornate armour, patched with verdigris, a dented, gouged helm, open-faced to reveal mostly bone, a few strips of flesh hanging from the cheek ridges, tendons binding the lower jaw, and a row of blackened, filed teeth.

In the brief moment as the horse reared, dust exploding outward, Cutter saw more weapons on the rider than he could count. Swords at his back, throwing axes, sheathed handles jutting upward from the saddle, something like a boar-spitter, the bronze point as long as a short sword, gripped in the gauntleted left hand. A long bow, a short bow, knives—

'Where is he!?' The voice was a savage, enraged roar.

Pieces of armour bounced on the ground as the figure twisted round, searching the compound. 'Damn you, Hood! I was on the trail!' He saw Cutter and was suddenly silent, motionless. 'She left one alive? I doubt it. You're no whelp of D'rek. Drink deep that water, mortal, it matters not. You're dead anyway. You and every damned blood-swishing living thing in this realm and every other!'

He pulled his horse around to face the temple, where Greyfrog had appeared, arms heaped with silks, boxes, foodstuffs and cooking utensils. 'A toad who likes to cook in comfort! The madness of the Grand Ending is upon us! Come any closer, demon, and I'll spit your legs and roast them over a fire – do you think I no longer eat? You are right, but I will roast you in vicious spite, drooling with irony – ah! You liked that, didn't you?' He faced Cutter once more. 'Is this what he wanted me to see? He pulled me from the trail ... for this?'

Cutter sheathed his knives. Through the gates beyond came Heboric Ghost Hands, leading the horses. The old man paused upon seeing the rider, head cocking, then he continued on. 'Too late, Soldier,' he said. 'Or too early!' He laughed.

The rider lifted the spear high. 'Treach made a mistake, I see, but I must salute you nonetheless.'

Heboric halted. 'A mistake, Soldier? Yes, I agree, but there is little I can do about it. I acknowledge your reluctant salute. What brings you here?'

'Ask Hood if you want the answer to that!' He upended the spear and drove it point first into the ground, then swung down from the saddle, more fragments of the rotting armour falling away. 'I expect I must look around, as if I cannot already see all there is to see. The pantheon is riven asunder, what of it?'

Heboric pulled the nervous horses towards the trough, giving the warrior a wide berth. As he approached Cutter he shrugged. 'The Soldier of Hood, High House Death. He'll not trouble us, I think.'

'He spoke to me in Daru,' Cutter said. 'At first. And Malazan with you.'

'Yes.'

The Soldier was tall, and Cutter now saw something hanging from a knife-studded belt. An enamel mask, cracked, smudged, with a single streak of red paint along one cheek. The Daru's eyes widened. 'Beru fend,' he whispered. 'A Seguleh!'

At that the Soldier turned, then walked closer. 'Daru, you are far from home! Tell me, do the Tyrant's children still rule Darujhistan?'

Cutter shook his head.

'You look crazed, mortal, what ails you?'

'I – I'd heard, I mean – Seguleh usually say nothing – to anyone. Yet you ...'

'The fever zeal still grips my mortal kin, does it? Idiots! The Tyrant's army still holds sway in the city, then?'

'Who? What? Darujhistan is ruled by a council. We have no army—'
'Brilliant insanity! No Seguleh in the city?'

'No! Just ... stories. Legends, I mean.'

'So where are my masked stick-pivoting compatriots hiding?'

'An island, it's said, far to the south, off the coast, beyond Morn—'

'Morn! Now the sense of it comes to me. They are being held in readiness. Darujhistan's council – mages one and all, yes? Undying, secretive, paranoid mages! Crouching low, lest the Tyrant returns, as one day he must! Returns, looking for his army! Hah, a council!'

'That's not the council, sir,' Cutter said. 'If you are speaking of mages, that would be the T'orrud Cabal—'

'T'orrud! Yes, clever. Outrageous! Barukanal, Derudanith, Travalegrah, Mammoltenan? These names strike your soul, yes? I see it.'

'Mammot was my uncle—'

'Uncle! Hah! Absurd!' He spun round. 'I have seen enough! Hood! I am leaving! She's made her position clear as ice, hasn't she? Hood, you damned fool, you didn't need me for this! Now I must seek out his trail all over again, damn your hoary bones! He swung back onto the undead horse.

Heboric called out from where he stood by the trough, 'Soldier! May I ask – who do you hunt?'

The sharpened teeth lifted and lowered in a silent laugh. 'Hunt? Oh yes, we all hunt, but I was closest! Piss on Hood's bony feet! Pluck out the hairs of his nose and kick his teeth in! Drive a spear up his puckered behind and set him on a windy mountain top! Oh, I'll find him a wife some day, lay coin on it! But first, I hunt!'

He collected the reins, pulled the horse round. The portal opened. 'Skinner! Hear me, you damned Avowed! Cheater of death! I am coming for you! Now!' Horse and rider plunged into the rent, vanished, and a moment later the gate disappeared as well.

The sudden silence rang like a dirge in Cutter's head. He took a ragged breath, then shook himself. 'Beru fend,' he whispered again. 'He was my uncle ...'

'I will feed the horses, lad,' Heboric said. 'Go out to the women. They've likely been hearing shouting and don't know what's going on. Go on, Cutter.'

Nodding, the Daru began walking. Barukanal. Mammoltenan ... What had the Soldier revealed? What ghastly secret hid in the apparition's words? What do Baruk and the others have to do with the Tyrant? And the Seguleh? The Tyrant is returning? Gods, I've got to get home.'

Outside the gates, Felisin and Scillara were seated on the track. Both puffing rustleaf, and although Felisin looked sickly, there was a determined, defiant look in her eyes.

'Relax,' Scillara said. 'She's not inhaling.'

'I'm not?' Felisin asked her. 'How do you do that?'

'Don't you have any questions?' Cutter demanded.

They looked at him. 'About what?' Scillara asked.

'Didn't you hear?'

'Hear what?'

They didn't hear. They weren't meant to. But we were. Why? Had the Soldier been mistaken in his assumptions? Sent by Hood, not to see the dead priests and priestesses of D'rek ... but to speak with us.

The Tyrant shall return. This, to a son of Darujhistan. 'Gods,' he whispered again, 'I've got to get home.'
Greyfrog’s voice shouted in his skull, ‘Friend Cutter! Surprise and alarm!’

‘What now?’ he asked, turning to see the demon bounding into view.

‘The Soldier of Death. Wondrous. He left his spear!’

Cutter stared, with sinking heart, at the weapon clutched between the demon’s teeth. ‘Good thing you don’t need your mouth to talk.’

‘Solemn agreement, friend Cutter! Query. Do you like these silks?’

The portal into the sky keep required a short climb. Mappo and Icarium stood on the threshold, staring into a cavernous chamber. The floor was almost level. A faint light seemed to emanate from the walls of stone. ‘We can camp here,’ the Trell said.

‘Yes,’ Icarium agreed. ‘But first, shall we explore?’

‘Of course.’

The chamber housed three additional mechanisms, identical to the one submerged in the lake, each positioned on trestles like ships in dry-dock. The hatches yawned open, revealing the padded seats within. Icarium walked to the nearest one and began examining its interior.

Mappo untied the pouch at his belt and began removing the larger one within. A short time later he laid out the bedrolls, food and wine. Then he drew out from his pack an iron-banded mace, not his favourite one, but another, expendable since it possessed no sorcerous virtues.

Icarium returned to his side. ‘They are lifeless,’ he said. ‘Whatever energy was originally imbued within the machinery has ebbed away, and I see no means of restoring it.’

‘That is not too surprising, is it? I suspect this keep has been here a long time.’

‘True enough, Mappo. But imagine, were we able to enliven one of these mechanisms! We could travel at great speed and in comfort! One for you and one for me, ah, this is tragic. But look, there is a passageway. Let us delve into the greater mystery this keep offers.’

Carrying only his mace, Mappo followed Icarium into the broad corridor.

Storage rooms lined the passage, whatever they had once held now nothing more than heaps of undisturbed dust.

Sixty paces in, they reached an intersection. An arched barrier was before them, shimmering like a vertical pool of quicksilver. Corridors went to the right and left, both appearing to curve inward in the distance.

Icarium drew out a coin from the pouch at his belt, and Mappo was amused to see that it was of a vintage five centuries old.

‘You are the world’s greatest miser, Icarium.’

The Jhag smiled, then shrugged. ‘I seem to recall that no-one ever accepts payment from us, no matter how egregious the expense of the service provided. Is that an accurate memory, Mappo?’

‘It is.’

‘Well, then, how can you accuse me of being niggardly?’ He tossed the coin at the silver barrier. It vanished. Ripples rolled outward, went beyond the stone frame, then returned.

‘This is a passive manifestation,’ Icarium said. ‘Tell me, did you hear the coin strike anything beyond?’

‘No, nor did it make a sound upon entering the ... uh, the door.’
'I am tempted to pass through.'

'That might prove unhealthy.'

Icarium hesitated, then drew a skinning-knife and inserted the blade into the barrier. Gentler ripples. He pulled it out. The blade looked intact. None of the substance had adhered to it. Icarium ran a fingertip along the iron. 'No change in temperature,' he observed.

'Shall I try a finger I won't miss much?' Mappo asked, holding up his left hand.

'And which one would that be, friend?'

'I don't know. I expect I'd miss any of them.'

'The tip?'

'Sound caution.' Making a fist, barring the last, smallest finger, Mappo stepped close, then dipped the finger up to the first knuckle into the shimmering door. 'No pain, at least. It is, I think, very thin.' He drew his hand back and examined the digit. 'Hale.'

'With the condition of your fingers, Mappo, how can you tell?'

'Ah, I see a change. No dirt left, not even crusted under the nail.'

'To pass through is to be cleansed. Do you think?'

Mappo reached in with his whole hand. 'I feel air beyond. Cooler, damper.' He withdrew his hand and peered at it. 'Clean. Too clean. I am alarmed.'

'Why?'

'Because it makes me realize how filthy I've become, that's why.'

'I wonder, will it do the same with our clothes?'

'That would be nice, although it may possess some sort of threshold. Too filthy, and it simply annihilates the offending material. We might emerge on the other side naked.'

'Now I am alarmed, friend.'

'Yes. Well, what shall we do, Icarium?'

'Do we have any choice?' With that, the Jhag strode through the barrier.

Mappo sighed, then followed.

Only to be clutched at the shoulder and pulled back from a second step – which, he saw, would have been into empty air.

The cavern before them was vast. A bridge had once connected the ledge they stood on to an enormous, towering fortress floating in space, a hundred or more paces opposite them. Sections of that stone span remained, seemingly unsupported, but others had broken away and now floated, motionless, in the air.

Far below, dizzyingly far, the cavern was swallowed in darkness. Above them, a faintly glittering dome of black rough-hewn stone, like a night sky. Tiered buildings rose along the inner walls, rows of dark windows but no balconies. Dust and rubble clouded the air, none of it moving. Mappo said nothing, he was too stunned by the vista before them.

Icarium touched his shoulder, then pointed to something small hovering directly before them. The coin, but not motionless as it had first seemed. It was drifting away, slowly. The Jhag reached out and retrieved it, returning it to the pouch at his waist. 'A worthy return on my investment,' he murmured. 'Since there is momentum, we should be able to travel. Launch ourselves from this ledge. Over to the fortress.'
'Sound plan,' Mappo said, 'but for all the obstacles in between.'

'Ah, good point.'

'There may be an intact bridge, on the opposite side. We could take one of the side passages behind us. If such a bridge exists, likely it will be marked with a silver barrier as this one was.'

'Have you never wished you could fly, Mappo?'

'As a child, perhaps, I am sure I did.'

'Only as a child?'

'It is where dreams of flight belong, Icarium. Shall we explore one of the corridors behind us?'

'Very well, although I admit I hope we fail in finding a bridge.'

Countless rooms, passages and alcoves along the wide, arched corridor, the floors thick with dust, odd, faded symbols etched above doorways, possibly a numerical system of some sort. The air was stagnant, faintly acrid. No furnishings remained in the adjoining chambers. Nor, Mappo realized, any corpses such as the one Icarium had discovered in the mechanism resting on the lake-bed. An orderly evacuation? If so, where had the Short-Tails gone?

Eventually, they came upon another silver door. Cautiously passing through it, they found themselves standing on the threshold of a narrow bridge. Intact, leading across to the floating fortress, which hovered much closer on this, the opposite side from whence they had first seen it. The back wall of the island keep was much rougher, the windows vertical slashes positioned seemingly haphazardly on the misshapen projections, crooked insets and twisted towers.

'Extraordinary,' Icarium said in a low voice. 'What, I wonder, does this hidden face of madness reveal of the makers? These K'Chain Che'Malle?'

'A certain tension, perhaps?'

'Tension?'

'Between,' Mappo said, 'order and chaos. An inner dichotomy, conflicting impulses ...'

'The contradictions evident in all intelligent life,' Icarium said, nodding. He stepped onto the span, then, arms wheeling, began drifting away.

Mappo reached out and just managed to grasp the Jhag's flailing foot. He pulled Icarium back down onto the threshold. 'Well,' he said, grunting, 'that was interesting. You weighed nothing, when I had you in my grip. As light as a mote of dust.'

Slowly, tentatively, the Jhag clambered upright once more. 'That was most alarming. It seems we may have to fly after all.'

'Then why build bridges?'

'I have no idea. Unless,' he added, 'whatever mechanism invokes this weightlessness is breaking down, losing its precision.'

'So the bridges should have been exempted? Possibly. In any case, see the railings, projecting not up but out to either side? Modest, but sufficient for handholds, were one to crawl.'

'Yes. Shall we?'

The sensation, Mappo decided as he reached the midway point, Icarium edging along ahead of him, was not a pleasant one. Nausea, vertigo, a strange urge to pull one's grip loose due to the momentum provided by one's
own muscles. All sense of up and down had vanished, and at times Mappo was convinced they were climbing a
ladder, rather than snaking more or less horizontally across the span of the bridge.

A narrow but tall entranceway gaped ahead, where the bridge made contact with the fortress. Fragments of
the door it had once held floated motionless before it. Whatever had shattered it had come from within.

Icarium reached the threshold and climbed to his feet. Moments later Mappo joined him. They peered into
the darkness.

'I smell ... vast ... death.'

Mappo nodded. He drew out his mace, looked down at the spiked ball of iron, then slipped the handle back
through the leather loop at his belt.

Icarium in the lead, they entered the fortress.

The corridor was as narrow as the doorway itself, the walls uneven, black basalt, wet with condensation, the
floor precarious with random knobs and projections, and depressions slick with ice that cracked and shifted
underfoot. It ran more or less straight for forty paces. By the time they reached the opening at the end their eyes
had adjusted to the gloom.

Another enormous chamber, as if the heart of the keep had been carved out. A massive cruciform of bound,
black wood filled the cavern, and on it was impaled a dragon. Long dead, once frozen but now rotting. An iron
spike as thick around as Mappo's torso had been driven into the dragon's throat, just above the breast bones.
Aquamarine blood had seeped down from the wound and still dripped heavy and turgid onto the stone floor in
slow, steady, fistsized drops.

'I know this dragon,' Icarium whispered.

How? No, ask not.

'I know this dragon,' Icarium said again. 'Sorrit. Its aspect was ... Serc. The warren of the sky.' He lifted both
hands to his face. 'Dead. Sorrit has been slain ...'

'A most delicious throne. No, not delicious. Most bitter, foul, ill-tasting, what was I thinking?'

'You don't think, Curdle. You never think. I can't remember any throne. What throne? There must be some
mistake. Not-Apsalar heard wrong, that much is obvious. Completely wrong, an absolute error. Besides,
someone's sitting in it.'

'Deliciously.'

'I told you, there was no throne—'

The conversation had been going on for half the night, as they travelled the strange paths of Shadow,
winding across a ghostly landscape that constantly shifted between two worlds, although both were equally
ravaged and desolate. Apsalar wondered at the sheer extent of this fragment of the Shadow Realm. If her
recollection of Cotillion's memories was accurate, the realm wandered untethered to the world Apsalar called
her own, and neither the Rope nor Shadowthrone possessed any control over its seemingly random
peregrinations. Even stranger, it was clear that roads of a sort stretched out from the fragment, twisting and
wending vast distances, like roots, or tentacles, and sometimes their motions proved independent of the larger
fragment.

As with the one they now traversed. More or less following the eastern road leading out from Ehrlitan,
skirting the thin ribbon of cedars on their left, beyond which was the sea. And as the traders' track began to
curve northward to meet the coastline, the Shadow Road joined with it, narrowing until it was barely the width
of the track itself.

Ignoring the ceaseless nattering from the two ghosts flitting behind her, Apsalar pushed on, fighting the lack
of sleep and eager to cover as much ground as possible before the sun's rise. Her control of the Shadow Road was growing more tenuous – it vanished with every slip of her concentration. Finally, she halted.

The warren crumbled around them. The sky to the east was lightening. They stood on the traders' track at the base of a winding climb to the coastal ridge, rhizan darting through the air around them.

'The sun returns! Not again! Telorast, we need to hide! Somewhere!'

'No we don't, you idiot. We just get harder to see, that's all, unless you're not mindful. Of course, Curdle, you are incapable of being mindful, so I look forward to your wailing dissolution. Peace, at last. For a while, at least —'

'You are evil, Telorast! I've always known it, even before you went and used that knife on—'

'Be quiet! I never used that knife on anyone.'

'And you're a liar!'

'Say that again and I'll stick you!'

'You can't! I'm dissolving!'

Apsalar ran a hand across her brow. It came glistening with sweat. 'That thread of Shadow felt ... wrong,' she said.

'Oh yes,' Telorast replied, slipping round to crouch before her in a miasma of swirling grey. 'It's sickly. All the outer reaches are. Poisoned, rotting with chaos. We blame Shadowthrone.'

'Shadowthrone? Why?'

'Why not? We hate him.'

'And that is sufficient reason?'

'The sufficientest reason of all.'

Apsalar studied the climbing track. 'I think we're close.'

'Good. Excellent. I'm frightened. Let's stop here. Let's go back, now.'

Stepping through the ghost, Apsalar began the ascent.

'That was a vicious thing to do,' Telorast hissed behind her. 'If I possessed you I wouldn't do that to me. Not even to Curdle, I wouldn't. Well, maybe, if I was mad. You're not mad at me, are you? Please don't be mad at me. I'll do anything you ask, until you're dead. Then I'll dance on your stinking, bloated corpse, because that's what you would want me to do, isn't it? I would if I was you and you were dead and I lingered long enough to dance on you, which I would do.'

Reaching the crest, Apsalar saw that the track continued along the ridge another two hundred paces before twisting back down onto the lee side. Cool morning wind plucked the sweat from her face, sighing in from the vast, dark cape that was the sea on her left. She looked down to see a narrow strand of beach fifteen or so man-heights below, cluttered with driftwood. Along the track to her right, near the far end, a stand of stunted trees rose from a niche in the cliff-side, and in their midst stood a stone tower. White plaster covered its surface for most of its height, barring the uppermost third, where the rough-cut stones were still exposed.

She walked towards it as the first spears of sunlight shot over the horizon.

Heaps of slate filled the modest enclosure surrounding the tower. No-one was visible, and Apsalar could hear nothing from within as she strode across to halt in front of the door.

Telorast's faint whisper came to her: 'This isn't good. A stranger lives here. Must be a stranger, since we've
never met. And if not a stranger then somebody I know, which would be even worse—'

'Be quiet,' Apsalar said, reaching up to pound on the door – then stopped, and stepping back, stared up at the enormous reptilian skull set in the wall above the doorway. 'Hood's breath!' She hesitated, Telorast voicing minute squeals and gasps behind her, then thumped on the weathered wood with a gloved fist.

The sounds of something falling over, then of boots crunching on grit and gravel. A bolt was tugged aside, and the door swung open in a cloud of dust.

The man standing within filled the doorway. Napan, massive muscles, blunt face, small eyes. His scalp shaved and white with dust, through which a few streaks of sweat ran down to glisten in his thick, wiry eyebrows.

Apsalar smiled. 'Hello, Urko.'

The man grunted, then said, 'Urko drowned. They all drowned.'

'It's that lack of imagination that gave you away,' she replied.

'Who are you?'

'Apsalar—'

'No you're not. Apsalar was an Imass—'

'Not the Mistress of Thieves. It is simply the name I chose—'

'Damned arrogant of you, too.'

'Perhaps. In any case, I bring greetings from Dancer.'

The door slammed in her face.

Coughing in the dust gusting over her, Apsalar stepped back and wiped grit from her eyes.

'Hee hee,' said Telorast behind her. 'Can we go now?'

She pounded on the door again.

After a long moment, it opened once more. He was scowling. 'I once tried to drown him, you know.'

'No, yes, I recall. You were drunk.'

'You couldn't have recalled anything – you weren't there. Besides, I wasn't drunk.'

'Oh. Then ... why?'

'Because he irritated me, that's why. Just like you're doing right now.'

'I need to talk to you.'

'What for?'

She suddenly had no answer to give him.

His eyes narrowed. 'He really thought I was drunk? What an idiot.'

'Well, I suppose the alternative was too depressing.'

'I never knew he was such a sensitive soul. Are you his daughter? Something ... in the way you stand ...'

'May I come in?'
He moved away from the door. Apsalar entered, then halted once more, her eyes on the enormous headless skeleton commanding the interior, reaching all the way up to the tower's ceiling. Bipedal, long-tailed, the bones a burnished brown colour. 'What is this?'

Urko said, 'Whatever it was, it could swallow a bhederin in one bite.'

'How?' Telorast asked Apsalar in a whisper. 'It has no head.'

The man heard the question, and he now scowled. 'You have company. What is it, a familiar or something? I can't see it, and that I don't like. Not at all.'

'A ghost.'

'You should banish it to Hood,' he said. 'Ghosts don't belong here, that's why they're ghosts.'

'He's an evil man!' Telorast hissed. 'What are those?'

Apsalar could just make out the shade as it drifted towards a long table to the right. On it were smaller versions of the skeletal behemoth, three of them crowsized, although instead of beaks the creatures possessed long snouts lined with needle-like teeth. The bones had been bound together with gut and the figures were mounted so that they stood upright, like sentry meer-rats.

Urko was studying Apsalar, an odd expression on his blunt, strong-featured face. Then he seemed to start, and said, 'I have brewed some tea.'

'That would be nice, thank you.'

He walked over to the modest kitchen area and began a search for cups. 'It's not that I don't want visitors ... well, it is. They always bring trouble. Did Dancer have anything else to say?'

'No. And he now calls himself Cotillion.'

'I knew that. I'm not surprised he's the Patron of Assassins. He was the most feared killer in the empire. More than Surly, who was just treacherous. Or Topper, who was just cruel. I suppose those two still think they won. Fools. Who now strides among the gods, eh?' He brought a clay cup over. 'Local herbs, mildly toxic but not fatal. Antidote to butcher snake bites, which is a good thing, since the bastards infest the area. Turns out I built my tower near a breeding pit.'

One of the small skeletons on the tabletop fell over, then jerkily climbed back upright, the tail jutting out, the torso angling almost horizontal.

'One of my ghost companions has just possessed that creature,' Apsalar said.

A second one lurched into awkward motion.

'Gods below,' whispered Urko. 'Look how they stand! Of course! It has to be that way. Of course!' He stared up at the massive fossil skeleton. 'It's all wrong! They lean forward – for balance!'

Telorast and Curdle were quickly mastering their new bodies, jaws snapping, hopping about on the tabletop.

'I suspect they won't want to relinquish those skeletons,' Apsalar said.

'They can have them – as reward for this revelation!' He paused, looked round, then muttered, 'I'll have to knock down a wall ...'

Apsalar sighed. 'I suppose we should be relieved one of them did not decide on the big version.'

Urko looked over at her with slightly wide eyes, then he grunted. 'Drink your tea – the toxicity gets worse as it cools.'

She sipped. And found her lips and tongue suddenly numb.
Urko smiled. 'Perfect. This way the conversation stays brief and you can be on your way all the sooner.'

'Mathard.'

'It wears off.' He found a stool and sat down facing her. 'You're Dancer's daughter. You must be, although I see no facial similarities – your mother must have been beautiful. It's in your walk, and how you stand there. You're his beget, and he was selfish enough to teach you, his own child, the ways of assassination. I can see how that troubles you. It's there in your eyes. The legacy haunts you – you're feeling trapped, caged in. There's already blood on your hands, isn't there? Is he proud of that?' He grimaced, then spat. 'I should've drowned him then and there. Had I been drunk, I would have.'

'You are wong.'

'Wong? Wrong, you mean? Am I?'

She nodded, fighting her fury at his trickery. She had come with the need to talk, and he had stolen from her the ability to shape words. 'Nnnoth th-aughther. Mmothethed.'

He frowned.

Apsalar pointed at the two reptilian skeletons now scuttling about on the stone-littered floor. 'Mmothethion.'

'Possession. He possessed you? The god possessed you? Hood pluck his balls and chew slow!' Urko heaved himself to his feet, hands clenching into fists. 'Here, hold on, lass. I have an antidote to the antidote.' He found a dusty beaker, rubbed at it until a patch of the glazed reddish earthenware was visible. 'This one, aye.' He found another cup and poured it full. 'Drink.'

Sickly sweet, the taste then turning bitter and stinging. 'Oh. That was ... fast.'

'My apologies, Apsalar. I'm a miserable sort most of the time, I admit it. And I've talked more since you arrived than I have in years. So I'll stop now. How can I help you?'

She hesitated, then looked away. 'You can't, really. I shouldn't have come. I still have tasks to complete.'

'For him?'

She nodded.

'Why?'

'Because I gave my word.'

'You owe him nothing, except maybe a knife in his back.'

'Once I am done ... I wish to disappear.'

He sat down once more. 'Ah. Yes, well.'

'I think an accidental drowning won't hold any longer, Urko.'

A faint grin. 'It was our joke, you see. We all made the pact ... to drown. Nobody got it. Nobody gets it. Probably never will.'

'I did. Dancer does. Even Shadowthrone, I think.'

'Not Surly. She never had a sense of humour. Always obsessing on the details. I wonder, are people like that ever happy? Are they even capable of it? What inspires their lives, anyway? Give 'em too much and they complain. Give 'em too little and they complain some more. Do it right and half of them complain it's too much and the other half too little.'

'No wonder you gave up consorting with people, Urko.'
'Aye, I prefer bones these days. People. Too many of them by far, if you ask me.'

She looked round. 'Dancer wanted you shaken up some. Why?'

The Napan's eyes shifted away, and he did not answer.

Apsalar felt a tremor of unease. 'He knows something, doesn't he? That's what he's telling you by that simple greeting.'

'Assassin or not, I always liked Dancer. Especially the way he could keep his mouth shut.'

The two reptilian skeletons were scrabbling at the door. Apsalar studied them for a moment. 'Disappearing ... from a god.'

'Aye, that won't be easy.'

'He said I could leave, once I'm done. And he won't come after me.'

'Believe him, Apsalar. Dancer doesn't lie, and I suspect even godhood won't change that.'

I think that is what I needed to hear. 'Thank you.' She headed towards the door.

'So soon?' Urko asked.

She glanced back at him. 'Too much or too little?'

He narrowed his gaze, then grunted a laugh. 'You're right. It's about perfect – I need to be mindful about what I'm asking for.'

'Yes,' she said. And that is also what Dancer wanted to remind you about, isn't it?

Urko looked away. 'Damn him, anyway.'

Smiling, Apsalar opened the door. Telorast and Curdle scurried outside. She followed a moment later.

Thick spit on the palms of the hands, a careful rubbing together, then a sweep back through the hair. The outlawed Gral straightened, kicked sand over the small cookfire, then collected his pack and slung it over his shoulders. He picked up his hunting bow and strung it, then fitted an arrow. A final glance around, and he began walking.

The trail was not hard to follow. Taralack Veed continued scanning the rough, broken scrubland. A hare, a desert grouse, a mamlak lizard, anything would do; he was tired of the sun-dried strips of bhederin and he'd eaten the last date two nights previously. No shortage of tubers, of course, but too much and he'd spend half the day squatting over a hastily dug hole.

The D'ivers demon was closing on its quarry, and it was vital that Taralack remain in near proximity, so that he could make certain of the outcome. He was being well paid for the task ahead and that was all that mattered. Gold, and with it, the clout to raise a company of mercenaries. Then back to his village, to deliver well-deserved justice upon those who had betrayed him. He would assume the mantle of warleader then, and lead the Gral to glory. His destiny lay before him, and all was well.

Dejim Nebralhl revealed no digressions, no detours in its path. The D'ivers was admirably singular, true to its geas. There would be no deviation, for it lusted for the freedom that was the reward for the task's completion. This was the proper manner in which to make bargains, and Taralack found himself admiring the Nameless Ones. No matter how dread-filled the tales he had heard of the secret cult, his own dealings with them had been clean, lucrative and straightforward.

It had survived the Malazan conquest, and that was saying something. The old Emperor had displayed uncanny skill at infiltrating the innumerable cults abounding in Seven Cities, then delivering unmitigated slaughter upon the adherents.
That, too, was worthy of admiration.

This distant Empress, however, was proving far less impressive. She made too many mistakes. Taralack could not respect such a creature, and he ritually cursed her name with every dawn and every dusk, with as much vehemence as he cursed the seventy-four other avowed enemies of Taralack Veed.

Sympathy was like water in the desert. Hoarded, reluctantly meted out in the barest of sips. And he, Taralack Veed, could walk a thousand deserts on a single drop.

Such were the world's demands. He knew himself well enough to recognize that his was a viper's charm, alluring and mesmerizing and ultimately deadly. A viper made guest in a nest-bundle of meer-rats, how could they curse him for his very nature? He had killed the husband, after all, in service to her heart, a heart that had swallowed him whole. He had never suspected that she would then cast him out, that she would have simply made use of him, that another man had been waiting in the hut's shadow to ease the tortured spirit of the grieving widow. He had not believed that she too possessed the charms of a viper.

He halted near a boulder, collected a waterskin from his pack and removed the broad fired-clay stopper. Tugging his loincloth down he squatted and peed into the waterskin. There were no rock-springs for fifteen or more leagues in the direction the D'ivers was leading him. That path would eventually converge on a traders' track, of course, but that was a week or more away. Clearly, the D'ivers Dejim Nebrahl did not suffer the depredations of thirst.

The rewards of singular will, he well knew. Worthy of emulation, as far as was physically possible. He straightened, tugged the loincloth back up. Replacing the stopper, Taralack Veed slung the skin over a shoulder and resumed his measured pursuit.

Beneath glittering stars and a pale smear in the east, Scillara knelt on the hard ground, vomiting the last of her supper and then nothing but bile as heave after heave racked through her. Finally the spasms subsided. Gasping, she crawled away a short distance, then sat with her back to a boulder.

The demon Greyfrog watched from ten paces away, slowly swaying from side to side.

Watching him invited a return of the nausea, so she looked away, pulled out her pipe and began repacking it. 'It's been days,' she muttered. 'I thought I was past this. Dammit ...'

Greyfrog ambled closer, approached the place where she had been sick. It sniffed, then pushed heaps of sand over the offending spot.

With a practised gesture, Scillara struck a quick series of sparks down into the pipe's bowl with the flint and iron striker. The shredded sweet-grass mixed in with the rustleaf caught, and moments later she was drawing smoke. 'That's good, Toad. Cover my trail ... it's a wonder you've not told the others. Respecting my privacy?'

Greyfrog, predictably, did not reply.

Scillara ran a hand along the swell of her belly. How could she be getting fatter and fatter when she'd been throwing back one meal in three for weeks? There was something diabolical about this whole pregnancy thing. As if she possessed her own demon, huddled there in her belly. Well, the sooner it was out the quicker she could sell it to some pimp or harem master. There to be fed and raised and to learn the trade of the supplicant.

Most women who bothered stopped at two or three, she knew, and now she understood why. Healers and witches and midwives and sucklers kept the babies healthy enough, and the world remained to teach them its ways. The misery lay in the bearing, in carrying this growing weight, in its secret demands on her reserves.

And something else was happening as well. Something that proved the child's innate evil. She'd been finding herself drifting into a dreamy, pleasant state, inviting a senseless smile that, quite simply, horrified Scillara. What was there to be happy about? The world was not pleasant. It did not whisper contentment. No, the poisonous seduction stealing through her sought delusion, blissful stupidity – and she had had enough of that already. As nefarious as durhang, this deadly lure.
Her bulging belly would soon be obvious, she knew. Unless she tried to make herself even fatter. There was something comforting about all that solid bulk – but no, that was the delusional seduction all over again, finding a new path into her brain.

Well, it seemed the nausea was fully past, now. Scillara regained her feet and made her way back to the encampment. A handful of coals in the hearth, drifting threads of smoke, and three recumbent figures wrapped in blankets. Greyfrog appeared in her wake, moving past her to squat near the hearth. It snapped a capemoth out of the air and stuffed it into its broad mouth. Its eyes were a murky green as it studied Scillara.

She refilled her pipe. Why was it just women that had babies, anyway? Surely some ascendant witch could have made some sorcerous adjustment to the inequity by now? Or was it maybe not a flaw at all, but an advantage of some sort? Not that any obvious advantages came to mind. Apart from this strange, suspicious bliss constantly stealing through her. She drew hard on the rustleaf. Bidithal had made the cutting away of pleasure the first ritual among girls in his cult. He had liked the notion of feeling nothing at all, removing the dangerous desire for sensuality. She could not recall if she had ever known such sensations.

Bidithal had inculcated religious rapture, a state of being, she now suspected, infinitely more selfish and self-serving than satisfying one's own body. Being pregnant whispered of a similar kind of rapture, and that made her uneasy.

A sudden commotion. She turned to see that Cutter had sat up.

'Something wrong?' she asked in a low voice.

He faced her, his expression indistinct in the darkness, then sighed shakily. 'No. A bad dream.'

'It's nearing dawn,' Scillara said.

'Why are you awake?'

'No particular reason.'

He shook off the blanket, rose and walked over to the hearth. Crouched, tossing a handful of tinder onto the glowing coals, waited until it flared to life, then began adding dung chips.

'Cutter, what do you think will happen on Otataral Island?'

'I'm not sure. That old Malazan's not exactly clear on the matter, is he?'

'He is Destriant to the Tiger of Summer.'

Cutter glanced across at her. 'Reluctantly.'

She added more rustleaf to her pipe. 'He doesn't want followers. And if he did, it wouldn't be us. Well, not me, nor Felisin. We're not warriors. You,' she added, 'would be a more likely candidate.'

He snorted. 'No, not me, Scillara. It seems I follow another god.'

'It seems?'

She could just make out his shrug. 'You fall into things,' he said.

A woman. Well, that explains a lot. 'As good a reason as any other,' she said behind a lungful of smoke.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, I don't see much reason behind following any god or goddess. If you're worth their interest, they use you. I know about being used, and most of the rewards are anything but, even if they look good at the time.'

'Well,' he said after a moment, 'someone's rewarded you.'

'Is that what you call it?'
'Call what? You're looking so ... healthy. Full of life, I mean. And you're not as skinny as before.' He paused, then hastily added, 'Which is good. Half-starved didn't suit you – doesn't suit anyone, of course. You, included. Anyway, that's all.'

She sat, smoking, watching him in the growing light. 'We are quite a burden to you, aren't we, Cutter?'

'No! Not at all! I'm to escort you, a task I happily accepted. And that hasn't changed.'

'Don't you think Greyfrog is sufficient to protect us?'

'No, I mean, yes, he probably is. Even so, he is a demon, and that complicates things – it's not as if he can just amble into a village or city, is it? Or negotiate supplies and passage or stuff like that.'

'Felisin can. So can I, in fact.'

'Well. You're saying you don't want me here?'

'I'm saying we don't need you. Which isn't the same as saying we don't want you, Cutter. Besides, you've done well leading this odd little company, although it's obvious you're not used to doing that.'

'Listen, if you want to take over, that's fine by me.'

Ah, a woman who wouldn't follow, then. 'I see no reason to change anything,' she said offhandedly.

He was staring at her as she in turn regarded him, her gaze as level and as unperturbed as she could manage. 'What is the point of all this?' he demanded.

'Point? No point. Just making conversation, Cutter. Unless ... is there something in particular you would like to talk about?'

She watched him pull back in every way but physically, as he said, 'No, nothing.'

'You don't know me well enough, then, is that it? Well, we'll have plenty of time.'

'I know you ... I think. I mean, oh, you're right, I don't know you at all. I don't know women, is what I really mean. And how could I? It's impossible, trying to follow your thoughts, trying to make sense out of what you say, what is hidden behind your words—'

'Would that be me, specifically, or women in general?'

He threw more dung on the fire. 'No,' he muttered, 'nothing in particular I'd like to talk about.'

'All right, but I have a few topics ...'

He groaned.

'You were given the task,' she said. 'To escort us, correct? Who gave you that task?'

'A god.'

'But not Heboric's god.'

'No.'

'So there's at least two gods interested in us. That's not good, Cutter. Does Ghost Hands know about this? No, he wouldn't, would he? No reason to tell him——'

'It's not hard to figure out,' Cutter retorted. 'I was waiting for you. In Iskaral Pust's temple.'

'Malazan gods. Shadowthrone or Cotillion. But you're not Malazan, are you?'

'Really, Scillara,' Cutter said wearily, 'do we have to discuss this right now?"
'Unless,' she went on, 'your lover was. Malazan, that is. The original follower of those gods.'

'Oh, my head hurts,' he mumbled, hands up over his eyes, the fingers reaching into his hair, then clenching as if to begin tearing it out. 'How – no, I don't want to know. It doesn't matter. I don't care.'

'So where is she now?'

'No more.'

Scillara subsided. She pulled out a narrow-bladed knife and began cleaning her pipe.

He suddenly rose. 'I'll start on breakfast.'

A sweet boy, she decided. Like damp clay in a woman's hands. A woman who knew what she was doing, that is. _Now the question is, should I be doing this?_ Felisin adored Cutter, after all. _Then again, we could always share._

'Smirking observation. Soft-curved, large-breasted woman wants to press flesh with Cutter.'

_Not now, Greyfrog,_ he replied without speaking aloud as he removed food from the pack.

'Alarm. No, not now indeed. The others are wakening from their uneasy dreams. Awkward and dismay to follow, especially with Felisin Younger.'

Cutter paused. _What? Why – but she's barely of age! No, this can't be. Talk her out of it, Greyfrog!"

'Greyfrog's own advances unwelcome. Despondent sulk. You, Cutter, of seed-issuing capacity, capable of effecting beget. Past revelation. Human women carry breeding pond in bellies. But one egg survives, only one. Terrible risk! You must fill pond as quickly as possible, before rival male appears to steal your destiny. Greyfrog will defend your claim. Brave self-sacrifice, such as Sentinel Circlers among own kind. Altruistic enlightenment of reciprocity and protracted slant reward once or even many times removed. Signifier of higher intelligence, acknowledgement of community interests. Greyfrog is already Sentinel Circler to soft-curved, large-breasted goddess-human.'

_Goddess? What do you mean, goddess?_"

'Lustful sigh, is worthy of worship. Value signifiers in male human clouding the pond's waters in Greyfrog's mind. Too long association. Happily. Sexual desires long withheld. Unhealthy.'

Cutter set a pot of water on the fire and tossed in a handful of herbs. _What did you say earlier about uneasy dreams, Greyfrog?_""

'Observation, skimming the mind ponds. Troubled. Approaching danger. There are warning signs.'

_What warning signs?_"

'Obvious. Uneasy dreams. Sufficient unto themselves.'

_Not always, Greyfrog. Sometimes it's things from me past that haunt us. That's all._

'Ah. Greyfrog will think on this. But first, pangs. Greyfrog is hungry.'

The grey haze of the heat and the dust made the distant walls barely visible. Leoman of the Flails rode at the head of the ragged column, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas at his side, as a company of riders approached from Y'Ghatan's gates.

'There,' Corabb said, 'front rider on the right of the standard-bearer, that is Falah'd Vedor. He looks ...

unhappy.'
'He'd best begin making peace with that sentiment,' Leoman said in a growl. He raised a gloved hand and the column behind him slowed to a halt.

They watched the company close.

'Commander, shall you and I meet them halfway?' Corabb asked.

'Of course not,' Leoman snapped.

Corabb said nothing more. His leader was in a dark mood. A third of his warriors were riding double. A muchloved old healer witch had died this very morning, and they'd pinned her corpse beneath a slab of stone lest some wandering spirit find her. Leoman himself had spat in the eight directions to hallow the ground, and spilled drops of his own blood from a slash he opened on his left hand onto the dusted stone, voicing the blessing in the name of the Apocalyptic. Then he had wept. In front of all his warriors, who had stood silent, awestruck by the grief and the love for his followers Leoman had revealed in that moment.

The Falah'd and his soldiers approached, then drew to a halt five paces in front of Leoman and Corabb.

Corabb studied Vedor's sallow, sunken face, murky eyes, and knew him for an addict of d'bayang poppy. His thickveined hands trembled on the saddle horn, and, when it became evident that Leoman would not be the first to speak, he scowled and said, 'I, Falah'd Vedor of Y'Ghatan, the First Holy City, do hereby welcome you, Leoman of the Flails, refugee of Sha'ik's Fall in Raraku, and your broken followers. We have prepared secure barracks for your warriors, and the tables wait, heaped with food and wine. You, Leoman, and your remaining officers shall be the Falah'd's guests in the palace, for as long as required for you to reprovision your army and recover from your flight. Inform us of your final destination and we shall send envoys in advance to proclaim your coming to each and every village, town and city on your route.'

Corabb found he was holding his breath. He watched as Leoman nudged his horse forward, until he was positioned side by side with the Falah'd.

'We have come to Y'Ghatan,' Leoman said, in a low voice, 'and it is in Y'Ghatan that we shall stay. To await the coming of the Malazans.'

Vedor's stained mouth worked for a moment without any sound issuing forth, then he managed a hacking laugh. 'Like a knife's edge, your sense of humour, Leoman of the Flails! It is as your legend proclaims!'

'My legend? Then this, too, will not surprise you.' The kethra knife was a blinding flash, sweeping to caress Vedor's throat. Blood spurted, and the Falah'd's head rolled back, thumped on the rump of the startled horse, then down to bounce and roll in the dust of the road. Leoman reached out to steady the headless corpse still seated in the saddle, and wiped the blade on the silken robes.

From the company of city soldiers, not a sound, not a single motion. The standard-bearer, a youth of perhaps fifteen years, stared open-mouthed at the headless body beside him.

'In the name of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic,' Leoman said, 'I now rule the First Holy City of Y'Ghatan. Who is the ranking officer here?'

A woman pushed her horse forward. 'I am. Captain Dunsparrow.'

Corabb squinted at her. Solid features, sun-darkened, light grey eyes. Twenty-five years of age, perhaps. The glint of a chain vest was just visible beneath her plain telaba. 'You,' Corabb said, 'are Malazan.'

The cool eyes fixed on him. 'What of it?'

'Captain,' Leoman said, 'your troop will precede us. Clear the way to the palace for me and my warriors. The secure barracks spoken of by the late Falah'd will be used to house those soldiers in the city garrison and from the palace who might be disinclined to follow my orders. Please ensure that they are indeed secured. Once you have done these things, report to me in the palace for further orders.'

'Sir,' the woman said, 'I am of insufficient rank to do as you ask—'
'No longer. You are now my Third, behind Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas.'

Her gaze briefly flicked back to Corabb, revealing nothing. 'As you command, Leoman of the Flails, Falah'd of Y'Ghatan.'

Dunsparrow twisted in her saddle and bellowed out to her troops, 'About face! Smartly now, you damned pig herders! We advance the arrival of the new Falah'd!'

Vedor's horse turned along with all the others, and began trotting, the headless body pitching about in its saddle.

Corabb watched as, twenty paces along, the dead Falah'd's mount came up alongside the captain. She noted it and with a single straight-armed shove sent the corpse toppling.

Leoman grunted. 'Yes. She is perfect.'

A Malazan. 'I have misgivings, Commander.'

'Of course you have. It's why I keep you at my side.' He glanced over. 'That, and the Lady's tug. Come now, ride with me into our new city.'

They kicked their horses into motion. Behind them followed the others.

'Our new city,' Corabb said, grinning. 'We shall defend it with our lives.'

Leoman shot him an odd look, but said nothing.

Corabb thought about that. Commander, I have more misgivings ...
CHAPTER FIVE

The first cracks appeared shortly after the execution of Sha'ik. None could know the mind of Adjunct Tavore. Not her closest officers, and not the common soldier under her command. But there were distant stirrings, to be sure, more easily noted in retrospect, and it would be presumptuous and indeed dismissive to claim that the Adjunct was ignorant of the growing troubles, not only in her command, but at the very heart of the Malazan Empire. Given that, the events at Y'Ghatan could have been a fatal wound. Were someone else in command, were that someone's heart any less hard, any less cold.

This, more than at any other time beforehand, gave brutal truth to the conviction that Adjunct Tavore was cold iron, thrust into the soul of a raging forge ...

'None to Witness'
*(The Lost History of the Bonehunters)*
Duiker of Darujhistan

'Put that down,' Samar Dev said wearily from where she sat near the window.

'Thought you were asleep,' Karsa Orlong said. He returned the object to the tabletop. 'What is it?'

'Two functions. The upper beaker contains filters for the water, removing all impurities. The water gathering in the lower beaker is flanked by strips of copper, which livens the water itself through a complicated and mysterious process. A particular ethereal gas is released, thus altering the air pressure above the water, which in turn—'

'But what do you use it for?'

Samar's eyes narrowed. 'Nothing in particular.'

He moved away from the table, approached the work benches and shelves. She watched him examining the various mechanisms she had invented, and the long-term experiments, many of which showed no evident alteration of conditions. He poked. Sniffed, and even sought to taste one dish filled with gelatinous fluid. She thought to stop him, then decided to remain quiet. The warrior's wounds had healed with appalling swiftness, with no signs of infection. The thick liquid he was licking from his finger wasn't particularly healthy to ingest, but not fatal. Usually.

He made a face. 'This is terrible.'

'I am not surprised.'

'What do you use it for?'

'What do you think?'

'Rub it into saddles. Leather.'

'Saddles? Indirectly, I suppose. It is an ointment, for the suppurating wounds that sometimes arise on the lining of the anus—'

He grunted loudly, then said, 'No wonder it tasted awful,' and resumed his examination of the room's contents.

She regarded him thoughtfully. Then said, 'The Falah'd sent soldiers into the keep. They found signs of past slaughter – as you said, not one Malazan left alive. They also found a demon. Or, rather, the corpse of a demon, freshly killed. They have asked me to examine it, for I possess a little knowledge of anatomy and other, related subjects.'
He made no reply, peering into the wrong end of a spyglass.

'If you come to the window, and look through the other end, Karsa, you will see things far away drawn closer.'

He scowled at her, and set the instrument down. 'If something is far away, I simply ride closer.'

'And if it is at the top of a cliff? Or a distant enemy encampment and you want to determine the picket lines?'

He retrieved the spyglass and walked over. She moved her chair to one side to give him room. 'There is a falcon's nest on the ledge of that tower, the copper-sheathed one.'

He held up the glass. Searched until he found the nest. 'That is no falcon.'

'You are right. It's a bokh'aral that found the abandoned nest to its liking. It carries up armfuls of rotting fruit and it spends the morning dropping them on people in the streets below.'

'It appears to be snarling ...'

'That would be laughter. It is forever driven to bouts of hilarity.'

'Ah – no, that wasn't fruit. It was a brick.'

'Oh, unfortunate. Someone will be sent to kill it, now. After all, only people are allowed to throw bricks at people.'

He lowered the spyglass and studied her. 'That is madness. What manner of laws do you possess, to permit such a thing?'

'Which thing? Stoning people or killing bokh'arala?'

'You are strange, Samar Dev. But then, you are a witch, and a maker of useless objects—'

'Is that spyglass useless?'

'No, I now understand its value. Yet it was lying on a shelf...'

She leaned back. 'I have invented countless things that would prove of great value to many people. And that presents me with a dilemma. I must ask myself, with each invention, what possible abuses await such an object? More often than not, I conclude that those abuses outweigh the value of the invention. I call this Dev's First Law of Invention.'

'You are obsessed with laws.'

'Perhaps. In any case, the law is simple, as all true laws must be—'

'You have a law for that, too?'

'Founding principle, rather than law. In any case, ethics are the first consideration of an inventor following a particular invention.'

'You call that simple?'

'The statement is, the consideration is not.'

'Now that sounds more like a true law.'

She closed her mouth after a moment, then rose and walked over to the scribe's desk, sat and collected a stylus and a wax tablet. 'I distrust philosophy,' she said as she wrote. 'Even so, I will not turn away from the subject ... when it slaps me in the face. Nor am I particularly eloquent as a writer. I am better suited to manipulating objects than words. You, on the other hand, seem to possess an unexpected talent for ... uh ... cogent brevity.'
'You talk too much.'

'No doubt.' She finished recording her own unexpectedly profound words – profound only in that Karsa Orlong had recognized a far vaster application than she had intended. She paused, wanting to dismiss his genius as blind chance, or even the preening false wisdom of savage nobility. But something whispered to her that Karsa Orlong had been underestimated before, and she vowed not to leap into the same pit. Setting the stylus down, she rose to her feet. 'I am off to examine the demon you killed. Will you accompany me?'

'No, I had a close enough examination the first time.'

She collected the leather satchel containing her surgical instruments. 'Stay inside, please, and try not to break anything.'

'How can you call yourself an inventor if you dislike breaking things?'

At the door, she paused and glanced back at him. His head was brushing the ceiling in this, the highest chamber in her tower. There was something ... there in his eyes. 'Try not to break any of my things.'

'Very well. But I am hungry. Bring more food.'

The reptilian corpse was lying on the floor of one of the torture chambers situated in the palace crypts. A retired Avower had been given the task of standing guard. Samar Dev found him asleep in one corner of the room. Leaving him to his snores, she stationed around the huge demon’s body the four lit lanterns she had brought down from above, then settled onto her knees and untied the flap of her satchel, withdrawing a variety of polished surgical instruments. And, finally, her preparations complete, she swung her attention to the corpse.

Teeth, jaws, forward-facing eyes, all the makings of a superior carnivore, likely an ambush hunter. Yet, this was no simple river lizard. Behind the orbital ridges the skull swept out broad and long, with massive occipital bulges, the sheer mass of the cranial region implying intelligence. Unless, of course, the bone was absurdly thick.

She cut away the torn and bruised skin to reveal broken fragments of that skull. Not so thick, then. Indentations made it obvious that Karsa Orlong had used his fists. In which, it was clear, there was astonishing strength, and an equally astonishing will. The brain beneath, marred with broken vessels and blood leakage and pulped in places by the skull pieces, was indeed large, although arranged in a markedly different manner from a human’s. There were more lobes, for one thing. Six more, in all, positioned beneath heavy ridged projections out to the sides, including two extra vessel-packed masses connected by tissue to the eyes. Suggesting these demons saw a different world, a more complete one, perhaps.

Samar extracted one mangled eye and was surprised to find two lenses, one concave, the other convex. She set those aside for later examination.

Cutting through the tough, scaled hide, she opened the neck regions, confirming the oversized veins and arteries necessary to feed an active brain, then continued on to reveal the chest region. Many of the ribs were already broken. She counted four lungs and two proto-lungs attached beneath them, these latter ones saturated with blood.

She cut through the lining of the first of three stomachs, then moved quickly back as the acids poured out. The blade of her knife sizzled and she watched as pitting etched into the iron surface. More hissing sounds, from the stone floor. Her eyes began watering.

Movement from the stomach, and Samar rose and took a step back. Worms were crawling out. A score, wriggling then dropping to the muddy stone. The colour of blued iron, segmented, each as long as an index finger. She glanced down at the crumbling knife in her hand and dropped the instrument, then collected wooden tongs from her satchel, moved to the edge of the acid pool, reached down and retrieved one of the worms.

Not a worm. Hundreds of legs, strangely finned, and, even more surprising, the creatures were mechanisms. Not living at all, the metal of their bodies somehow impervious to the acids. The thing twisted about in the grip
of the tongs, then stopped moving. She shook it, but it had gone immobile, like a crooked nail. An infestation? She did not think so. No, there were many creatures that worked in concert. The pond of stomach acid had been home to these mechanisms, and they in turn worked in some fashion to the demon's benefit.

A hacking cough startled her, and she turned to see the Avower stumble to his feet. Hunched, twisted with arthritis, he shambled over. 'Samar Dev, the witch! What's that smell? Not you, I hope. You and me, we're the same sort, aren't we just?'

'We are?'

'Oh yes, Samar Dev.' He scratched at his crotch. 'We strip the layers of humanity, down to the very bones, but where does humanity end and animal begin? When does pain defeat reason? Where hides the soul and to where does it flee when all hope in the flesh is lost? Questions to ponder, for such as you and me. Oh how I have longed to meet you, to share knowledge—'

'You're a torturer.'

'Someone has to be,' he said, offended. 'In a culture that admits the need for torture, there must perforce be a torturer. A culture, Samar Dev, that values the acquisition of truths more than it does any single human life. Do you see? Oh,' he added, edging closer to frown down at the demon's corpse, 'the justifications are always the same. To save many more lives, this one must be surrendered. Sacrificed. Even the words used disguise the brutality. Why are torture chambers in the crypts? To mask the screams? True enough, but there's more. This,' he said, waving one gnarled hand, 'is the nether realm of humanity, the rotted heart of unpleasantness.'

'I am seeking answers from something already dead. It is not the same—'

'Details. We are questioners, you and I. We slice back the armour to uncover the hidden truth. Besides, I'm retired. They want me to train another, you know, now that the Malazan laws have been struck down and torture's popular once more. But, the fools they send me! Ah, what is the point? Now, Falah'd Krithasan, now he was something – you were likely just a child, then, or younger even. My, how he liked torturing people. Not for truths – he well understood that facile rubbish for what it was – facile rubbish. No, the greater questions interested him. How far along can a soul be dragged, trapped still within its broken body, how far? How far until it can no longer crawl back? This was my challenge, and oh how he appreciated my artistry!'

Samar Dev looked down to see that the rest of the mechanisms had all ceased to function. She placed the one she had retrieved in a small leather pouch, then repacked her kit, making sure to include the eye lenses. She'd get them to burn the rest of the body – well away from the city, and upwind.

'Will you not dine with me?'

'Alas, I cannot. I have work to do.'

'If only they'd bring your guest down here. Toblakai. Oh, he would be fun, wouldn't he?'

She paused. 'I doubt I could talk him into it, Avower.'

'The Falah'd has been considering it, you know.'

'No, I didn't know. I think it would be a mistake.'

'Well, those things are not for us to question, are they?'

'Something tells me Toblakai would be delighted to meet you, Avower. Although it would be a short acquaintance.'

'Not if I have my way, Samar Dev!' 'Around Karsa Orlong, I suspect, only Karsa Orlong has his way.'

She returned to find the Teblor warrior poring over her collection of maps, which he'd laid out on the floor in
the hallway. He had brought in a dozen votive candles, now lit and set out around him. He held one close as he perused the precious parchments. Without looking up, he said, 'This one here, witch. The lands and coast west and north ... I was led to believe the Jhag Odhan was unbroken, that the plains ran all the way to the far-lands of Nemil and the Trell, yet here, this shows something different.'

'If you burn holes in my maps,' Samar Dev said, 'I will curse you and your bloodline for all eternity.'

'The Odhan sweeps westward, it seems, but only in the south. There are places of ice marked here. This continent looks too vast. There has been a mistake.'

'Possibly,' she conceded. 'Since that is the one direction I have not travelled, I can make no claim as to the map's accuracy. Mind you, that one was etched by Othun Dela Farat, a century ago. He was reputed to be reliable.'

'What of this region of lakes?' he asked, pointing to the northerly bulge along the coast, west of Yath Alban.

She set her equipment down, then, sighing, she crouched at his side. 'Difficult to cross. The bedrock is exposed there, badly folded, pocked with lakes and only a few, mostly impassable rivers. The forest is spruce, fir and pine, with low-lying thickets in the basins.'

'How do you know all that if you have never been there?'

She pointed. 'I am reading Dela's notes, there, along the border. He also says he found signs suggesting there were people living there, but no contact was ever made. Beyond lies the island kingdom of Sepik, now a remote subject of the Malazan Empire, although I would be surprised if the Malazans ever visited. The king was clever enough to send delegates proposing conditions of surrender, and the Emperor simply accepted.'

'The mapmaker hasn't written that much.'

'No, some of that information was mine. I have heard, now and then, certain odd stories about Sepik. There are, it seems, two distinct populations, one the subject of the other.' She shrugged at his blank look. 'Such things interest me.' Then frowned, as it became obvious that the distant expression on the giant's tattooed visage was born of something other than indifference. 'Is something wrong?'

Karsa Orlong bared his teeth. 'Tell me more of this Sepik.'

'I am afraid I have exhausted my knowledge.'

Scowling at her answer, he hunched down over the map once more. 'I shall need supplies. Tell me, is the weather the same as here?'

'You are going to Sepik?'

'Yes. Tell the Falah'd that I demand equipment, two extra horses, and five hundred crescents in silver. Dried foods, more waterskins. Three javelins and a hunting bow with thirty arrows, ten of them bird-pointed. Six extra bowstrings and a supply of fletching, a brick of wax—'

'Wait! Wait, Karsa Orlong. Why would the Falah'd simply gift you all these things?'

'Tell him, if he does not, I will stay in this city.'

'Ah, I see.' She considered for a time, then asked, 'Why are you going to Sepik?'

He began rolling up the map. 'I want this one—'

'Sorry, no. It is worth a fortune—'

'I will return it.'

'No, Karsa Orlong.' She straightened. 'If you are prepared to wait, I will copy it – on hide, which is more resilient—'
'How long will that take?'
'I don't know. A few days ...'
'Very well, but I am getting restless, witch.' He handed her the rolled-up map and walked into the other chamber.
'And hungry.'

She stooped once more to gather in the other maps. The candles she left alone. Each one was aspected to a local, minor god, and the flames had, one and all, drawn the attention of the host of spirits. This hallway was crowded with presences, making the air taut, bridling, since many of them counted others as enemies. Yet, she suspected, it had been more than just the flickering flames that had earned the regard of the spirits. Something about Toblakai himself ...

There were mysteries, she believed, swirling in Karsa Orlong's history. And now, the spirits drawn close, close and ... frightened ...

'Ah,' she whispered, 'I see no choice in the matter. None at all ...' She drew out a belt-knife, spat on the blade, then began waving the iron through the flame of each candle.

The spirits howled in her mind, outraged at this unexpected, brutal imprisonment. She nodded. 'Yes, we mortals are cruel ...'

'Three leagues,' Quick Ben said under his breath.

Kalam scratched at the stubble on his chin. Some old wounds – that enkar'al at the edge of the Whirlwind's wall had torn him up pretty bad – were aching after the long forced march back towards the Fourteenth Army. After what they had seen in the warren, no-one was in the mood to complain, however. Even Stormy had ceased his endless griping. The squad was hunkered down behind the assassin and the High Mage, motionless and virtually invisible in the darkness.

'So,' Kalam mused, 'do we wait for them here, or do we keep walking?'

'We wait,' Quick Ben replied. 'I need the rest. In any case, we all more or less guessed right, and the trail isn't hard to follow. Leoman's reached Y'Ghatan and that's where he'll make his stand.'

'And us with no siege equipment to speak of.'

The wizard nodded. 'This could be a long one.'

'Well, we're used to that, aren't we?'

'I keep forgetting, you weren't at Coral.'

Kalam settled down with his back against the ridge's slope and pulled free a flask. He drank then handed it to the High Mage. 'As bad as the last day at Pale?'

Quick Ben sipped, then made a face. 'This is water.'

'Of course it is.'

'Pale ... we weren't fighting anyone. Just collapsing earth and raining rocks.'

'So, the Bridgeburners went down fighting.'

'Most of Onearm's Host went down fighting,' Quick Ben said. 'Even Whiskeyjack,' he added. 'His leg gave out under him. Mallet won't forgive himself for that, and I can't say I'm surprised.' He shrugged in the gloom. 'It was messy. A lot went wrong, as usual. But Kallor turning on us ... that we should have foreseen.'
'I've got a space on my blade for a notch in his name,' Kalam said, retrieving the flask.

'You're not the only one, but he's not an easy man to kill.'

Sergeant Gesler edged into view. 'Saw you two passing something.'

'Just water,' Kalam said.

'The last thing I wanted to hear. Well, don't mind me.'

'We were discussing the siege to come,' the assassin said. 'Could be a long one.'

'Even so,' Gesler said with a grunt, 'Tavore's a patient woman. We know that much about her, anyway.'

'Nothing else?' Quick Ben asked.

'You've talked with her more than any of us, High Mage. She keeps her distance. No-one really seems to know what she is, behind the title of Adjunct. noble-born, aye, and from Unta. From House Paran.'

Kalam and Quick Ben exchanged glances, then the assassin pulled out a second flask. 'This one ain't water,' he said, tossing it to the sergeant. 'We knew her brother. Ganoes Paran. He was attached to the Bridgeburners, rank as captain, just before we infiltrated Darujhistan.'

'He led the squads into Coral,' Quick Ben said.

'And died?' Gesler asked after pulling at the flask.

'Most everyone died,' answered the High Mage. 'At any rate, he wasn't an embarrassment as far as officers go. As for Tavore, well, I'm in the dark as much as the rest of you. She's all edges, but they're for keeping people away, not cutting them. At least from what I've seen.'

'She's going to start losing soldiers at Y'Ghatan,' Kalam said.

No-one commented on that observation. Different commanders reacted in different ways to things like that. Some just got stubborn and threw more and more lives away. Others flinched back and if nothing then happened, the spirit of the army drained away. Sieges were battles of will, for the most part, along with cunning. Leoman had shown a capacity for both in this long pursuit west of Raraku. Kalam wasn't sure what Tavore had shown at Raraku – someone else had done most of the killing for her, for the entire Fourteenth, in fact.

Ghosts. Bridgeburners ... ascended. Gods, what a chilling thought. They were all half-mad when alive, and now ... 'Quick,' Kalam said, 'those ghosts at Raraku ... where are they now?'

'No idea. Not with us, though.'

'Ghosts,' Gesler said. 'So the rumours were true – it wasn't no sorcerous spell that slaughtered the Dogslayers. We had unseen allies – who were they? He paused, then spat. 'You both know, don't you, and you're not telling. Fiddler knows, too, doesn't he? Never mind. Everybody's got secrets and don't bother asking me to share mine. So that's that.' He handed the flask back. 'Thanks for the donkey piss, Kalam.'

They listened as he crawled back to rejoin his squad.

'Donkey piss?' Quick Ben asked.

'Ground-vine wine, and he's right, it tastes awful. I found it at the Dogslayer camp. Want some?'

'Why not? Anyway, when I said the ghosts weren't with us, I think I was telling the truth. But something is following the army.'

'Well, that's just great.'

'I'm not—'
'Hush! I hear—'

Figures rose from behind the ridge. Gleaming, ancient armour, axes and scimitars, barbaric, painted faces – Khundryl Burned Tears. Swearing, Kalam settled back down, re-sheathing his long-knives. 'That was a stupid move, you damned savages—'

One spoke: 'Come with us.'

Three hundred paces up the road waited a number of riders, among them the Adjunct Tavore. Flanked by the troop of Khundryl Burned Tears, Kalam, Quick Ben and Gesler and his squad approached the group.

The misshapen moon now cast down a silvery light on the land – it was looking rougher round the edges, Kalam realized, as if the surrounding darkness was gnawing at it – he wondered that he’d not noticed before. Had it always been like that?

'Good evening, Adjunct,' Quick Ben said as they arrived.

'Why have you returned?' she demanded. 'And why are you not in the Imperial Warren?'

With Tavore were the Fists, the Wickan Temul, Blistig, Keneb and Tene Baralta, as well as Nil and Nether. They looked, one and all, to have been recently roused from sleep, barring the Adjunct herself.

Quick Ben shifted uneasily. 'The warren was being used ... by something else. We judged it unsafe, and we concluded you should be told of that as soon as possible. Leoman is now in Y’Ghatan.'

'And you believe he will await us there?'

'Y’Ghatan,' Kalam said, 'is a bitter memory to most Malazans – those that care to remember, anyway. It is where the First—'

'I know, Kalam Mekhar. You need not remind me of that. Very well, I shall assume your assessment is correct. Sergeant Gesler, please join the Khundryl pickets.'

The marine's salute was haphazard, his expression mocking.

Kalam watched Tavore's eyes follow the sergeant and his squad as they headed off. Then she fixed her gaze on Quick Ben once more.

'High Mage.'

He nodded. 'There were ... Moon's Spawns in the Imperial Warren. Ten, twelve came into sight before we retreated.'

'Hood take us,' Blistig muttered. 'Floating fortresses? Has that white-haired bastard found more of them?'

'I don't think so, Fist,' Quick Ben said. 'Anomander Rake has settled in Black Coral, now, and he abandoned Moon's Spawn, since it was falling to pieces. No, I believe the ones we saw in the warren have their, uh, original owners inside.'

'And who might they be?' Tavore asked.

'K'Chain Che'Malle, Adjunct. Long-Tails or Short-Tails. Or both.'

'And why would they be using the Imperial Warren?'

'I don't know,' Quick Ben admitted. 'But I have some notions.'

'Let us hear them.'

'It's an old warren, effectively dead and abandoned, although, of course, not nearly as dead or abandoned as it first seems. Now, there is no known warren attributed to the K'Chain Che'Malle, but that does not mean one
'You believe the Imperial Warren was originally the K'Chain Che'Malle warren?'

The High Mage shrugged. 'It's possible, Adjunct.'

'What else?'

'Well, wherever the fortresses are going, they don't want to be seen.'

'Seen by whom?'

'That I don't know.'

The Adjunct studied the High Mage for a long moment, then she said, 'I want you to find out. Take Kalam and Gesler's squad. Return to the Imperial Warren.'

The assassin slowly nodded to himself, not at all surprised at this insane, absurd command. Find out? Precisely how?

'Have you any suggestions,' Quick Ben asked, his voice now strangely lilting, as it always was when he struggled against speaking his mind, 'on how we might do that?'

'As High Mage, I am certain you can think of some.'

'May I ask, why is this of particular importance to us, Adjunct?'

'The breaching of the Imperial Warren is important to all who would serve the Malazan Empire, would you not agree?'

'I would, Adjunct, but are we not engaged in a military campaign here? Against the last rebel leader in Seven Cities? Are you not about to lay siege to Y'Ghatan, wherein the presence of a High Mage, not to mention the empire's most skilled assassin, might prove pivotal to your success?'

'Quick Ben,' Tavore said coolly, 'the Fourteenth Army is quite capable of managing this siege without your assistance, or that of Kalam Mekhar.'

All right, that clinches it. She knows about our clandestine meeting with Dujek Oonearm and Tayschrenn. And she does not trust us. Probably with good reason.

'Of course,' Quick Ben said, with a modest bow. 'I trust the Burned Tears can resupply our soldiers, then. I request we be permitted to rest until dawn.'

'Acceptable.'

The High Mage turned away, his eyes momentarily meeting Kalam's own. Aye, Quick, she wants me as far away from her back as possible. Well, this was the Malazan Empire, after all. Laseen's empire, to be more precise. But Tavore, it's not me you have to worry about ...

At that moment a figure emerged from the darkness, approaching from one side of the road. Green silks, graceful motion, a face very nearly ethereal in the moonlight. 'Ah, a midnight assignation! I trust all matters of grave import have already been addressed.'

Pearl. Kalam grinned at the man, one hand making a gesture that only another Claw would understand.

Seeing it, Pearl winked.

Soon, you bastard.

Tavore wheeled her horse round. 'We are done here.'

'Might I ride double with one of you?' Pearl asked the assembled Fists.
None replied, and moments later they were cantering up the road.

Pearl coughed delicately in the dust. 'How rude.'

'You walked out here,' Quick Ben said, 'you can walk back in, Claw.'

'It seems I have no choice.' A fluttering wave of a gloved hand. 'Who knows when we'll meet again, my friends. But until then ... good hunting ...' He walked off.

Now how much did he hear? Kalam took a half-step forward, but Quick Ben reached out and restrained him.

'Relax, he was just fishing. I sensed him circling closer – you had him very nervous, Kal.'

'Good.'

'Not really. It means he isn't stupid.'

'True. Too bad.'

'Anyway,' Quick Ben said, 'you and me and Gesler have to come up with a way to hitch a ride on one of those fortresses.'

Kalam turned his head. Stared at his friend. 'That wasn't a joke, was it?'

'I'm afraid not.'

Joyful Union was basking in the sun as it dined, ringed in by stones, with Bottle lying close by and studying the way it fed as the scorpion snipped apart the capemoth he had given it for breakfast, when a military issue boot crunched down on the arachnid, the heel twisting.

Bottle jerked back in dumbfounded horror, stared up at the figure standing over him, a surge of murderous intent filling his being.

Backlit by the morning light, the figure was little more than a silhouette.

'Soldier,' the voice was a woman's, the accent Korelri, 'which squad is this?'

Bottle's mouth opened and closed a few times, then he said in a low tone, 'This is the squad that will start making plans to kill you, once they find out what you've just done.'

'Allow me,' she said, 'to clarify matters for you, soldier. I am Captain Faradan Sort, and I cannot abide scorpions. Now, I want to see how well you manage a salute while lying down.'

'You want a salute, Captain? Which one? I have plenty of salutes to choose from. Any preference?'

'The salute that tells me you have just become aware of the precipice I am about to kick your ass over. After I shove the sack of bricks up it, of course.'

'Oh. 'Standard salute, then. Of course, Captain.' He arched his back and managed to hold the salute for a few heartbeats ... waiting for her to respond, which she did not. Gasping, he collapsed back down, inhaling a mouthful of dust.

'We will try that again later, soldier. Your name?'

'Uh, Smiles, sir.'

'Well, I doubt I will see many of those on your ugly face, will I?'

'No, sir.'

She then walked on.
Bottle stared down at the mashed, glittering pulp that had been Joyful Union and half a capemoth. He wanted to cry.

'Sergeant.'

Strings glanced up, noted the torc on the arm, and slowly climbed to his feet. He saluted, studying the tall, straightbacked woman standing before him. 'Sergeant Strings, Captain. Fourth Squad.'

'Good. You are mine, now. My name is Faradan Sort.'

'I was wondering when you'd show up, sir. The replacements have been here for days, after all.'

'I was busy. Do you have a problem with that, Sergeant?'

'No, sir, not one.'

'You are a veteran, I see. You might think that fact yields some relief on my part. It does not. I do not care where you have been, who you served under, or how many officers you knifed in the back. All I care about is how much you know about fighting.'

'Never knifed a single officer, sir ... in the back. And I don't know a damned thing about fighting, except surviving it.'

'That will do. Where are the rest of my squads?'

'Well, you're missing one. Gesler's. They're on a reconnaissance mission, no idea when they'll be back. Borduke's squad is over there.' He pointed. 'With Cord's just beyond. The rest you'll find here and there.'

'You do not bivouac together?'

'As a unit? No.'

'You will from now on.'

'Yes sir.'

She cast her eyes over the soldiers still sprawled in sleep around the hearth. 'The sun is up. They should be awake, fed and equipped for the march by now.'

'Yes sir.'

'So ... wake them.'

'Yes sir.'

She started to walk off, then turned and added, 'You have a soldier named Smiles in your squad, Sergeant Strings?'

'I have.'

'Smiles is to carry a double load today.'

'Sir?'

'You heard me.'

He watched her leave, then swung about and looked down at his soldiers. All were awake, their eyes on him.

'What did I do?' Smiles demanded.

Strings shrugged. 'She's a captain, Smiles.'
'So?'
'So, captains are insane. At least, this one is, which proves my claim. Wouldn't you agree, Cuttle?'
'Oh yes, Strings. Raving wide-eyed insane.'
'A double load!'
Bottle stumbled into the camp, in his cupped hands a mangled mess. 'She stepped on Joyful Union!'
'Well, that settles it,' Cuttle said, grunting as he sat up. 'She's dead.'

Fist Keneb strode into his tent, unstrapping his helm and pulling it free to toss it on the cot, then paused upon seeing a tousled head lift clear of the opened travel trunk at the back wall. 'Grub! What were you doing in there?'

'Sleeping. She is not stupid, no. They are coming, to await the resurrection.' He clambered out of the trunk, dressed, as ever, in ragged leathers, Wickan in style yet badly worn. The childish roundness of his cheeks had begun to thin, hinting at the man he would one day become.

'She? Do you mean the Adjunct? Who is coming? What resurrection?'

'They will try to kill her. But that is wrong. She is our last hope. Our last hope. I'm going to find something to eat, we're marching to Y'Ghatan.' He rushed past Keneb. Outside the tent, dogs barked. The Fist pulled the flap aside and stepped out to see Grub hurrying down the aisle between the tents, flanked by the Wickan cattle-dog, Bent, and the Hengese lapdog, Roach. Soldiers deferentially moved aside to let them pass.

The Fist headed back inside. A baffling child. He sat down on the cot, stared at nothing in particular.

A siege. Ideally, they needed four or five thousand more soldiers, five or six Untan catapults and four towers. Ballistae, mangonels, onagers, scorpions, wheeled rams and ladders. Perhaps a few more units of sappers, with a few wagons loaded with Moranth munitions. And High Mage Quick Ben.

Had it been just a matter of pride, sending the wizard away? The meetings with Dujek Onearm had been strained. Tavore's refusal of assistance beyond a contingent of replacements from Quon Tali made little sense. Granted, Dujek had plenty to occupy himself and his Host, reinforcing garrisons and pacifying recalcitrant towns and cities. Then again, the arrival of Admiral Nok and a third of the imperial fleet in the Maadil Sea had done much to quell rebellious tendencies among the locals. And Keneb suspected that the anarchy, the horrors, of the rebellion itself was as much a force for pacification as any military presence.

A scratch against the outer wall of his tent. 'Enter.'

Blistig ducked under the flap. 'Good, you're alone. Tene Baralta has been speaking with Warleader Gall. Look, we knew a siege was likely—'

'Blistig,' Keneb cut in, 'this isn't right. The Adjunct leads the Fourteenth Army. She was commanded to crush the rebellion, and she is doing just that. Fitting that the final spark should be snuffed out at Y'Ghatan, the mythical birthplace of the Apocalypse—'

'Aye, and we're about to feed that myth.'

'Only if we fail.'

'Malazans die at Y'Ghatan. That city burned to the ground that last siege. Dassem Ultor, the company of the First Sword. The First Army, the Ninth. Eight, ten thousand soldiers? Y'Ghatan drinks Malazan blood, and its thirst is endless.'

'Is this what you're telling your officers, Blistig?'

The man walked over to the trunk, tipped down the lid, and sat. 'Of course not. Do you think me mad? But,
gods, man, can't you feel this growing dread?"

'The same as when we were marching on Raraku,' Keneb said, 'and the resolution was frustrated, and that is
the problem. The only problem, Blistig. We need to blunt our swords, we need that release, that's all.'

'She should never have sent Quick Ben and Kalam away. Who gives a rhizan's squinting ass what's going on
in the Imperial Warren?'

Keneb looked away, wishing he could disagree. 'She must have her reasons.'

'I'd like to hear them.'

'Why did Baralta speak with Gall?'

'We're all worried, is why, Keneb. We want to corner her, all the Fists united on this, and force some
answers. Her reasons for things, some real sense of how she thinks.'

'No. Count me out. We haven't even reached Y'Ghatan yet. Wait and see what she has in mind.'

Blistig rose with a grunt. 'I'll pass your suggestions along, Keneb. Only, well, it ain't just the soldiers who are
frustrated.'

'I know. Wait and see.'

After he had left, Keneb settled back on the cot. Outside, he could hear the sounds of tents being struck,
equipment packed away, the distant lowing of oxen. Shouts filled the morning air as the army roused itself for
another day of marching. Burned Tears, Wickans, Seti, Malazans. What can this motley collection of soldiers
do? We are facing Leoman of the Flails, dammit. Who's already bloodied our noses. Mind you, hit-and-run
tactics are one thing, a city under siege is another. Maybe he's as worried as we are.

A comforting thought. Too bad he didn't believe a word of it.

The Fourteenth had been kicked awake and was now swarming with activity. Head pounding, Sergeant Hellian
sat on the side of the road. Eight days with this damned miserable army and that damned tyrant of a captain,
and now she was out of rum. The three soldiers of her undersized squad were packing up the last of their kits,
none daring to address their hungover, murderously inclined sergeant.

Bitter recollections of the event that had triggered all this haunted Hellian. A temple of slaughter, the frenzy
of priests, officials and investigators, and the need to send all witnesses as far away as possible, preferably into
a situation they would not survive. Well, she couldn't blame them – no, wait, of course she could. The world
was run by stupid people, that was the truth of it. Twenty-two followers of D'rek had been butchered in their
own temple, in a district that had been her responsibility – but patrols were never permitted inside any of the
temples, so she could have done nothing to prevent it in any case. But no, that wasn't good enough. Where had
the killers gone, Sergeant Hellian? And why didn't you see them leave? And what about that man who
accompanied you, who then vanished?

Killers. There weren't any. Not natural ones. A demon, more likely, escaped from some secret ritual, a
conjuration gone awry. The fools killed themselves, and that was the way of it. The man had been some
defrocked priest from another temple, probably a sorcerer. Once he figured out what had happened, he'd
hightailed it out of there, leaving her with the mess.

Not fair, but what did fairness have to do with anything?

Urb lowered his massive bulk in front of her. 'We're almost ready, Sergeant.'

'You should've strangled him.'

'I wanted to. Really.'

'Did you? Truth?'
‘Truth.’

‘But then he slipped away,’ Hellian said. ‘Like a worm.’

‘Captain wants us to join the rest of the squads in her company. They’re up the road some. We should get going before the march begins.’

She looked over at the other two soldiers. The twins, Brethless and Touchy. Young, lost – well, maybe not young in years, but young anyway. She doubted they could fight their way out of a midwives’ picnic – though, granted, she’d heard those could be rough events, especially if some fool pregnant woman wandered in. Oh, well, that was Kartool, city of spiders, city that crunched underfoot, city of webs and worse. They were a long way from any midwives’ picnic.

Out here, spiders floated in the air, but at least they were tiny, easily destroyed with a medium-sized stone. ‘Abyss below,’ she groaned. ‘Find me something to drink.’

Urb handed her a waterskin.

‘Not that, idiot.’

‘Maybe in the company we’re joining ...’

She looked up, squinted at him. ‘Good idea. All right, help me up – no, don’t help me up.’ She staggered upright.

‘You all right, Sergeant?’

‘I will be,’ she said, ‘after you take my skull in your hands and crush it flat.’

He frowned. ‘I’d get in trouble if I did that.’

‘Not with me you wouldn’t. Never mind. Touchy, take point.’

‘We’re on a road, Sergeant.’

‘Just do it. Practice.’

‘I won’t be able to see anything,’ the man said. ‘Too many people and things in the way.’

Oh, gods crawling in the Abyss, just let me live long enough to kill that man. ‘You got any problem with taking point, Brethless?’

‘No, Sergeant. Not me.’

‘Good. Do it and let’s get going.’

‘Want me out on flank?’ Touchy asked.

‘Yeah, somewhere past the horizon, you brain-stunted cactus.’

‘It’s not your average scorpion,’ Maybe said, peering close but not too close.

‘It’s damned huge,’ Lutes said. ‘Seen that type before, but never one so ... huge.’

‘Could be a freak, and all its brothers and sisters were tiny. Making it lonely and that’s why it’s so mean.’

Lutes stared across at Maybe. ‘Yeah, could be it. You got a real brain in that skull. All right, now, you think it can kill Joyful Union? I mean, there’s two of those ...’

‘Well, maybe we need to find another one just like this one.’
'But I thought all its brothers and sisters were tiny.'

'Oh, right. Could be it's got an uncle, or something.'

'Who's big.'

'Huge. Huger than this one.'

'We need to start looking.'

'I wouldn't bother,' Bottle said from where he sat in the shadow of a boulder, five paces away from the two soldiers of Borduke's squad.

They started, then Lutes hissed and said, 'He's been spying!'

'Not spying. Grieving.'

'What for?' Maybe demanded. 'We ain't even arrived at Y'Ghatan yet.'

'Met our new captain?'

The two looked at each other, then Lutes said, 'No. Knew one was coming, though.'

'She's here. She killed Joyful Union. Under her heel. Crunch!'

Both men jumped. 'That murderer!' Maybe said in a growl. He looked down at the scorpion ringed in by stones at his feet. 'Oh yes, let's see her try with Sparkle here — he'd get her ankle for sure, right through the boot leather—'

'Don't be a fool,' Bottle said. 'Anyway, Sparkle's not a boy. Sparkle's a girl.'

'Even better. Girls are meaner.'

'The smaller ones you always see are the boys. Not as many girls around, but that's just the way of it. They're coy. Anyway, you'd better let her go.'

'Why?' Lutes demanded. 'Ain't no prissy captain going to—'

'She'd be the least of your problems, Lutes. The males will pick up her distress scent. You'll have hundreds following you. Then thousands, and they'll be damned aggressive, if you get my meaning.'

Maybe smiled. 'Interesting. You sure of that, Bottle?'

'Don't get any stupid ideas.'

'Why not? We're good at stupid ideas. I mean, uh, well—'

'What Maybe means,' Lutes said, 'is we can think things through. Right through, Bottle. Don't you worry about us.'

'She killed Joyful Union. There won't be any more fights — spread the word, all those squads with new scorpions — let the little ones go.'

'All right,' Lutes said, nodding.

Bottle studied the two men. 'That includes the one you got there.'

'Sure. We'll just look at her a while longer, that's all.' Maybe smiled again.

Climbing to his feet, Bottle hesitated, then shook his head and walked off, back towards the squad's camp. The army was almost ready to resume the march. With all the desultory lack of enthusiasm one might expect of an army about to lay siege to a city.
A sky without clouds. Again. More dust, more heat, more sweat. Bloodflies and chigger fleas, and the damned vultures wheeling overhead – as they had been doing since Raraku – but this, he knew, would be the last day of that march. The old road ahead, a few more abandoned hamlets, feral goats in the denuded hills, distant riders tracking them from the ridge.

The others in the squad were on their feet and waiting when he arrived. Bottle saw that Smiles was labouring under two packs. 'What happened to you?' he asked her.

The look she turned on him was filled with abject misery. 'I don't know. The new captain ordered it. I hate her.'

'I'm not surprised,' Bottle said, collecting his own gear and shrugging into the pack's straps. 'Is that Strings's kit you got there?'

'Not all of it,' she said. 'He won't trust me with the Moranth munitions.'

*Thank Oponn for that.* 'The captain been by since?'

'No. The bitch. We're going to kill her, you know.'

'Really. Well, I won't shed any tears. Who is this "we" anyway?'

'Me and Cuttle. He'll distract her, I'll stick a knife in her back. Tonight.'

'Fist Keneb will have you strung up, you know.'

'We'll make it look like an accident.'

Distant horns sounded. 'All right, everyone,' Strings said from the road. 'Let's move.'

Groaning wagon wheels, clacking and thumping on the uneven cobbles, rocking in the ruts, the lowing of oxen, thousands of soldiers lurching into motion, the sounds a rising clatter and roar, the first dust swirling into the air.

Koryk fell in alongside Bottle. 'They won't do it,' he said.

'Do what? Kill the captain?'

'I got a long look at her,' he said. 'She's not just from Korelri. She's from the Stormwall.'

Bottle squinted at the burly warrior. 'How do you know that?'

'There's a silver tracing on her scabbard. She was a section commander.'

'That's ridiculous, Koryk. First, standing the Wall isn't something you can just resign from, if what I've heard is true. Besides, this woman's a captain, in the least-prepared Malazan army in the entire empire. If she'd commanded a section against the Stormriders, she'd rank as Fist at the very least.'

'Only if she told people, Bottle, but that tracing tells another story.'

Two strides ahead of them, Strings turned his head to regard them. 'So, you saw it too, Koryk.'

Bottle swung round to Smiles and Cuttle. 'You two hearing this?'

'So?' Smiles demanded.

'We heard,' Cuttle said, his expression sour. 'Maybe she just looted that scabbard from somewhere ... but I don't think that's likely. Smiles, lass, we'd best put our plans on a pyre and strike a spark.'

'Why?' she demanded. 'What's this Stormwall mean, anyway? And how come Koryk thinks he knows so much? He doesn't know anything, except maybe the back end of a horse and that only in the dark. Look at all your faces – I'm saddled with a bunch of cowards!'
'Who plan on staying alive,' Cuttle said.

'Smiles grew up playing in the sand with farm boys,' Koryk said, shaking his head. 'Woman, listen to me. The Stormwall is leagues long, on the north coast of Korelri. It stands as the only barricade between the island continent and the Stormriders, those demonic warriors of the seas between Malaz Island and Korelri – you must have heard of them?'

'Old fishers' tales.'

'No, all too real,' Cuttle said. 'I seen them myself, plying those waters. Their horses are the waves. They wield lances of ice. We slit the throats of six goats to paint the water in appeasement.'

'And it worked?' Bottle asked, surprised.

'No, but tossing the cabin boy over the side did.'

'Anyway,' Koryk said after a moment of silence, 'only chosen warriors are given the task of standing the Wall. Fighting those eerie hordes. It's an endless war, or at least it was...'

'It's over?' The Seti shrugged.

'So,' Smiles said, 'what's she doing here? Bottle's right, it doesn't make sense.'

'You could ask her,' Koryk replied, 'assuming you survive this day's march.'

'This isn't so bad,' she sniffed.

'We've gone a hundred paces, soldier,' Strings called back. 'So best save your breath.'

Bottle hesitated, then said to Smiles. 'Here, give me that – that captain ain't nowhere about, is she?'

'I never noticed nothing,' Strings said without turning round.

'I can do this—'

'We'll spell each other.'

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, then she shrugged. 'If you like.'

He took the second pack from her.

'Thanks, Bottle. At least someone in this squad's nice to me.'

Koryk laughed. 'He just doesn't want a knife in his leg.'

'We got to stick together,' Bottle said, 'now that we got ourselves a tyrant officer over us.'

'Smart lad,' Strings said.

'Still,' Smiles said, 'thanks, Bottle.'

He smiled sweetly at her.

'They've stopped moving,' Kalam muttered. 'Now why would that be?'

'No idea,' Quick Ben said at his side.

They were lying flat on the summit of a low ridge. Eleven Moon's Spawns hovered in an even row above another rise of hills two thousand paces distant. 'So,' the assassin asked, 'what passes for night in this warren?'
'It's on its way, and it isn't much.'

Kalam twisted round and studied the squad of soldiers sprawled in the dust of the slope behind them. 'And your plan, Quick?'

'We make use of it, of course. Sneak up under one—'

'Sneak up? There's no cover, there's nothing to even throw shadows!'

'That's what makes it so brilliant, Kalam.'

The assassin reached out and cuffed Quick Ben.

'Ow. All right, so the plan stinks. You got a better one?'

'First off, we send this squad behind us back to the Fourteenth. Two people sneaking up is a lot better than eight. Besides, I've no doubt they can fight but that won't be much use with a thousand K'Chain Che'Malle charging down on us. Another thing – they're so cheery it's a struggle to keep from dancing.'

At that, Sergeant Gesler threw him a kiss.

Kalam rolled back round and glared at the stationary fortresses.

Quick Ben sighed. Scratched his smooth-shaven jaw. 'The Adjunct's orders ...'

'Forget that. This is a tactical decision, it's in our purview.'

Gesler called up from below, 'She don't like us around either, Kalam.'

'Oh? And why's that?'

'She keeps cracking up in our company. I don't know. We was on the Silanda, you know. We went through walls of fire on that ship.'

'We've all led hard lives, Gesler ...'

'Our purview?' Quick Ben asked. 'I like that. You can try it on her, later.'

'Let's send them back.'

'Gesler?'

'Fine with us. I wouldn't follow you two into a latrine, begging your sirs' pardon.'

Stormy added, 'Just hurry up about it, wizard. I'm getting grey waiting.'

'That would be the dust, Corporal.'

'So you say.'

Kalam considered, then said, 'We could take the hairy Falari with us, maybe. Care to come along, Corporal? As rearguard?'

'Rearguard? Hey, Gesler, you were right. They are going into a latrine. All right, assuming my sergeant here won't miss me too much.'

'Miss you?' Gesler sneered. 'Now at least I'll get women to talk to me.'

'It's the beard puts them off,' Stormy said, 'but I ain't changing for nobody.'

'It's not the beard, it's what lives in the beard.'

'Hood take us,' Kalam breathed, 'send them away, Quick Ben, please.'
Four leagues north of Ehrlitan, Apsalar stood facing the sea. The promontory on the other side of A'rath Strait was just visible, rumpling the sunset's line on the horizon. Kansu Reach, which stretched in a long, narrow arm westward to the port city of Kansu. At her feet prowled two gut-bound skeletons, pecking at grubs in the dirt and hissing in frustration as the mangled insects they attempted to swallow simply fell out beneath their jaws.

Even bone, or the physical remembrance of bone, held power, it seemed. The behaviour patterns of the lizard-birds the creatures once were had begun to infect the ghost spirits of Telorast and Curdle. They now chased snakes, leapt into the air after rhizan and capemoths, duelled each other in dominance contests, strutting, spitting and kicking sand. She believed they were losing their minds.

No great loss. They had been murderous, vile, entirely untrustworthy in their lives. And, perhaps, they had ruled a realm. As usurpers, no doubt. She would not regret their dissolution.

'Not-Apsalar! Why are we waiting here? We dislike water, we have discovered. The gut bindings will loosen. We'll fall apart.'

'We are crossing this strait, Telorast,' Apsalar said. 'Of course, you and Curdle may wish to stay behind, to leave my company.'

'Do you plan on swimming?'

'No, I intend to use the warren of Shadow.'

'Oh, that won't be wet.'

'No,' Curdle laughed, prancing around to stand before Apsalar, head bobbing. 'Not wet, oh, that's very good. We'll come along, won't we, Telorast?'

'We promised! No, we didn't. Who said that? We're just eager to stand guard over your rotting corpse, Not-Apsalar, that's what we promised. I don't understand why I get so confused. You have to die eventually. That's obvious. It's what happens to mortals, and you are mortal, aren't you? You must be, you have been bleeding for three days – we can smell it.'

'Idiot!' Curdle hissed. 'Of course she's mortal, and besides, we were women once, remember? She bleeds because that's what happens. Not all the time, but sometimes. Regularly. Or not. Except just before she lays eggs, which would mean a male found her, which would mean ...'

'She's a snake?' Telorast asked in a droll tone.

'But she isn't. What were you thinking, Telorast?'

The sun's light was fading, the waters of the strait crimson. A lone sail from a trader's carrack was cutting a path southward into the Ehrlitan Sea. 'The warren feels strong here,' Apsalar said.

'Oh yes,' Telorast said, bony tail caressing Apsalar's left ankle. 'Fiercely manifest. This sea is new.'

'That is possible,' she replied, eyeing the jagged cliffs marking the narrows. 'Are there ruins beneath the waves?'

'How would we know? Probably. Likely, absolutely. Ruins. Vast cities. Shadow Temples.'

Apsalar frowned. 'There were no Shadow Temples in the time of the First Empire.'

Curdle's head dipped, then lifted suddenly. 'Dessimbelackis, a curse on his multitude of souls! We speak of the time of the Forests. The great forests that covered this land, long before the First Empire. Before even the T'lan Imass——'

'Shhh!' Telorast hissed. 'Forests? Madness! Not a tree in sight, and those who were frightened of shadows never existed. So why would they worship them? They didn't, because they never existed. It's a natural ferocity,
this shadow power. It's a fact that the first worship was born of fear. The terrible unknown—'

'Even more terrible,' Curdle cut in, 'when it becomes known! Wouldn't you say, Telorast?'

'No I wouldn't. I don't know what you're talking about. You've been babbling too many secrets, none of which are true in any case. Look! A lizard! It's mine!'

'No, mine!'

The two skeletons scrambled along the rocky ledge. Something small and grey darted away.

A wind was picking up, sweeping rough the surface of the strait, carrying with it the sea's primal scent to flow over the cliff where she stood. Crossing stretches of water, even through a warren, was never a pleasant prospect. Any waver of control could fling her from the realm, whereupon she would find herself leagues from land in dhenrabi-infested waters. Certain death.

She could, of course, choose the overland route. South from Ehrlitan, to Pan'potsun, then skirting the new Raraku Sea westward. But she knew she was running out of time. Cotillion and Shadowthrone had wanted her to take care of a number of small players, scattered here and there inland, but something within her sensed a quickening of distant events, and with it the growing need – a desperate insistence – that she be there without delay. To cast her dagger, to affect, as best she could, a host of destinies.

She assumed Cotillion would understand all of this. That he would trust her instincts, even if she was, ultimately, unable to explain them.

She must ... hurry.

A moment's concentration. And the scene before her was transformed. The cliff now a slope, crowded with collapsed trees, firs, cedars, their roots torn loose from dark earth, the boles flattened as if the entire hillside had been struck by some unimaginable wind. Beneath a leaden sky, a vast forested valley clothed in mist stretched out across what had moments before been the waters of the strait.

The two skeletons pattered up to crowd her feet, heads darting.

'I told you there'd be a forest,' Telorast said.

Apsalar gestured at the wreckage on the slope immediately before them. 'What happened here?'

'Sorcery,' Curdle said. 'Dragons.'

'Not dragons.'

'No, not dragons. Telorast is right. Not dragons.'

'Demons.'

'Yes, terrible demons whose very breath is a warren's gate, oh, don't jump down those throats!'

'No breath, Curdle,' Telorast said. 'Just demons. Small ones. But lots of them. Pushing trees down, one by one, because they're mean and inclined to senseless acts of destruction.'

'Like children.'

'Right, as Curdle says, like children. Children demons. But strong. Very strong. Huge, muscled arms.'

'So,' Apsalar said, 'dragons fought here.'

'Yes,' Telorast said.

'In the Shadow Realm.'

'Yes.'
‘Presumably, the same dragons that are now imprisoned within the stone circle.’

‘Yes.’

Apsalar nodded, then began making her way down. ‘This will be hard going. I wonder if I will save much time traversing the forest.’

‘Tiste Edur forest,’ Curdle said, scampering ahead. ‘They like their forests.’

‘All those natural shadows,’ Telorast added. ‘Power in permanence. Blackwood, bloodwood, all sorts of terrible things. The Eres were right to fear.’

In the distance a strange darkness was sliding across the treetops. Apsalar studied it. The carrack, casting an ethereal presence into this realm. She was seeing both worlds, a common enough occurrence. Yet, even so ... someone is on that carrack. And that someone is important ...

T’rolbarahl, ancient creature of the First Empire of Dessimbelackis, Dejim Nebrahl crouched at the base of a dead tree, or, rather, flowed like a serpent round the bleached, exposed roots, seven-headed, seven-bodied and mottled with the colours of the ground, the wood and the rocks. Fresh blood, slowly losing its heat, filled the D'ivers' stomachs. There had been no shortage of victims, even in this wasteland. Herders, salt-miners, bandits, desert wolves, Dejim Nebrahl had fed continuously on this journey to the place of ambush.

The tree, thick-boled, squat, with only a few twisted branches surviving the centuries since it had died, rose from a crack in the rock between a flat stretch that marked the trail and an upthrust tower of pitted, wind-worn stone. The trail twisted at this point, skirting the edge of a cliff, the drop below ten or more man-heights to boulders and jagged rubble.

On the other side of the trail, more rocks rose, heaped, the stone cracked and shelved.

The D'ivers would strike here, from both sides, lifting free of the shadows.

Dejim Nebrahl was content. Patience easily purchased by fresh meat, the echoing screams of death, and now it need but await the coming of the victims, the ones the Nameless Ones had chosen.

Soon, then.

Plenty of room between the trees, a cathedral of shadows and heavy gloom, the flow of damp air like water against her face as Apsalar jogged onward, flanked by the darting forms of Telorast and Curdle. To her surprise, she was indeed making good time. The ground was surprisingly level and tree-falls seemed nonexistent, as if no tree in this expanse of forest ever died. She had seen no wildlife, had come upon no obvious game trail, yet there had been glades, circular sweeps of moss tightly ringed by evenly spaced cedars, or, if not cedar, then something much like it, the bark rough, shaggy, black as tar. The circles were too perfect to be natural, although no other evidence of intent or design was visible. In these places, the power of shadow was, as Telorast had said, fierce.

Tiste Edur, Kurald Emurlahn, their presence lingered, but only in the same manner as memories clung to graveyards, tombs and barrows. Old dreams snarled and fading in the grasses, in the twist of wood and the crystal latticework of stone. Lost whispers in the winds that ever wandered across such death-laden places. The Edur were gone, but their forest had not forgotten them.

A darkness ahead, something reaching down from the canopy, straight and thin. A rope, as thick round as her wrist, and, resting on the needle-strewn humus of the floor, an anchor.

Directly in her path. Ah, so even as I sensed a presence, so it in turn sensed me. This is, I think, an invitation.

She approached the rope, grasped it in both hands, then began climbing.

Telorast hissed below, 'What are you doing? No, dangerous intruder! Terrible, terrifying, horrible, cruel-
faced stranger! Don't go up there! Oh, Curdle, look, she's going.'

'She's not listening to us!'

'We've been talking too much, that's the problem.'

'You're right. We should say something important, so she starts listening to us again.'

'Good thinking, Curdle. Think of something!' 'I'm trying!'

Their voices faded away as Apsalar continued climbing. Among thick-needled branches now, old cobwebs strung between them, small, glittering shapes scampering about. The leather of her gloves was hot against her palms and her calves were beginning to ache. She reached the first of a series of knots and, planting her feet on it, she paused to rest. Glancing down, she saw nothing but black boles vanishing into mist, like the legs of some giant beast. After a few moments, she resumed her climb. Knots, now, every ten or so arm-lengths. Someone was being considerate.

The ebon hull of the carrack loomed above, crusted with barnacles, glistening. Reaching it, she planted her boots against the dark planks and climbed the last two manheights to where the anchor line ran into a chute in the gunnel. Clambering over the side, she found herself near the three steps leading to the aft deck. Faint smudges of mist, slightly glowing, marked where mortals stood or sat: here and there, near rigging, at the side-mounted steering oar, one perched high among the shrouds. A far more substantial, solid figure was standing before the mainmast.

Familiar. Apsalar searched her memory, her mind rushing down one false trail after another. Familiar ... yet not.

With a faint smile on his clean-shaven, handsome face, he stepped forward and held up both hands. 'I'm not sure which name you go by now. You were little more than a child – was it only a few years ago? Hard to believe.'

Her heart was thudding hard against her chest, and she wondered at the sensation within her. Fear? Yes, but more than that. Guilt. Shame. She cleared her throat. 'I have named myself Apsalar.'

A quick nod. Recognition, then his expression slowly changed. 'You do not remember me, do you?'

'Yes. No, I'm not sure. I should – I know that much.'

'Difficult times, back then,' he said, lowering his hands, but slowly, as if unsure how he would be received as he said, 'Ganoes Paran.'

She drew off her gloves, driven by the need to be doing something, and ran the back of her right hand across her brow, was shocked to see it come away wet, the sweat beading, trickling, suddenly cold on her skin. 'What are you doing here?'

'I might ask you the same. I suggest we retire to my cabin. There is wine. Food.' He smiled again. 'In fact, I am sitting there right now.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'It seems you have come into some power, Ganoes Paran.'

'In a manner of speaking.'

She followed him to the cabin. As he closed the door behind her, his form faded, and she heard movement from the other side of the map-table. Turning, she saw a far less substantial Ganoes Paran. He was pouring wine, and when he spoke the words seemed to come from a vast distance. 'You had best emerge from your warren now, Apsalar.'

She did so, and for the first time felt the solid wood beneath her, the pitch and sway of a ship at sea.
'Sit,' Paran said, gesturing. 'Drink. There's bread, cheese, salted fish.'

'How did you sense my presence?' she asked, settling into the bolted-down chair nearest her. 'I was travelling through a forest—'

'A Tiste Edur forest, yes. Apsalar, I don't know where to begin. There is a Master of the Deck of Dragons, and you are sharing a bottle of wine with him. Seven months ago I was living in Darujhistan, in the Finnest House, in fact, with two eternally sleeping house-guests and a Jaghut manservant ... although he'd likely kill me if he heard that word ascribed to him. Raest is not the most pleasant company.'

'Darujhistan,' she murmured, looking away, the glass of wine forgotten in her hand. Whatever confidence she felt she had gained since her time there was crumbling away, assailed by a swarm of disconnected, chaotic memories. Blood, blood on her hands, again and again. 'I still do not understand ...'

'We are in a war,' Paran said. 'Oddly enough, there was something one of my sisters once said to me, when we were young, pitching toy armies against each other. To win a war you must come to know all the players. All of them. Living ones, who will face you across the field. Dead ones, whose legends are wielded like weapons, or held like eternally beating hearts. Hidden players, inanimate players – the land itself, or the sea, if you will. Forests, hills, mountains, rivers. Currents both seen and unseen – no, Tavore didn't say all that; she was far more succinct, but it's taken me a long time to fully understand. It's not "know your enemy". That's simplistic and facile. No, it's "know your enemies". There's a big difference, Apsalar, because one of your enemies could be the face in the silver mirror.'

'Yet now you call them players, rather than enemies,' she said. 'Suggesting to me a certain shift in perspective – what comes, yes, of being the Master of the Deck of Dragons?'

'Huh, I hadn't thought about that. Players. Enemies. Is there a difference?'

'The former implies ... manipulation.'

'And you would understand that well.'

'Yes.'

'Does Cotillion haunt you still?'

'Yes, but not as ... intimately.'

'And now you are one of his chosen servants, an agent of Shadow. An assassin, just like the assassin you once were.'

She levelled her gaze on him. 'What is your point?'

'I'm not sure. I'm just trying to find my feet, regarding you, and whatever mission you are on right now.'

'If you want details of that, best speak with Cotillion yourself.'

'I am considering it.'

'Is that why you have crossed an ocean, Ganoes Paran?'

'No. As I said, we are at war. I was not idle in Darujhistan, or in the weeks before Coral. I was discovering the players ... and among them, true enemies.'

'Of you?'

'Of peace.'

'I trust you will kill them all.'

He seemed to wince, looked down at the wine in his glass. 'For a short time, Apsalar, you were innocent.
Naive, even.'

'Between the possession of a god and my awakening to certain memories.'

'I was wondering, who created in you such cynicism?'

'Cynicism? You speak of peace, yet twice you have told me we are at war. You have spent months learning
the lie of the battle to come. But I suspect that even you do not comprehend the vastness of the coming conflict,
the conflict we are in right now.'

'You are right. Which is why I wanted to speak with you.'

'It may be we are on different sides, Ganoes Paran.'

'Maybe, but I don't think so.'

She said nothing.

Paran refilled their glasses. 'The pantheon is splitting asunder. The Crippled God is finding allies.'

'Why?'

'What? Well ... I don't really know. Compassion?''

'And is that something the Crippled God has earned?''

'I don't know that, either.'

'Months of study?' Her brows rose.

He laughed, a response that greatly relieved her.

'You are likely correct,' she said. 'We are not enemies.'

'By "we" I take it you include Shadowthrone and Cotillion.'

'As much as is possible, which isn't as much as I would like. None can fathom Shadowthrone's mind. Not
even Cotillion, I suspect. Certainly not me. But he has shown ... restraint.'

'Yes, he has. Quite surprising, if you think about it.'

'For Shadowthrone, the pondering of the field of battle has consumed years, maybe decades.'

He grunted, a sour expression on his face. 'Good point.'

'What role do you possess, Paran? What role are you seeking to play?'

'I have sanctioned the Crippled God. A place in the Deck of Dragons. A House of Chains.'

She considered for a time, then nodded. 'I can see the reason in that. All right, what has brought you to Seven
Cities?'

He stared at her, then shook his head. 'A decision I chewed on for what seemed forever, and you grasp my
motives in an instant. Fine. I am here to counter an enemy. To remove a threat. Only, I am afraid I will not get
there in time, in which case I will clean up the mess as best I can, before moving on—'

'To Quon Tali.'

'How – how did you know that?'

She reached for the brick of cheese, produced a knife from her sleeve and sliced off a piece. 'Ganoes Paran,
we are going to have a rather long conversation now. But first, where do you plan to make landfall?'
'Kansu.'

'Good, this will make my journey quicker. Two minuscule companions of mine are even now clambering onto the deck, having ascended via the trees. They will any moment begin hunting rats and other vermin, which should occupy them for some time. As for you and me, let us settle to this meal.'

He slowly leaned back in his chair. 'We will reach port in two days. Something tells me those two days will fly past like a gull in a gale.'

_For me as well, Ganoes Paran._

Ancient memories whispered through Dejim Nebrahl, old stone walls lit red with reflected fire, the cascade of smoke down streets filled with the dead and the dying, the luscious flow of blood in the gutters. Oh, there was a grandness to the First Empire, that first, rough flowering of humanity. The T'rolbarahl were, in Dejim's mind, the culmination of truly human traits, blended with the strength of beasts. Savagery, the inclination towards vicious cruelty, the cunning of a predator that draws no boundaries and would sooner destroy one of its own kind than another. Feeding the spirit on the torn flesh of children. That stunning exercise of intelligence that could justify any action, no matter how abhorrent.

Mated with talons, dagger-long teeth and the D'ivers gift of becoming many from one ... _we should have survived, we should have ruled. We were born masters and all humanity were rightly our slaves. If only Dessimbelackis had not betrayed us. His own children._

Well, even among T'rolbarahl, Dejim Nebrahl was supreme. A creation beyond even the First Emperor's most dread nightmare. Domination, subjugation, the rise of a new empire, this is what awaited Dejim, and oh how he would feed. Bloated, sated by human blood. He would make the new, fledgling gods kneel before him.

Once his task was complete, the world awaited him. No matter its ignorance, its blind disregard. That would all change, so terribly change.

Dejim's quarry neared, drawn ever so subtly onto this deadly track. Not long now.

The seashell vest glimmered white in the morning light. Karsa Orlong had drawn it from his pack to replace the shredded remnants of the padded leather he had worn earlier. He sat on his tall, lean horse, the blood-spattered, stitched white fur cloak sweeping down from his broad shoulders. Bare-headed, with a lone, thick braid hanging down the right side of his chest, the dark hair knotted with fetishes: finger bones, strips of gold-threaded silk, bestial canines. A row of withered human ears was sewn onto his belt. The huge flint sword was strapped diagonally across his back. Two bone-handled daggers, each as long and broad-bladed as a short sword, were sheathed in the high moccasins that reached to just below his knees.

Samar Dev studied the Toblakai a moment longer, gaze lifting to fix on his tattooed face. The warrior was facing west, his expression unreadable. She turned back to check the tethers of the packhorses once more, then drew herself up and into the saddle. She settled the toes of her boots into the stirrups and gathered the reins. 'Contrivances,' she said, 'that require no food or water, that do not tire or grow lame, imagine the freedom of such a world as that would bring, Karsa Orlong.'

The eyes he set upon her were those of a barbarian, revealing suspicion and a certain animal wariness. 'People would go everywhere. What freedom in a smaller world, witch?'

_Smaller? You do not understand—'_

'The sound of this city is an offence to peace,' Karsa Orlong said. 'We leave it, now.'

She glanced back at the palace gate, closed with thirty soldiers guarding it. Hands restless near weapons. 'The Falah'd seems disinclined for a formal leavetaking. So be it.'

The Toblakai in the lead, they met few obstacles passing through the city, reaching the west gate before the morning's tenth bell. Initially discomforted by the attention they received from virtually every citizen, on the
street and at windows of flanking buildings, Samar Dev had begun to see the allure of notoriety by the time they rode past the silent guards at the gate, enough to offer one of the soldiers a broad smile and a parting wave with one gloved hand.

The road they found themselves on was not one of the impressive Malazan feats of engineering linking the major cities, for the direction they had chosen led ... nowhere. West, into the Jhag Odhan, the ancient plains that defied the farmer's plough, the mythical conspiracy of land, rain and wind spirits, content only with the deep-rooted natural grasses, eager to wither every planted crop to blackened stalks, the soil blown into the sky. One could tame such land for a generation or two, but in the end the Odhan would reclaim its wild mien, fit for naught but bhederin, jackrabbits, wolves and antelope.

Westward, then, for a half-dozen or so days. Whereupon they would come to a long-dead river-bed wending northwestward, the valley sides cut and gnawed by the seasonal run-off from countless centuries past, gnarled now with sage brush and cacti and grey-oaks. Dark hills on the horizon where the sun set, a sacred place, the oldest maps noted, of some tribe so long extinct their name meant nothing.

Out onto the battered road, then, the city falling away behind them. After a time, Karsa glanced back and bared his teeth at her. 'Listen. That is better, yes?'

'I hear only the wind.'

'Better than ten thousand tireless contrivances.'

He turned back, leaving Samar to mull on his words. Inventions cast moral shadows, she well knew, better than most, in fact. But ... could simple convenience prove so perniciously evil? The action of doing things, laborious things, repetitive things, such actions invited ritual, and with ritual came meaning that expanded beyond the accomplishment of the deed itself. From such ritual selfidentity emerged, and with it self-worth. Even so, to make life easier must possess some inherent value, mustn't it?

_Easier. Nothing earned, the language of recompense fading away until as lost as that ancient tribe's cherished tongue. Worth diminished, value transformed into arbitrariness, oh gods below, and I was so bold as to speak of freedom!_ She kicked her horse forward until she came alongside the Toblakai. 'But is that all? Karsa Orlong! I ask you, is that all?'

'Among my people,' he said after a moment, 'the day is filled, as is the night.'

'With what? Weaving baskets, trapping fish, sharpening swords, training horses, cooking, eating, sewing, fucking—'

'Telling stories, mocking fools who do and say foolish things, yes, all that. You must have visited there, then?'

'I have not.'

A faint smile, then gone. 'There are things to do. And, always, witch, ways of cheating them. But no-one truly in their lives is naive.'

'Truly in their lives?'

'Exulting in the moment, witch, does not require wild dancing.'

'And so, without those rituals ...'

'The young warriors go looking for war.'

'As you must have done.'

Another two hundred paces passed before he said, 'Three of us, we came to deliver death and blood. Yoked like oxen, we were, to glory. To great deeds and the heavy shackles of vows. We went hunting children, Samar Dev.'
'Children?'

He grimaced. 'Your kind. The small creatures who breed like maggots in rotting meat. We sought — no, I sought — to cleanse the world of you and your kin. You, the cutters of forests, the breakers of earth, the binders of freedom. I was a young warrior, looking for war.'

She studied the escaped slave tattoo on his face. 'You found more than you bargained for.'

'I know all about small worlds. I was born in one.'

'So, experience has now tempered your zeal,' she said, nodding. 'No longer out to cleanse the world of humanity.'

He glanced across and down at her. 'I did not say that.'

'Oh. Hard to manage, I would imagine, for a lone warrior, even a Toblakai warrior. What happened to your companions?'

'Dead. Yes, it is as you say. A lone warrior cannot slay a hundred thousand enemies, even if they are children.'

'A hundred thousand? Oh, Karsa, that's barely the population of two Holy Cities. Your enemy does not number in the hundreds of thousands, it numbers in the tens of millions.'

'That many?'

'Are you reconsidering?'

He shook his head slowly, clearly amused. 'Samar Dev, even tens of millions can die, one city at a time.'

'You will need an army.'

'I have an army. It awaits my return.'

_Toblakai. An army of Toblakai, now that would be a sight to loosen the bladder of the Empress herself._

'Needless to say, Karsa Orlong, I hope you never make it home.'

'Hope as you like, Samar Dev. I shall do what needs doing in my own time. None can stop me.'

A statement, not a boast. The witch shivered in the heat.

They approached a range of cliffs marking the Turul'a Escarpment, the sheer face of the limestone pocked with countless caves. Cutter watched Heboric Ghost Hands urge his mount into a canter, drawing ahead, then reining in sharply, the reins cutting into his wrists, a flare of greenish fire blossoming at his hands.

'Now what?' the Daru asked under his breath.

Greyfrog bounded forward and halted at the old man's side.

'They sense something,' Felisin Younger said behind Cutter. 'Greyfrog says the Destriant is suddenly fevered, a return of the jade poison.'

'The what?'

'Jade poison, the demon says. I don't know.'

Cutter looked at Scillara, who rode at his side, head lowered, almost sleeping in the saddle. _She's getting fat._

_Gods, on the meals we cook? Incredible._

'His madness returns,' Felisin said, her voice fearful. 'Cutter, I don't like this—'
The road cuts through, there.' He pointed. 'You can see the notch, beside that tree. We'll camp just up ahead, at the base, and make the climb tomorrow.'

Cutter in the lead, they rode forward until they reached Heboric Ghost Hands. The Destriant was glaring at the cliff rearing before them, muttering and shaking his head. 'Heboric?'

A quick, fevered glance. 'This is the war,' he said. Green flames flickered across his barbed hands. 'The old belong to the ways of blood. The new proclaim their own justice.' The old man's toadlike face stretched into a ghastly grimace. 'These two cannot – cannot – be reconciled. It is so simple, do you see? So simple.'

'No,' Cutter replied, scowling. 'I do not see. What war are you talking about? The Malazans?'

'The Chained One, perhaps he was once of the old kind. Perhaps, yes, he was that. But now, now he is sanctioned. He is of the pantheon. He is new. But then, what are we? Are we of the blood? Or do we bow to the justice of kings, queens, emperors and empresses? Tell me, Daru, is justice written in blood?'

Scillara asked, 'Are we going to camp or not?'

Cutter looked at her, watched as she pushed rustleaf into the bowl of her pipe. Struck sparks.

'They can talk all they want,' Heboric said. 'Every god must choose. In the war to come. Blood, Daru, bums with fire, yes? Yet ... yet, my friend, it tastes of cold iron. You must understand me. I am speaking of what cannot be reconciled. This war – so many lives, lost, all to bury the Elder Gods once and for all. That, my friends, is the heart of this war. The very heart, and all their arguing means nothing. I am done with them. Done with all of you. Treach has chosen. He has chosen. And so must you.'

'I don't like choosing,' Scillara said behind a wreath of smoke. 'As for blood, old man, that's a justice you can never put to sleep. Now, let us find a camp site. I'm hungry, tired and saddlesore.'

Heboric slipped down from his horse, gathered the reins, and made his way towards a side track. 'There's a hollow in the wall,' he said. 'People have camped there for millennia, why not us? One day,' he added as he continued on, 'the jade prison shall shatter, and the fools will stumble out, coughing in the ashes of their convictions. And on that day, they will realize that it's too late. Too late to do a damned thing.'

More sparks and Cutter glanced over to see Felisin Younger lighting her own pipe. The Daru ran a hand through his hair, squinting in the glare of the sun's light reflecting off the cliff-side. He dismounted. 'All right,' he said, leading his horse. 'Let's camp.'

Greyfrog bounded after Heboric, clambering over the rock like a bloated lizard.

'What did he mean?' Felisin asked Cutter as they made their way along the trail. 'Blood and Elder Gods – what are Elder Gods?'

'Old ones, mostly forgotten ones. There's a temple dedicated to one in Darujhistan, must have stood there a thousand years. The god was named K'rul. The worshippers vanished long ago. But maybe that doesn't matter.'

Tugging her own horse along in their wake, Scillara stopped listening to Cutter as he went on. Elder gods, new gods, blood and wars, it made little difference to her. She just wanted to rest her legs, ease the aches in her lower back, and eat everything they still had in the saddle-packs.

Heboric Ghost Hands had saved her, drawn her back into life, and that had lodged something like mercy in her heart, stifling her inclination to dismiss the mad old man outright. He was haunted in truth, and such things could drag the sanest mind into chaos. But what value could be found in trying to make sense of all that he said?

The gods, old or new, did not belong to her. Nor did she belong to them. They played their ascendancy games as if the outcome mattered, as if they could change the hue of the sun, the voice of the wind, as if they could make forests grow in deserts and mothers love their children enough to keep them. The rules of mortal flesh were all that mattered, the need to breathe, to eat, drink, to find warmth in the cold of night. And, beyond
these struggles, when the last breath had been taken inside, well, she would be in no condition to care about anything, about what happened next, who died, who was born, the cries of starving children and the vicious tyrants who starved them – these were, she understood, the simple legacies of indifference, the consequences of the expedient, and this would go on in the mortal realm until the last spark winked out, gods or no gods.

And she could make peace with that. To do otherwise would be to rail at the inevitable. To do otherwise would be to do as Heboric Ghost Hands did, and look where it took him. Into madness. The truth of futility was the hardest truth of all, and for those clear-eyed enough to see it, there was no escape.

She had been to oblivion, after all, and had returned, and so she knew there was nothing to fear in that dreamthick place.

True to Heboric’s words, the rock shelter revealed the signs of countless generations of occupation. Boulder-lined hearths, red ochre paintings on the bleached walls, heaps of broken pottery and fire-split, charred bones. The clay floor of the hollow was packed hard as stone by countless passings. Nearby was the sound of trickling water, and Scillara saw Heboric crouched there, before a spring-fed pool, his glowing hands held over the placid, dark-mirror surface, as if hesitating to plunge them down into the coolness. White-winged butterflies danced in the air around him.

He journeyed with the gift of salvation. Something to do with the green glow of his hands, and the ghosts haunting him. Something to do with his past, and what he saw of the future. But he belonged to Treach now, Tiger of Summer. No reconciliation.

She spied a flat rock and walked over to sit, stretching out her weary legs, noting the bulge of her belly as she leaned back on her hands. Staring down upon it, cruel extrusion on what had once been a lithe form, forcing an expression of disgust on her features.

'Are you with child?'

She glanced up, studied Cutter's face, amused at his dawning revelation as it widened his eyes and filled them with alarm.

'Bad luck happens,' she said. Then, 'I blame the gods.'
CHAPTER SIX

Paint a line with blood and, standing over it, shake a nest of spiders good and hard. They fall to this side of the divide. They fall to that side of the divide. Thus did the gods fall, taut-legged and ready, as the heavens trembled, and in the scattering rain of drifting web – all these dread cut threads of scheming settling down – skirling now in the winds that roared sudden, alive and vengeful, to pronounce in tongues of thunder, the gods were at war.

_Slayer of Magic_  
_A history of the Host of Days_  
_Sarathan_

Through slitted eyes, in the bar of shadow cast by the great helm's ridged brow, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas studied the woman.

Harried aides and functionaries rushed past her and Leoman of the Flails, like leaves in a torrential flood. _And the two, standing there, like stones. Boulders. Like things ... rooted, yes, rooted to bedrock._ Captain Dunsparrow, now Third Dunsparrow. A Malazan.

A woman, and Leoman ... well, Leoman liked women.

So they stood, oh yes, discussing details, finalizing the preparations for the siege to come. The smell of sex a heady smugness enveloping the two like a poisonous fog. He, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, who had ridden at Leoman's side through battle after battle, who had saved Leoman's life more than once, who had done all that had ever been asked of him, was loyal. But she, she is desirable.

He told himself it made no difference. There had been other women. He'd had a few himself from time to time, although not the same ones as Leoman had known, of course. And, one and all, they had been nothing before the faith, withering into insignificance in the face of hard necessity. The voice of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic overwhelmed with its descending squall of destruction. This was as it should be.

Dunsparrow. Malazan, woman, distraction and possible corrupter. For Leoman of the Rails was hiding something from Corabb, and that had never before happened. Her fault. She was to blame. He would have to do something about her, but what?

He rose from the Falah'd's old throne, that Leoman had so contemptuously discarded, and walked to the wide, arched window overlooking the inner keep compound. More chaotic scurrying below, dust twisting in the sunspeared air. Beyond the palace wall, the bleached rooftops of Y'Ghatan, clothes drying in the sun, awnings rippling in the wind, domes and the cylindrical, flat-topped storage buildings called maethgara that housed in vast containers the olive oil for which the city and its outlying groves were renowned. In the very centre of the city rose the eightsided, monstrously buttressed Temple of Scalissara, with its inner dome a mottled hump of remnant gold-leaf and green copper tiles liberally painted by bird droppings.

Scalissara, Matron Goddess of Olives, the city's own, cherished protector, now in abject disrepute. Too many conquests she could not withstand, too many gates battered down, walls pounded into rubble. While the city itself seemed capable of ever rising again from the dust of destruction, Scalissara had revealed a more finite number of possible resurrections. And, following the last conquest, she did not return to pre-eminence. Indeed, she did not return at all.

Now, the temple belonged to the Queen of Dreams.

A foreign goddess. Corabb scowled. Well, maybe not entirely foreign, but still ...

The great statues of Scalissara that once rose from the corners of the city's outer fortifications, marble arms plump and fleshy, upraised, an uprooted olive tree in one hand, a newborn babe in the other, the umbilical cord
wrapped snake-like up her forearm, then across and down, into her womb – the statues were gone. Destroyed in the last conflagration. Now, on three of the four corners, only the pedestal remained, bare feet broken clean above the ankles, and on the fourth even that was gone.

In the days of her supremacy, every foundling child was named after her if female, and, male or female, every abandoned child was taken into the temple to be fed, raised and schooled in the ways of the Cold Dream, a mysterious ritual celebrating a kind of divided spirit or something – the esoterica of cults were not among Corabb's intellectual strengths, but Leoman had been one such foundling child, and had spoken once or twice of such things, when wine and durhang loosened his tongue. Desire and necessity, the war within a mortal's spirit, this was at the heart of the Cold Dream. Corabb did not understand much of that. Leoman had lived but a few years under the guidance of the temple's priestesses, before his wild indulgences saw him expelled into the streets. And from the streets, out into the Odhans, to live among the desert tribes, and so to be forged by the sun and blowing sands of Raraku into the greatest warrior Seven Cities had ever beheld. At least in Corabb's lifetime. The Fala'dhan of the Holy Cities possessed grand champions in their day, of course, but they were not leaders, they had nothing of the wiles necessary for command. Besides, Dassem Ultor and his First Sword had cut them down, every one of them, and that was that.

Leoman had sealed Y'Ghatan, imprisoning within its new walls an emperor's ransom in olive oil. The maethgara were filled to bursting and the merchants and their guilds were shrieking their outrage, although less publicly since Leoman, in a fit of irritation, had drowned seven representatives in the Grand Maeth attached to the palace.

Drowned them in their very own oil. Priests and witches were now petitioning for beakers of that fell amber liquid.

Dunsparrow had been given command of the city garrison, a mob of drunken, lazy thugs. The first tour of the barracks had revealed the military base as little more than a raucous harem, thick with smoke and pool-eyed, prepubescent boys and girls staggering about in a nightmare world of sick abuse and slavery. Thirty officers were executed that first day, the most senior one by Leoman's own hand. The children had been gathered up and redistributed among the temples of the city with the orders to heal the damage and purge what was possible of their memories. The garrison soldiers had been given the task of scouring clean every brick and tile of the barracks, and Dunsparrow had then begun drilling them to counter Malazan siege tactics, with which she seemed suspiciously familiar.

Corabb did not trust her. It was as simple as that. Why would she choose to fight against her own people? Only a criminal, an outlaw, would do that, and how trustworthy was an outlaw? No, there were likely horrific murders and betrayals crowding her sordid past, and now here she was, spreading her legs beneath Falah'd Leoman of the Flails, the known world's most feared warrior. He would have to watch her carefully, hand on the grip of his new cutlass, ready at a moment's notice to cut her clean in half, head to crotch, then across, diagonally, twice – swish swish! – right shoulder to left hip, left shoulder to right hip, and watch her part ways.

A duty-bound execution, yes. At the first hint of betrayal.

'What has so lightened your expression, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas?'

Stiffening, he turned, to find Dunsparrow standing at his side. 'Third,' he said in sour grunt of greeting. 'I was thinking, uh, of the blood and death to come.'

'Leoman says you are the most reasonable of the lot. I now dread closer acquaintance with his other officers.'

'You fear the siege to come?'

'Of course I do. I know what Imperial Armies are capable of. There is said to be a High Mage among them, and that is the most disturbing news of all.'

'The woman commanding them is simple-minded,' Corabb said. 'No imagination, or none that she's bothered showing.'

'And that is my point on that issue, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas.'
He frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'She's had no need, as yet, to display the extent of her imagination. Thus far, it's been easy for her. Little more than marching endless leagues in Leoman's dust.'

'We are her match, and better,' said Corabb, straightening, chest swelling. 'Our spears and swords have already drawn their foul Malazan blood, and shall do so again. More of it, much more.'

'That blood,' she said after a moment, 'is as red as yours, warrior.'

'Is it? Seems to me,' he continued, looking out upon the city once more, 'that betrayal is a dark taint upon it, to so easily twist one of its own into switching sides.'

'As with, for example, the Red Blades?'

'Corrupted fools!'

'Of course. Yet ... Seven Cities born, yes?'

'They have severed their own roots and now flow on the Malazan tide.'

'Nice image, Corabb. You do stumble on those often, don't you?'

'You'd be amazed at the things I stumble on, woman. And I will tell you this, I guard Leoman's back, as I have always done. Nothing has changed that. Not you and your ... your—'

'Charms?'

'Wiles. I have marked you, Third, and best you be mindful of that.'

'Leoman has done well to have such a loyal friend.'

'He shall lead the Apocalypse—'

'Oh, he will at that.'

'—for none but he is equal to such a thing. Y'Ghatan shall be a curse name in the Malazan Empire for all time—'

'It already is.'

'Yes, well, it shall be more so.'

'What is it about this city, I wonder, that has driven so deep a knife into the empire? Why did the Claw act here against Dassem Ultor? Why not somewhere else? Somewhere less public, less risky? Oh yes, they made it seem like a wayward accident of battle, but no-one was fooled. I admit to a fascination with this city, indeed, it is what brought me here in the first place.'

'You are an outlaw. The Empress has a price on your head.'

'She does? Or are you just guessing?'

'I am certain of it. You fight against your own people.'

'My own people. Who are they, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas? The Malazan Empire has devoured many peoples, just as it has done those of Seven Cities. Now that the rebellion is over, are your kin now Malazan? No, that thought is incomprehensible to you, isn't it? I was born on Quon Tali, but the Malazan Empire was born on Malaz Island. My people too were conquered, just as yours have been.'

Corabb said nothing, too confused by her words. Malazans were ... Malazans, dammit. All of a kind, no matter the hue of their skin, the tilt of their eyes, no matter all the variations within that Hood-cursed empire. Malazans! 'You will get no sympathy from me, Third.'
'I did not ask for it.'

'Good.'

'Now, will you accompany us?'

_Us?_ Corabb slowly turned. Leoman stood a few paces behind them, arms crossed, leaning against the map-
table. In his eyes a sly, amused expression.

'We are going into the city,' Leoman said. 'I wish to visit a certain temple.'

Corabb bowed. 'I shall accompany you, sword at the ready, Warleader.'

Leoman's brows lifted fractionally. 'Warleader. Is there no end of titles you will bestow upon me, Corabb?'

'None, Hand of the Apocalypse.'

He flinched at that honorific, then turned away. A halfdozen officers stood waiting at one end of the long
table, and to these warriors, Leoman said, 'Begin the evacuation. And no undue violence! Kill every looter you
catch, of course, but quietly. Ensure the protection of families and their possessions, including livestock—'

One of the warriors started. 'But Commander, we shall need—'

'No, we shall not. We have all we need. Besides, those animals are the only wealth most of the refugees will
have to take with them. I want escorts on the west road.' He glanced over at Dunsparrow. 'Have the messengers
returned from Lothal?'

'Yes, with delighted greetings from the Falah'd.'

'Delighted that I am not marching on to his city, you mean.'

Dunsparrow shrugged.

'And so he is dispatching troops to manage the road?'

'He is, Leoman.'

_Ah._ She _is already beyond titles!_ Corabb struggled to keep the snarl from his voice. 'He is Warleader to you,
Third. Or Commander, or Falah'd—'

'Enough,' cut in Leoman. 'I am pleased enough with my own name to hear it used. From now on, friend
Corabb, we shall dispense with titles when only officers are present.'

As _I thought, the corruption has begun._ He glared at Dunsparrow, but she was paying him no attention, her
eyes settled possessively on Leoman of the Flails. Corabb's own gaze narrowed. _Leoman the Fallen._

No track, alley or street in Y'Ghatan ran straight for more than thirty paces. Laid upon successive foundations,
rising, it was likely, from the very first maze-wound fortress city built here ten thousand years or more past, the
pattern resembled a termite mound with each twisting passageway exposed to the sky, although in many cases
that sky was no more than a slit, less than an arm's length wide, overhead.

To look upon Y'Ghatan, and to wander its corridors, was to step into antiquity. Cities, Leoman had once told
Corabb, were born not of convenience, nor lordship, nor markets and their babbling merchants. Born not even
of harvest and surplus. No, said Leoman, cities were born from the need for protection. Fortresses, that and
nothing more, and all that followed did just that: follow. And so, cities were always walled, and indeed, walls
were often all that remained of the oldest ones.

And this was why, Leoman had explained, a city would always build upon the bones of its forebears, for this
lifted its walls yet higher, and made of the place a more formidable protection. It was the marauding tribes, he
had said, laughing, that forced the birth of cities, of the very cities capable of defying them and, ultimately,
conquering them. Thus did civilization arise from savagery.

All very well, Corabb mused as they walked towards this city's heart, and possibly even true, but already he longed for the open lands of the Odhans, the desert's sweet whispering wind, the sultry heat that could bake a man's brain inside his helmet until he dreamed raving that he was being pursued by herds of fat aunts and leathery grandmothers who liked to pinch cheeks.

Corabb shook his head to dispel the recollection and all its attendant terrors. He walked at Leoman's left, cutlass drawn and a scowl of belligerence ready for any suspicious-looking citizen. Third Dunsparrow was to Leoman's right, the two brushing arms every now and then and exchanging soft words, probably grim with romance, that Corabb was pleased he could not overhear. That, or they were talking about ways of doing away with him.

'Oponn pull me, push her,' he said under his breath.

Leoman's head turned. 'You said something, Corabb?'

'I was cursing this damned rat path, Avenger.'

'We're almost there,' Leoman said, uncharacteristically considerate, which only deepened Corabb's foul mood. 'Dunsparrow and I were discussing what to do with the priesthood.'

'Were you now? That's nice. What do you mean, what to do with them?'

'They are resisting the notion of leaving.'

'I am not surprised.'

'Nor am I, but leave they shall.'

'It's all the wealth,' Corabb said. 'And their reliquaries and icons and wine cellars – they fear they will be set upon on the road, raped and robbed and their hair all unbunned.'

Both Leoman and Dunsparrow peered over at him with odd expressions.

'Corabb,' Leoman said, 'I think it best you remove that new great helm of yours.'

'Yes,' Dunsparrow added. 'There are streams of sweat pouring down your face.'

'I am fine,' Corabb said in growl. 'This was the Champion's helm. But Leoman would not take it. He should have. In truth, I am only carrying it for him. At the appropriate time, he will discover the need to tear it from my head and don it himself, and the world shall right itself once more, may all the yellow and blue gods be praised.'

'Corabb—'

'I am fine, although we had better do something about all those old women following us. I will spit myself on my own sword before I let them get me. Ooh what a nice little boy! Enough of that, I say.'

'Give me that helm,' Leoman said.

'It's about time you recognized your destiny, Adjunct Slayer.'

Corabb's head was pounding by the time they reached the Temple of Scalissara. Leoman had elected not to wear the great helm, even with its sodden quilted under-padding removed – without which it would have been too loose in any case. At least the old women were gone; in fact, the route they had taken was almost deserted, although they could hear the chaotic sounds of crowds in the main thoroughfares, being driven from the city, out onto the west road that led to Lothal on the coast. Panic rode the sweltering currents, yet it was clear that most of the four thousand soldiers now under Leoman's command were out in the streets, maintaining order.
Seven lesser temples, each dedicated to one of the Seven Holies, encircled the octagonal edifice now sanctified in the name of the Queen of Dreams. The formal approach was spiral, wending through these smaller domed structures. The flanking compound walls had been twice defaced, first with rededication to Malazan gods soon after the conquest; then again with the rebellion, when the temples and their new foreign priesthoods had been assailed, the sanctuaries sundered and hundreds slaughtered. Friezes and metopes, caryatids and panels were all ruined now, entire pantheons defiled and made incomprehensible.

All, that is, but the temple of the Queen of Dreams, its impressive fortifications making it virtually impregnable. There were in any case mysteries surrounding the Queen, Corabb knew, and it was generally believed that her cult had not originated in the Malazan Empire. The Goddess of Divinations cast a thousand reflections upon a thousand peoples, and no one civilization could claim her as exclusively its own. So, having battered futilely at the temple's walls for six days, the rebels had concluded that the Queen was not their enemy after all, and had thereafter left her in peace. Desire and necessity, Leoman had said, laughing, upon hearing the tale.

Nonetheless, as far as Corabb was concerned, the goddess was ... foreign.

'What business do we have,' Corabb asked, 'visiting this temple?'

Leoman replied with a question of his own: 'Do you recall, old friend, your vow to follow me no matter what seeming madness I undertake?'

'I do, Warleader.'

'Well, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, you shall find yourself sorely tested in that promise. For I intend to speak with the Queen of Dreams.'

'The High Priestess—'

'No, Corabb,' said Leoman, 'with the goddess herself.'

'It is a difficult thing, killing dragons.'

Blood the colour of false dawn continued to spread across the buckled pavestones. Mappo and Icarium remained beyond its reach, for it would not do to make contact with that dark promise. The Jhag was seated on a stone block that might have once been an altar but had been pushed up against the wall to the left of the entrance. The warrior's head was in his hands, and he had said nothing for some time.

Mappo alternated his attention between his friend and the enormous draconean corpse rearing over them. Both scenes left him distraught. There was much worthy of grieving in this cavern, in the terrible ritual murder that had taken place here, and in the fraught torrent of memories unleashed within Icarium upon its discovery.

'This leaves naught but Osserc,' Mappo said. 'And should he fall, the warren of Sere shall possess no ruler. I believe, Icarium, that I am beginning to see a pattern.'

'Desecration,' the Jhag said in a whisper, not looking up.

'The pantheon is being made vulnerable. Fener, drawn into this world, and now Osserc – the very source of wer under assault. How many other gods and goddesses are under siege, I wonder? We have been away from things too long, my friend.'

'Away, Mappo? There is no away.'

The Trell studied the dead dragon once more. 'Perhaps you are right. Who could have managed such a thing? Within the dragon is the heart of the warren itself, its wellfount of power. Yet ... someone defeated Sorrit, drove her down into the earth, into this cavern within a sky keep, and spiked her to Blackwood – how long ago, do you think? Would we not have felt her death?' With no answers forthcoming from Icarium, Mappo edged closer to the blood pool and peered upward, focusing on that massive iron, rust-streaked spike. 'No,' he murmured after a moment, 'that is not rust. Otataral. She was bound by otataral. Yet, she was Elder – she should have been
able to defeat that eager entropy. I do not understand this ...

'Old and new,' Icarium said, his tone twisting the words into a curse. He rose suddenly, his expression ravaged and eyes hard. 'Speak to me, Mappo. Tell me what you know of spilled blood.'

He turned away. 'Icarium—'

'Mappo, tell me.'

Gaze settling on the aquamarine pool, the Trell was silent as emotions warred within him. Then he sighed. 'Who first dipped their hands into this fell stream? Who drank deep and so was transformed, and what effect did that otataral spike have upon that transformation? Icarium, this blood is fouled—'

'Mappo.'

'Very well. All blood spilled, my friend, possesses power. Beasts, humans, the smallest bird, blood is the life-force, the soul's own stream. Within it is locked the time of living, from beginning to end. It is the most sacred force in existence. Murderers with their victims' blood staining their hands feed from that force, whether they choose to or not. Many are sickened, others find a new hunger within themselves, and so become slaves to the violence of slaying. The risk is this: blood and its power become tainted by such things as fear and pain. The stream, sensing its own demise, grows stressed, and the shock is as a poison.'

'What of fate?' Icarium asked in a heavy voice.

Mappo flinched, his eyes still on the pool. 'Yes,' he whispered, 'you cut to the matter's very heart. What does anyone take upon themselves when such blood is absorbed, drawn into their own soul? Must violent death be in turn delivered upon them? Is there some overarching law, seeking ever to redress the imbalance? If blood feeds us, what in turn feeds it, and is it bound by immutable rules or is it as capricious as we are? Are we creatures on this earth the only ones free to abuse our possessions?'

'The K'Chain Che'Malle did not kill Sorrit,' Icarium said. 'They knew nothing of it.'

'Yet this creature here was frozen, so it must have been encompassed in the Jaghut's ritual of Omtose Phellack – how could the K'Chain Che'Malle not have known of this? They must have, even if they themselves did not slay Sorrit.'

'No, they are innocent, Mappo. I am certain of it.'

'Then ... how?'

'The crucifix, it is Blackwood. From the realm of the Tiste Edur. From the Shadow Realm, Mappo. In that realm, as you know, things can be in two places at once, or begin in one yet find itself eventually manifesting in another. Shadow wanders, and respects no borders.'

'Ah, then ... this ... was trapped here, drawn from Shadow—'

'Snared by the Jaghut's ice magic – yet the spilled blood, and perhaps the otataral, proved too fierce for Omtose Phellack, thus shattering the Jaghut's enchantment.'

'Sorrit was murdered in the Shadow Realm. Yes. Now the pattern, Icarium, grows that much clearer.'

Icarium fixed bright, fevered eyes upon the Trell. 'Is it? You would blame the Tiste Edur?'

'Who else holds such command of Shadow? Not the Malazan pretender who now sits on the throne!'

The Jhag warrior said nothing. He walked along the pool's edge, head down as if seeking signs from the battered floor. 'I know this Jaghut. I recognize her work. The carelessness in the unleashing of Omtose Phellack. She was ... distraught. Impatient, angry, weary of the endless paths the K'Chain Che'Malle employed in their efforts to invade, to establish colonies on every continent. She cared nothing for the civil war afflicting the K'Chain Che'Malle. These Short-Tails were fleeing their kin, seeking a refuge. I doubt she bothered asking questions.'
'Do you think,' Mappo asked, 'that she knows of what has happened here?'

'No, else she would have returned. It may be that she is dead. So many are ...'

_Oh, Icarium, would that such knowledge remained lost to you._

The Jhag halted and half-turned. 'I am cursed. This is the secret you ever keep from me, isn't it? There are ... recollections. Fragments.' He lifted a hand as if to brush his brow, then let it fall. 'I sense... terrible things ...'

'Yes. But they do not belong to you, Icarium. Not to the friend standing before me now.'

Icarium's deepening frown tore at Mappo's heart, but he would not look away, would not abandon his friend at this tortured moment.

'You,' Icarium said, 'are my protector, but that protection is not as it seems. You are at my side, Mappo, to protect the world. From me.'

'It is not that simple.'

'Isn't it?'

'No. I am here to protect the friend I look upon now, from the ... the other Icarium ...'

'This must end, Mappo.'

'No.'

Icarium faced the dragon once more. 'Ice,' he said in murmur. 'Omtose Phellack.' He turned to Mappo. 'We shall leave here now. We travel to the Jhag Odhan. I must seek out kin of my blood. Jaghut.'

_To ask for imprisonment. Eternal ice, sealing you from all life. But they will not trust that. No, they will seek to kill you. Let Hood deal with you. And this time, they will be right. For their hearts do not fear judgement, and their blood ... their blood is as cold as ice._

Sixteen barrows had been raised half a league south of Y'Ghatan, each one a hundred paces long, thirty wide, and three man-heights high. Rough-cut limestone blocks and internal columns to hold up the curved roofs, sixteen eternally dark abodes, home to Malazan bones. Newly cut, stone-lined trenches reached out to them from the distant city, carrying Y'Ghatan's sewage in turgid flows swarming with flies. Sentiments, Fist Keneb reflected sourly, could not be made any clearer.

Ignoring the stench as best he could, Keneb guided his horse towards the central barrow, which had once been surmounted by a stone monument honouring the empire's fallen. The statue had been toppled, leaving only the broad pedestal. Standing on it now were two men and two dogs, all facing Y'Ghatan's uneven, whitewashed walls.

The Barrow of Dassem Ultor and his First Sword, which held neither Dassem nor any of his guard who had fallen outside the city all those years ago. Most soldiers knew the truth of that. The deadly, legendary fighters of the First Sword had been buried in unmarked graves, to keep them from desecration, and Dassem's own grave was believed to be somewhere outside Unta, on Quon Tali.

_Probably empty._

The cattle-dog, Bent, swung its huge head to watch Keneb push his horse up the steep slope. Red-rimmed eyes, set wide in a nest of scars, a regard that chilled the Malazan, reminding him yet again that he but imagined his own familiarity with that beast. It should have died with Coltaine. The animal looked as though pieced together from disparate, unidentifiable parts, only roughly approximating a dog's shape. Humped, uneven shoulder muscles, a neck as thick round as a grown man's thigh, misshapen, muscle-knitted haunches, a chest deep as a desert lion's. Beneath the empty eyes the creature was all jaw, overwide, the snout misaligned, the three remaining canines visible even when Bent's fierce mouth was closed, for most of the skin covering
them had been torn away at the Fall, and nothing had replaced it. One shorn ear, the other healed flat and out to
the side.

The stub that was all that was left of Bent's tail did not wag as Keneb dismounted. Had it done so, Keneb
allowed the possibility that he would have been shocked to death.

The mangy, rat-like Hengese dog, Roach, trott ed up to sniff at Keneb's left boot, whereupon it squatted
ladylike and urinated against the leather. Cursing, the Malazan stepped away, cocking one foot for a savage
kick, then halting the motion at a deep growl from Bent.

Warleader Gall rumbled a laugh. 'Roach but claims this heap of stones, Fist. Hood knows, there's no-one
below to get offended.'

'Too bad one cannot say the same for the other barrows,' Keneb said, drawing off his riding gloves.

'Ah, but that insult belongs at the feet of the citizens of Y'Ghatan.'

'Roach should have displayed more patience, then, Warleader.'

'Hood take us, man, she's a damned dog. Besides, you think she'll run out of piss any time soon?'

*If I had my way, she'd run out of a lot more besides.* 'Not likely, I'll grant you. That rat has more malign
fluids in it than a rabid bhederin bull.'

'Poor diet.'

Keneb addressed the other man: 'Fist Temul, the Adjunct wishes to know if your Wickan scouts have ridden
round the city.'

The young warrior was a child no longer. He had grown two hand's-widths since Aren. Lean, hawk-faced,
with far too many losses pooled in his black eyes. The Crow clan warriors who had so resented his command at
Aren were silent these days. Gaze fixed on Y'Ghatan, he gave no indication of having heard Keneb's words.

*More and more like Coltaine with every passing day,* Gall says. Keneb knew enough to wait.

Gall cleared his throat. 'The west road shows signs of an exodus, no more than a day or two before we
arrived. A half-dozen old Crow horse-warriors demanded that they pursue and ravage the fleeing refugees.'

'And where are they now?' Keneb asked.

'Guarding the baggage train, hah!'

Temul spoke. 'Inform the Adjunct that all gates are sealed. A trench has been dug at the base of the tel,
cutting through the ramped roads on all sides, to a depth of nearly a man's height. Yet, this trench is but two
paces wide -- clearly the enemy ran out of time.'

Out of time. Keneb wondered at that. With pressed workers, Leoman could have had a far broader barrier
excavated within the span of a single day. *Very well. Did your scouts report any large weapons mounted on the
walls or on the roofs of the corner towers?*

'Malazan-built ballistae, an even dozen,' Temul replied, 'ranged about at equal intervals. No sign of
concentrations.'

'Well,' Keneb said with a grunt, 'foolish to suppose that Leoman would give away his perceived weak-points.
And those walls were manned?'

'Yes, crowds, all shouting taunts to my warriors.'

'And showing their naked backsides,' Gall added, turning to spit.

Roach trotted over to sniff at the gleaming phlegm, then licked it up.
Nauseous, Keneb looked away, loosening the chin-strap of his helm. ‘Fist Temul, have you made judgement as to our surest approach?’

Temul glanced over, expressionless. ‘I have.’

‘And?’

‘And what, Fist? The Adjunct cares nothing for our opinions.’

‘Perhaps not, but I would like to hear your thoughts in any case.’

‘Ignore the gates. Use Moranth munitions and punch right through a wall midway between tower and gate. Any side will do. Two sides would be even better.’

‘And how will the sappers survive camping out at the base of a wall?’

‘We attack at night.’

‘That is a risky thing to do.’

Temul scowled, and said nothing.

Gall turned to regard Keneb, his tear-etched face mildly incredulous. ‘We begin a siege, man, not a Hood-damned fly dance.’

‘I know. But Leoman must have mages, and night will not hide sappers from them.’

‘They can be countered,’ Gall retorted. ‘It’s what our mages are for. But we waste our breaths with such things. The Adjunct will do as she chooses.’

Keneb faced right and studied the vast encampment of the Fourteenth Army, arrayed to fend off a sortie, should Leoman prove so foolish. The investiture would be a careful, measured exercise, conducted over two or three days. The range of the Malazan ballistae on the walls was well known, so there would be no surprises there. Even so, encirclement would stretch their lines appallingly thin. They would need advance emplacements to keep an eye on the gates, and Temul’s Wickans and Seti, as well as Gall’s Khundryl horse-warriors, divided into companies and positioned to respond should Leoman surprise them.

The Fist shook his head. ‘This is what I do not understand. Admiral Nok’s fleet is even now sailing for Lothal with five thousand marines on board, and once Dujek forces the last city to capitulate he will begin a fast march to join us. Leoman must know his position is hopeless. He cannot win, even should he maul us. We will still be able to keep this noose knotted tight round Y’Ghatan, whilst we wait for reinforcements. He is finished. So why does he continue to resist?’

‘Aye,’ said Gall. ‘He should have carried on riding west, out into the odhan. We would never have caught him out there, and he could begin rebuilding, drawing warriors to his cause.’

Keneb glanced over. ‘So, Warleader, you are as nervous about this as I am.’

‘He means to bleed us, Keneb. Before he falls, he means to bleed us.’ A rough gesture. ‘More barrows to ring this cursed city. And he will die fighting, and so will become yet another martyr.’

‘So, the killing of Malazans is sufficient cause to fight. What have we done to deserve this?’

‘Wounded pride,’ Temul said. ‘It is one thing to suffer defeat on a field of battle, it is another to be crushed when your foe has no need even to draw a sword.’

‘Humiliated in Raraku,’ Gall said, nodding. ‘The growing cancer in their souls. This cannot be carved out. The Malazans must be made to know pain.’

‘That is ridiculous,’ Keneb said. ‘Was not the Chain of Dogs glory enough for the bastards?’
'The first casualty among the defeated is recalling their own list of crimes, Fist,' Temul said.

Keneb studied the young man. The foundling Grub was often in Temul's company, and among the strange lad's disordered host of peculiar observations, Grub had hinted of glory, or perhaps infamy, bound to Temul's future. Of course, that future could be tomorrow. Besides, Grub might be no more than a brain-addled waif ... all right, I don't believe that – he seems to know too much. If only half the things he said made any sense ... Well, in any case, Temul still managed to startle Keneb with statements more suited to some veteran campaigner. 'Very well, Fist Temul. What would you do, were you in Leoman's place?'

Silence, then a quick look at Keneb, something like surprise in Temul's angular features. A moment later the expressionless mask returned, and he shrugged.

'Coltaine walks in your shadow, Temul,' Gall said, running his fingers down his own face as if to mimic the tears tattooed there. 'I see him, again and again—'

'No, Gall. I have told you before. You see naught but the ways of the Wickans; all else is but your imagination. Coltaine sent me away; it is not to me that he will return.'

_He haunts you still, Temul. Coltaine sent you with Duiker to keep you alive, not to punish or shame you. Why won't you accept that?_'

'I have seen plenty of Wickans,' Gall said in a growl.

This had the sound of an old argument. Sighing, Keneb walked over to his horse. 'Any last words for the Adjunct? Either of you? No? Very well.' He swung up into the saddle and gathered the reins.

The cattle-dog Bent watched him with its sand-coloured, dead eyes. Nearby, Roach had found a bone and was lying sprawled on its belly, legs spread out as it gnawed with the mindless concentration unique to dogs.

Halfway down the slope, Keneb realized where that bone had likely come from. A kick, all right, hard enough to send that rat straight through Hood's Gate.

Corporal Deadsmell, Throatslitter and Widdershins were sitting round a game of Troughs, black stones bouncing off the rudder and rolling in the cups, as Bottle walked up.

'Where's your sergeant?' he asked.

Deadsmell glanced up, then back down. 'Mixing paint.'

'Paint? What kind of paint?'

'It's what Dal Honese do,' said Widdershins, 'death-mask paint.'

'Before a siege?'

Throatslitter hissed – what passed for laughter, Bottle supposed – and said, 'Hear that? Before a siege. That's very cute, very cute, Bottle.'

'It's a death mask, idiot,' Widdershins said to Bottle. 'He paints it on when he thinks he's about to die.'

'Great attitude for a sergeant,' Bottle said, looking around. The other two soldiers of the Ninth Squad, Galt and Lobe, were feuding over what to put in a pot of boiling water. Both held handfuls of herbs, and as each reached to toss the herbs in the other soldier pushed that hand away and sought to throw in his own. Again and again, over the boiling water. Neither spoke. 'All right, where is Balm finding his paint?'

'There's a local cemetery north of the road,' Deadsmell said. 'I'd guess maybe there.'

'If I don't find him,' Bottle said, 'the captain wants a meeting with all the sergeants in her company. Dusk.'

'Where?'
'The sheep pen back of the farm south of the road, the one with the caved-in roof.'

Over by the hearth the pot had boiled dry and Galt and Lobe were fighting over water jugs.

Bottle moved on to the next encampment. He found Sergeant Moak sprawled with his back resting on a heap of bedrolls. The Falari, copper-haired and bearded, was picking at his overlarge teeth with a fish spine. His soldiers were nowhere in sight.

'Sergeant. Captain Faradan Sort's called a meeting—'

'I heard. I ain't deaf.'

'Where's your squad?'

'Got the squats.'

'All of them?'

'I cooked last night. They got weak stomachs, that's all.' He belched, and a moment later Bottle caught a whiff of something like rotting fish guts.

'Hood take me! Where'd you find anywhere to catch fish on this trail?'

'Didn't. Brought it with me. Was a bit high, it's true, but nothing a real soldier couldn't handle. There's some scrapings in the pot -- want some?'

'No.'

'No wonder the Adjunct's in trouble, what with a whole damn army of cowardly whiners.'

Bottle stepped past to move on.

'Hey,' Moak called out, 'tell Fid the wager's still on as far as I'm concerned.'

'What wager?'

'Between him and me and that's all you got to know.'

'Fine.'

He found Sergeant Mosel and his squad dismantling a broken wagon in the ditch. They had piled up the wood and Flashwit and Mayfly were prying nails, studs and fittings from the weathered planks, whilst Taffo and Uru Hela struggled with an axle under the sergeant's watchful eye.

Mosel glanced over. 'Bottle, isn't it? Fourth Squad, Fid's, right? If you're looking for Neffarias Bredd you just missed him. A giant of a man, must have Fenn blood in him.'

'No, I wasn't, Sergeant. You saw Bredd?'

'Well, not me, I've just come back, but Flashwit ...'

At mention of her name the burly woman looked up. 'Yah. I heard he was just by here. Hey, Mayfly, who was it said he was just by?'

'Who?'

'Neffarias Bredd, you fat cow, who else would we be talking 'bout?'

'I don't know who said what. I was only half listening, anyway. I think it was Smiles, was it Smiles? Might have been. Anyway, I'd like to roll in the blankets with that man—'

'Smiles isn't a man—'
'Not her. Bredd, I mean.'

Bottle asked, 'You want to bed Bredd?'

Mosel stepped closer, eyes narrowing. 'You making fun of my soldiers, Bottle?'

'I'd never do that, Sergeant. Just came to tell there's a meeting—'

'Oh, yes, I heard.'

'From who?'

The lean man shrugged. 'Can't remember. Does it matter?'

'It does if it means I'm wasting my time.'

'You ain't got time to waste? Why, what makes you unique?'

'That axle doesn't look broken,' Bottle observed.

'Who said it was?'

'Then why are you taking the wagon apart?'

'We been eating its dust so long we just took revenge.'

'Where's the wagoner, then? The load crew?'

Flashwit laughed an ugly laugh.

Mosel shrugged again, then gestured further down the ditch. Four figures, bound and gagged, were lying motionless in the yellow grass.

The two squads of sergeants Sobelone and Tugg were gathered round a wrestling match between, Bottle saw as he pushed his way in for a better look, Saltlick and Shortnose. Coins were being flung down, puffing the dust of the road, as the two heavy infantrymen strained and heaved in a knot of arm and leg holds. Saltlick's massive, round face was visible, red, sweaty and streaked with dust, the expression fixed in its usual cow-like, uninterested incomprehensibility. He blinked slowly, and seemed to be concentrating on chewing something.

Bottle nudged Toles, the soldier on his right. 'What are they fighting over?'

Toles looked down on Bottle, his thin, pallid face twitching. 'It's very simple. Two squads, marching in step, one behind the other, then the other in front of the one that had been in front beforehand, proving the mythical camaraderie to be no more than some epic instigator of bad poetry and bawdy songs designed to appease lowbrows, in short, a lie. Culminating at the last in this disreputable display of animal instincts—'

'Saltlick bit Shortnose's ear off,' cut in Corporal Reem, standing on Bottle's left.

'Oh. Is that what he's chewing?'

'Yeah. Taking his time with it, too.'

'Do Tugg and Sobelone know about the captain's meeting?'

'Yeah.'

'So, Shortnose who got his nose tip cut off now has only one ear, too.'

'Yeah. He'll do anything to spite his face.'

'Is he the one who got married last week?'

'Yeah, to Hanno there. She's the one betting against him. Anyway, from what I hear, it ain't his face that she
adores, if you know what I mean.'

Bottle caught sight of a low hill on the north side of the road on which stood a score of twisted, hunched guldindha trees. 'Is that the old cemetery?'

'Looks like it, why?'

Without answering, Bottle pushed his way back through the crowd and set off for the burial ground. He found Sergeant Balm in a looter's pit, face streaked with ash, making a strange monotonous nasal groaning sound as he danced in tight circles.

'Sergeant, captain wants a meeting—'

'Shit up, I'm busy.'

'Dusk, in the sheep pen—'

'Interrupt a Dal Honese death dirge and you'll know a thousand thousand lifetimes of curses, your bloodlines for ever. Hairy old women will steal your children and your children's children and chop them up and cook them with vegetables and tubers and a few precious threads of saffron—'

'I'm done, Sergeant. Orders delivered. Goodbye.'

'—and Dal Honese warlocks wearing snake girdles will lie with your woman and she'll birth venomous worms all covered in curly black hair—'

'Keep it up, Sergeant, and I'll make a doll of you—'

Balm leapt from the pit, eyes suddenly wide. 'You evil man! Get away from me! I never done nothing to you!' He spun about and ran away, gazelle-skins flapping.

Bottle turned and began the long walk back to the camp.

He found Strings assembling his crossbow, Cuttle watching with avid interest. A crate of Moranth munitions was to one side, the lid pried loose and the grenados lying like turtle eggs in nests of padding. The others of the squad were sitting some distance away, looking nervous.

The sergeant glanced up. 'Bottle, you found them all?'

'Aye.'

'Good. So, how are the other squads holding up?'

'Just fine,' Bottle replied. He regarded the others on the far side of the hearth. 'What's the point?' he asked. 'If that box goes up, it'll knock down Y'Ghatan's wall from here, and you and most of this army will be red hail.'

Sudden sheepish expressions. Grunting, Koryk rose, deliberately casual. 'I was already sitting here,' he said. 'Then Tarr and Smiles crawled over to huddle in my shadow.'

'The man lies,' Smiles said. 'Besides, Bottle, why did you volunteer to go wandering with the captain's orders?'

'Because I'm not stupid.'

'Yeah?' Tarr said. 'Well, you're back now, aren't you?'

'I thought they'd be finished by now.' He waved a fly away that had been buzzing in front of his face, then walked over to sit downwind of the hearth. 'So, Sergeant, what do you figure the captain's got to say?'

'Sappers and shields,' Cuttle said in a growl.
'Shields?'
'Aye. We scurry in hunched low and the rest of you shield us from all the arrows and rocks until we're done planting the mines, then whoever's left runs back out, as fast as they can and it won't be fast enough.'
'A one-way trip, then.'
Cuttle grinned.
'It'll be more elaborate than that,' Strings said. 'I hope.'
'She goes straight in, that's what she does.'
'Maybe, Cuttle. Maybe not. She wants most of her army still breathing when the dust's settled.'
'Minus a few hundred sappers.'
'We're getting rare enough as it is,' Strings said. 'She won't want to waste us.'
'That'd be a first for the Malazan Empire.'
The sergeant looked over at Cuttle. 'Tell you what, why don't I just kill you now and be done with it?'
'Forget it. I want to take the rest of you sorry humpers with me.'

Nearby, Sergeant Gesler and his squad had appeared and were making their camp. Corporal Stormy, Bottle noted, wasn't with them. Gesler strode over. 'Fid.'

'Kalam and Quick back, too?'
'No, they went on, with Stormy.'
'On? Where?'

Gesler crouched opposite Strings. 'Let's just say I'm actually glad to see your ugly face, Fid. Maybe they'll make it back, maybe they won't. I'll tell you about it later. Spent the morning with the Adjunct. She had lots of questions.'

'About what?'
'About the stuff I'll tell you about later. So we've got a new captain.'
'Faradan Sort.'
'Koreli?'
Strings nodded. 'Stood the Wall, we think.'
'So she can probably take a punch.'
'Then punch back, aye.'
'Well that's just great.'
'She wants all the sergeants for a meeting tonight.'
'I think I'll go back and answer a few more of the Adjunct's questions.'
'You can't avoid meeting her for ever, Gesler.'
'Oh yeah? Watch me. So, where did they move Captain Kindly to?'
Strings shrugged. 'To some company that needs pulling into shape, I'd imagine.'
'And we don't?'

'Harder terrifying us than most in this army, Gesler. I think he'd already given up on us, in any case. I'm not sorry to see the miserable bastard on his way. This meeting tonight will likely be about what we'll be doing in the siege. Either that or she just wants to waste our time with some inspiring tirade.'

'For the glory of the empire,' Gesler said, grimacing.

'For vengeance,' Koryk said from where he sat tying fetishes onto his baldric.

'Vengeance is glorious, so long as it's us delivering it, soldier.'

'No it's not,' said Strings. 'It's sordid, no matter how you look at it.'

'Ease up, Fid. I was only half serious. You're so tense you'd think we was heading into a siege or something. Anyway, why ain't there a few hands of Claw to do the dirty work? You know, infiltrate the city and the palace and stick a knife in Leoman and be done with it. Why do we have to get messed up with a real fight? What kind of empire are we, these days?'

No-one spoke for a time. Bottle watched his sergeant. Strings was testing the pull on the crossbow, but Bottle could see that he was thinking.

Cuttle said, 'Laseen's pulled 'em in. Close and tight.'

The regard Gesler fixed on the sapper was level, gauging. 'That the rumour, Cuttle?'

'One of 'em. What do I know? Maybe she caught something on the wind.'

'You certainly have,' Strings muttered as he examined the case of quarrels.

'Only that the few veteran companies still on Quon Tali were ordered to Unta and Malaz City.'

Strings finally looked up. 'Malaz City? Why there?'

'The rumour weren't that specific, Sergeant. Just the where, not the why. Anyway, there's something going on.'

'Where'd you catch all this?' Gesler asked.

'That new sergeant, Hellian, from Kartool.'

'The drunk one?'

'That's her.'

'Surprised she noticed anything,' Strings observed. 'What got her shipped out here?'

'That she won't talk about. In the wrong place at the wrong time, I figure, from the way her face twists all sour on the subject. Anyway, she went to Malaz City first, then joined up with the transports at Naph, then on to Unta. She never seems so drunk she can't keep her eyes open.'

'You trying to get your hand on her thigh, Cuttle?'

'A bit too young for me, Fid, but a man could do worse.'

'A bleary-eyed wife,' Smiles said with a snort. 'That's probably the best you could manage, Cuttle.'

'When I was a lad,' the sapper said, reaching out to collect a grenade – a sharper, Bottle noted with alarm as Cuttle began tossing it up in the air and catching it onehanded – 'every time I said something disrespectful of my betters, my father'd take me out back and slap me halfunconscious. Something tells me, Smiles, your da was way too indulgent when it came to his little girl.'
'You just try it, Cuttle, and I'll stick a knife in your eye.'

'If I was your da, Smiles, I'd have long ago killed myself.'

She went pale at that, although no-one else seemed to notice, since their eyes were following the grenado up and down.

'Put it away,' Strings said.

An ironic lifting of the brows, then, smiling, Cuttle returned the sharper to the crate. 'Anyway, it looks like Hellian's got a capable corporal, which tells me she'd held onto good judgement, despite drinking brandy like water.'

Bottle rose. 'Actually, I forgot about her. Where are they camped, Cuttle?'

'Near the rum wagon. But she already knows about the meeting.'

Bottle glanced over at the crate of munitions. 'Oh. Well, I'm going for a walk in the desert.'

'Don't stray too far,' the sergeant said, 'could be some of Leoman's warriors out there.'

'Right.'

A short while later he came within sight of the intended meeting place. Just beyond the collapsed building was an overgrown rubbish heap, misshapen with tufts of yellow grass sprouting from the barrow-sized mound. There was no-one in sight. Bottle made his way towards the midden, the sounds of the encampment dwindling behind him. It was late afternoon but the wind remained hot as the breath of a furnace.

Chiselled wall and foundation stones, shattered idols, lengths of splintered wood, animal bones and broken pottery. Bottle clambered up the side, noting the most recent leavings – Malazan-style pottery, black-glazed, squat, fragmented images of the most common motifs: Dassem Ultor's death outside Y'Ghatan, the Empress on her throne, the First Heroes and the Quon pantheon. The local style, Bottle had seen from the villages they had passed through, was much more elegant, elongated with cream or white glazing on the necks and rims and faded red on the body, adorned with full-toned and realistic images. Bottle paused at seeing one such shard, a body-piece, on which had been painted the Chain of Dogs. He picked it up, wiped dust from the illustrated scene. Part of Coltaine was visible, affixed to the cross of wood, overhead a wild flurry of black crows. Beneath him, dead Wickans and Malazans, and a cattle-dog impaled on a spear. A chill whispered along his spine and he let the shard drop.

Atop the mound, he stood for a time, studying the sprawl of the Malazan army along the road and spilling out to the sides. The occasional rider wending through carrying messages and reports; carrion birds, capemoths and rhizan wheeling overhead like swarming flies.

He so disliked omens.

Drawing off his helm, Bottle wiped sweat from his brow and turned to face the odhan to the south. Once fertile, perhaps, but now a wasteland. Worth fighting for? No, but then, there wasn't much that was. The soldier at your side, maybe – he'd been told that enough times, by old veterans with nothing left but that dubious companionship. Such bonds could only be born of desperation, a closing in of the spirit, down to a manageable but pitiful area containing things and people one could care about. For the rest, pure indifference, twisting on occasion into viciousness.

*Gods, what am I doing here?*

Stumbling into ways of living didn't seem a worthy path to take. Barring Cuttle and the sergeant, the squad was made up of people no different from Bottle. Young, eager for a place to stand that didn't feel so isolated and lonely, or filling oneself with bravado to mask the fragile self hiding within. But all that was no surprise. Youth was headlong, even when it felt static, stagnant and stifling. It liked its emotions extreme, doused in fiery spices, enough to burn the throat and set flame to the heart. The future was not consciously rushed into – it was just the place you suddenly ended up in, battered and weary and wondering how in Hood's name you got
there. Well. He could see that. He didn't need the echoes of his grandmother's ceaseless advice whispering through his thoughts.

Assuming, of course, that voice belonged to his grandmother. He had begun to suspect otherwise.

Bottle crossed the heap, moved down onto the south side. At the base here the desiccated ground was pitted, revealing much older leavings of rubbish – red-glazed sherds with faded images of chariots and stilted figures wearing ornate headdresses and wielding strange hookbladed weapons. The massive olive-oil jars common to this region retained these old forms, clinging to a mostly forgotten antiquity as if the now lost golden age was any different from the present one.

His grandmother's observations, those ones. She'd had nothing good to say about the Malazan Empire, but even less about the Untan Confederacy, the Li Heng League and all the other despotic rulers of the pre-empire days on Quon Tali. She had been a child through all the Itko Kan–Cawn Por wars, the Seti Tide, the Wickan migrations, the Quon attempt at hegemony. All blood and stupidity, she used to say. All prod and pull. The old with their ambitions and the young with their eager mindless zeal. At least the Emperor put an end to all that – a knife in the back for those grey tyrants and distant wars for the young zealots. It ain't right but nothing ever is. Ain't right, as I said, but better than worst, and I remember the worst.

Now here he was, in the midst of one of those distant wars. Yet there had been no zeal in his motivations. No, something far more pathetic. Boredom was a poor reason to do anything. Better to hold high some raging brand of righteousness, no matter how misguided and lacking in subtlety.

**Cuttie talks of vengeance. But he makes his trying to feed us something too obvious, and we're not swelling with rage like we're supposed to.** He couldn't be sure of it, but this army felt lost. At its very core was an empty place, waiting to be filled, and Bottle feared it would wait for ever.

He settled down onto the ground, began a silent series of summonings. Before long, a handful of lizards scampered across the dusty earth towards him. Two rhizan settled down onto his right thigh, their wings falling still. An arch spider, big as a horse's hoof and the colour of green glass, leapt from a nearby rock and landed light as a feather on his left knee. He studied his array of companions and decided they would do. Gestures, the stroke of fingers, silent commands, and the motley servants hurried off, making one and all towards the sheep pen where the captain would address the sergeants.

It paid to know just how wide Hood's Gate was going to be come the assault.

And then something else was on its way.

Sudden sweat on Bottle's skin.

She appeared from the heat haze, moving like an animal – prey, not predator, in her every careful, watchful motion – fine-furred, deep brown, a face far more human than ape, filled with expression – or at least its potential, for the look she fixed upon him now was singular in its curiosity. As tall as Bottle, lean but heavy-breasted, belly distended. Skittish, she edged closer.

**She is not real. A manifestation, a conjuration. A memory sprung from the dust of this land.**

He watched her crouch to collect a handful of sand, then fling it at him, voicing a loud barking grunt. The sand fell short, a few pebbles bouncing off his boots.

**Or maybe I am the conjured, not her. In her eyes the wonder of coming face to face with a god, or a demon.** He looked past her, and saw the vista of a savannah, thick with grasses, stands of trees and wildlife. Nothing like it should have been, only what it once was, long ago. **Oh, spirits, why won't you leave me alone?**

She had been following. Following them all. The entire army. She could smell it, see the signs of its passing, maybe even hear the distant clack of metal and wooden wheels punching down the sides of stones in the road as they rocked along. Driven on by fear and fascination, she had followed, not understanding how the future could echo back to her world, her time. Not understanding? Well, he couldn't either. **As if all is present, as if every moment co-exists. And here we two are, face to face, both too ignorant to partition our faith, our way of**
seeing the world – and so we see them all, all at once, and if we’re not careful it will drive us mad.

But there was no turning back. Simply because back did not exist.

He remained seated and she came closer, chattering now in some strange glottal tongue filled with clicks and stops. She gestured at her own belly, ran an index figure along it as if drawing a shape on the downy, paler pelt.

Bottle nodded. Yes, you carry a child. I understand that much. Still, what is that to me?

She threw more sand at him, most of it striking below his chest. He waved at the cloud in front of his stinging eyes.

A lunge forward, surprisingly swift, and she gripped his wrist, drew his arm forward, settled his hand on her belly.

He met her eyes, and was shaken to his very core. This was no mindless creature. Eres’al. The yearning in those dark, stunningly beautiful eyes made him mentally reel.

‘All right,’ he whispered, and slowly sent his senses questing, into that womb, into the spirit growing within it.

For every abomination, there must emerge its answer. Its enemy, its counterbalance. Here, within this Eres’al, is such an answer. To a distant abomination, the corruption of a once-innocent spirit. Innocence must be reborn. Yet ... I can see so little ... not human, not even of this world, barring what the Eres’al herself brought to the union. Thus, an intruder. From another realm, a realm bereft of innocence. To make them part of this world, one of their kind must be born ... in this way. Their blood must be drawn into this world’s flow of blood.

But why an Eres’al? Because ... gods below ... because she is the last innocent creature, the last innocent ancestor of our line. After her ... the degradation of spirit begins. The shifting of perspective, the separation from all else, the carving of borders – in the ground, in the mind’s way of seeing. After her, there’s only ... us.

The realization – the recognition – was devastating. Bottle pulled his hand away. But it was too late. He knew too many things, now. The father ... Tiste Edur. The child to come ... the only pure candidate for a new Throne of Shadow – a throne commanding a healed realm.

And it would have so many enemies. So many ...

‘No,’ he said to the creature, shaking his head. ‘You cannot pray to me. Must not. I’m not a god. I’m only a ...’

Yet ... to her I must seem just that. A vision. She is spirit-questing and she barely knows it. She’s stumbling, as much as we all are, but within her there’s a kind of ... certainty. Hope. Gods ... faith.

Humbled beyond words, filling with shame, Bottle pulled away, clawing up the slope of the mound, amidst the detritus of civilization, potsherds and fragments of mortar, rusted pieces of metal. No, he didn’t want this. Could not encompass this ... this need in her. He could not be her ... her faith.

She drew yet closer, hands closing round his neck, and dragged him back. Teeth bared, she shook him.

Unable to breathe, Bottle flailed in her grip.

She threw him down, straddled him, released his neck and raised two fists as if to batter him.

‘You want me to be your god?’ he gasped, ‘Fine, then! Have it your way!’ He stared up at her eyes, at the fists lifted high, framed by bright, blinding sunlight.

So, is this how a god feels?

A flash of glare, as if a sword had been drawn, an eager hiss of iron filling his head. Something like a fierce challenge—
Blinking, he found himself staring up at the empty sky, lying on the rough scree. She was gone, but he could still feel the echo of her weight on his hips, and the appalling erection her position had triggered in him.

Fist Keneb walked into the Adjunct's tent. The map-table had been assembled and on it was an imperial map of Y'Ghatan that had been delivered a week earlier by a rider from Onearm's Host. It was a scholar's rendition drawn shortly after Dassem's fall. Standing at Tavore's side was Tene Baralta, busy scrawling all over the vellum with a charcoal stick, and the Red Blade was speaking.

'... rebuilt here, and here, in the Malazan style of sunk columns and counter-sunk braces. The engineers found the ruins beneath the streets to be a maze of pockets, old rooms, half-buried streets, wells and inside-wall corridors. It should all have been flattened, but at least one age of construction was of a stature to rival what's possible these days. Obviously, that gave them problems, which is why they gave up on the fourth bastion.'

'I understand,' the Adjunct said, 'however, as I stated earlier, Fist Baralta, I am not interested in assailing the fourth bastion.'

Keneb could see the man's frustration, but he held his tongue, simply tossing down the charcoal stick and stepping away from the table.

Over in the corner sat Fist Blistig, legs sprawled out in a posture bordering on insubordination.

'Fist Keneb,' Tavore said, eyes still on the map, 'have you met with Temul and Warleader Gall?'

'Temul reports the city has been evacuated – an exodus of citizens on the road to Lothal. Clearly, Leoman is planning for a long siege, and is not interested in feeding anyone but soldiers and support staff.'

'He wants room to manoeuvre,' said Blistig from where he sat. 'Panic in the streets won't do. We shouldn't read too much into it, Keneb.'

'I suspect,' Tene Baralta said, 'we're not reading enough into it. I am nervous, Adjunct. About this whole damned situation. Leoman didn't come here to defend the last rebel city. He didn't come to protect the last believers – by the Seven Holies, he has driven them from their very homes, from their very own city! No, his need for Y'Ghatan was tactical, and that's what worries me, because I can make no sense of it.'

The Adjunct spoke: 'Did Temul have anything else to say, Keneb?'

'He had thoughts of a night attack, with sappers, taking out a section of wall. Presumably, we would then follow through in strength, into that breach, thrusting deep into Y'Ghatan's heart. Cut through far enough and we can isolate Leoman in the Falah'd's palace ...'

'Too risky,' Tene Baralta said in a grumble. 'Darkness won't cover those sappers from their mages. They'd get slaughtered—'

'Risks cannot be avoided,' Tavore said.

Keneb's brows rose. 'Temul said much the same, Adjunct, when the danger was discussed.'

'Tene Baralta,' Tavore continued after a moment, 'you and Blistig have been directed as to the disposition of your companies. Best you begin preparations. I have spoken directly with Captain Faradan Sort on what will be required of her and her squads. We shall not waste time on this. We move tonight. Fist Keneb, remain, please. The rest of you are dismissed.'

Keneb watched Blistig and Baralta leave, reading in an array of small signs – posture, the set of their shoulders and the stiffness of their gaits – the depth of their demoralization.

'Command does not come from consensus,' the Adjunct said, her tone suddenly hard as she faced Keneb. 'I deliver the orders, and my officers are to obey them. They should be relieved that is the case, for all responsibility lies with me and me alone. No-one else shall have to answer to the Empress.'
Keneb nodded, 'As you say, Adjunct. However, your officers do feel responsible – for their soldiers—'

'Many of whom will die, sooner or later, on some field of battle. Perhaps even here in Y'Ghatan. This is a siege, and sieges are messy. I do not have the luxury of starving them out. The longer Leoman resists, the greater the risk of flareups all over Seven Cities. High Fist Dujek and I are fully agreed on this.'

'Then why, Adjunct, did we not accept his offer of more troops?'

She was silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then, 'I am aware of the sentiments among the squads of this army, none of whom, it seems, are aware of the true condition of Onearm's Host.'

'The true condition?'

She stepped closer. 'There's almost nothing left, Keneb. The core – the very heart – of Onearm's Host – it's gone.'

'But – Adjunct, he has received replacements, has he not?'

'What was lost cannot be replaced. Recruits: Genabarri, Nathii, half the Pale Garrison, oh, count the boots and they look to be intact, up to full complement, but Keneb, know this – Dujek is broken. And so is the Host.'

Shaken, Keneb turned away. He unstrapped his helm and drew the battered iron from his head, then ran a hand through his matted, sweaty hair. 'Hood take us, the last great imperial army ...'

'Is now the Fourteenth, Fist.'

He stared at her.

She began pacing. 'Of course Dujek offered, for he is, well, he is Dujek. Besides, the ranking High Fist could do no less. But he – they – have suffered enough. Their task now is to make the imperial presence felt – and we should all pray to our gods that they do not find their mettle tested, by anyone.'

'That is why you are in such a hurry.'

'Leoman must be taken down. Y'Ghatan must fall. Tonight.'

Keneb said nothing for a long moment, then he asked, 'Why, Adjunct, are you telling me this?'

'Because Garnet is dead.'

Garnet? Oh, I see.

'And T'amber is not respected by any of you. Whereas,' she glanced at him, with an odd expression, 'you are.'

'You wish for me to inform the other Fists, Adjunct?'

'Regarding Dujek? Decide that for yourself, but I advise you, Fist, to think very carefully before reaching that decision.'

'But they should be told! At least then they will understand ...'

'Me? Understand me? Perhaps. But that is not the most important issue here.'

He did not comprehend. Not at once. Then, a growing realization. 'Their faith, beyond you, beyond the Fourteenth, lies with Dujek Onearm. So long as they believe he is there, poised behind us and ready to march to our aid, they will do as you command. You do not want to take that away from them, yet by your silence you sacrifice yourself, you sacrifice the respect they would accord you—'

'Assuming such respect would be granted, Fist, and of that I am not convinced.' She returned to the map-table. 'The decision is yours, Fist.'

He watched her studying the map, then, concluding he had been dismissed, Keneb left the tent.
He felt sick inside. The Host – broken? Was that simply her assessment? Maybe Dujek was just tired ... yet, who might know better? Quick Ben, but he wasn't here. Nor that assassin, Kalam Mekhar. Leaving ... well, one man. He paused outside the tent, studied the sun's position. There might be time, before Sort spoke to them all, if he hurried.

Keneb set out towards the camps of the marines.

'What do you want me to say, Fist?' The sergeant had laid out a half-dozen heavy quarrels. He had already tied sharpers to two of them and was working on a third.

Keneb stared at the clay-ball grenado in Strings's hands. 'I don't know, but make it honest.'

Strings paused and looked over at his squad, eyes narrowing. 'Adjunct's hoping for reinforcements if things go bad?' He was speaking in a low voice.

'That's just it, Sergeant. She isn't.'

'So, Fist,' Strings said, 'she thinks Dujek's finished. And so's the Host. Is that what she thinks?'

'Yes. You know Quick Ben, and the High Mage was there, after all. At Coral. He's not here for me to ask him, so I'm asking you. Is the Adjunct right?'

He resumed affixing the grenado to the quarrel head.

Keneb waited.

'Seems,' the sergeant muttered, 'I misjudged the Adjunct.'

'In what way?'

'She's better at reading signs than I thought,'

_Hood's balls, I really did not want to hear that._

'You are looking well, Ganoes Paran.'

His answering smile was wry. 'My new life of ease, Apsalar.'

Shouts from the sailors on the deck as the carrack swung towards the harbour of Kansu, the sound of gulls a muted accompaniment to the creak of cordage and timber. A cool breeze rode the salty air coming through the cabin's round window portside, smelling of the shore.

Apsalar studied the man seated across from her a moment longer, then returned to her task of roughing with a pumice stone the grip of one of her in-fighting knives. Polished wood was pretty, but far too slick in a sweaty hand. Normally she used leather gloves, but it never hurt to consider less perfect circumstances. For an assassin, the ideal situation was choosing when and where to fight, but such luxuries were not guaranteed.

Paran said, 'I see that you're as methodical as ever. Although at least now, there's more animation in your face. Your eyes ...'

'You've been at sea too long, Captain.'

'Probably. Anyway, I'm not a captain any more. My days as a soldier are done.'

'Regrets?'

He shrugged. 'Some. I was never where I wanted to be with them. Until me very end, and then,' he paused, 'well, it was too late.'

'That might have been for the better,' Apsalar said. 'Less ... sullied.'
'Odd, how the Bridgeburners mean different things for us. Memories, and perspectives. I was treated well enough among the survivors—'

'Survivors. Yes, there's always survivors.'

'Picker, Antsy, Blend, Mallet, a few others. Proprietors of K'rul's Bar, now, in Darujhistan.'

'K'rul's Bar?'

'The old temple once sanctified to that Elder God, aye. It's haunted, of course.'

'More than you realize, Paran.'

'I doubt that. I've learned a lot, Apsalar, about a lot of things.'

A heavy thud to starboard, as the harbour patrol arrived to collect the mooring fees. The slap of lines. More voices.

'K'rul played a very active role against the Pannion Domin,' Paran went on. 'Since that time, I've grown less easy with his presence – the Elder Gods are back in the game—'

'Yes, you've already said something to that effect. They are opposing the Crippled God, and one cannot find fault in that.'

'Are they? Sometimes I'm convinced ... other times,' he shook his head. Then rose. 'We're pulling in. I need to make arrangements.'

'What kind of arrangements?'

'Horses.'

'Paran.'

'Yes?'

'Are you now ascended?'

His eyes widened. 'I don't know. Nothing feels different. I admit I'm not even sure what ascendancy means.'

'Means you're harder to kill.'

'Why?'

'You have stumbled onto power, of a personal nature, and with it, well, power draws power. Always. Not the mundane kind, but something other, a force in nature, a confluence of energies. You begin to see things differently, to think differently. And others take notice of you – that's usually bad, by the way.' She sighed, studying him, and said, 'Perhaps I don't need to warn you, but I will. Be careful, Paran; of all the lands in this world, there are two more dangerous than all others—'

'Your knowledge, or Cotillion's?'

'Cotillion's for one, mine for the other. Anyway, you're about to set foot on one of those two. Seven Cities, Paran, is not a healthy place to be, especially not for an ascendant.'

'I know. I can feel that ... what's out there, what I have to deal with.'

'Get someone else to do your fighting for you, if possible.'

His gaze narrowed on her. 'Now that's a clear lack of faith.'
'I killed you once—'

'And you were possessed by a god, by the Patron of Assassins himself, Apsalar.'

'Who played by the rules. There are things here that do not.'

'I'll give that some consideration, Apsalar. Thank you.'

'And remember, bargain from strength or don't bargain at all.'

He gave her a strange smile, then headed topside.

A skittering sound from one corner, and Telorast and Curdle scampered into view, bony feet clattering on the wooden floor.

'He is dangerous, Not-Apsalar! Stay away, oh, you've spent too long with him!'

'Don't worry about me, Telorast.'

'Worry? Oh, we have worries, all right, don't we, Curdle?'

'Endless worries, Telorast. What am I saying? We're not worried.'

Apsalar said, 'The Master of the Deck knows all about you two, no doubt compounding those worries.'

'But he told you nothing!'

'Are you so certain of that?'

'Of course!' The bird-like skeleton bobbed and weaved in front of its companion. 'Think on it, Curdle! If she knew she'd step on us! Wouldn't she?'

'Unless she has a more devious betrayal in mind, Telorast! Have you thought of that? No, you haven't, have you? I have to do all the thinking.'

'You never think! You never have!'

Apsalar rose. 'They've dropped the gangplank. Time to leave.'

'Hide us under your cloak. You have to. There are dogs out there, in the streets!'

She sheathed the knife. 'All right, but no squirming.'

A squalid port, four of the six piers battered into treacherous hulks by Nok's fleet a month earlier, Kansu was in no way memorable, and Apsalar was relieved as they rode past the last sprawl of shanties on the inland road and saw before them a scattering of modest stone buildings, marking the herders, the pens and the demon-eyed goats gathered beneath guldindh trees. And beyond that, tharok orchards with their silvery, thread-like bark prized for rope-making, the uneven rows looking ghostly with their boles shimmering in the wind.

There had been something odd in the city behind them, the crowds smaller than was normal, the voices more muted. A number of merchant shops had been shut, and this during peak market time. The modest garrison of Malazan soldiers was present only at the gates and down at the docks, where at least four trader ships had been denied berths. And no-one seemed inclined to offer explanations to outsiders.

Paran had spoken quietly with the horse trader and Apsalar had watched as more coin than was necessary changed hands, but the ex-captain had said nothing during their ride out.

Reaching a crossroads, they drew rein.

'Paran,' Apsalar said, 'did you note anything strange about Kansu?'
He grimaced. 'I don't think we need worry,' he said. 'You've been possessed by a god, after all, and as for me, well, as I said, there's no real cause for worry.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Plague. Hardly surprising, given all the unburied corpses following this rebellion. It began a week or so ago, somewhere east of Ehrlitan. Any ships that made port or hail from there are being turned away.'

Apsalar said nothing for a time. Then she nodded. 'Poliel.'

'Aye.'

'And not enough healers left to intercede.'

'The horse trader said officials went to the Temple of D'rek, in Kansu. The foremost healers are found there, of course. They found everyone within slaughtered.'

She glanced over at him.

'I take the south track,' Paran said, fighting with his edgy gelding.

Yes, there is nothing more to be said, is there. The gods are indeed at war. 'The west for us,' Apsalar replied, already uncomfortable with the Seven Cities style of saddle. Neither she nor Cotillion had ever had much success with horses, but at least the mare beneath her seemed a docile beast. She opened her cloak and dragged out Telorast, then Curdle, tossing them both onto the ground, where they raced ahead, long tails flicking.

'All too short,' Paran said, meeting her eyes.

She nodded. 'But just as well, I think.'

Her comment was not well received. 'I am sorry to hear you say that.'

'I do not mean to offend, Ganoes Paran. It's just that, well, I was rediscovering ... things.'

'Like comradeship?'

'Yes.'

'And that is something you feel you cannot afford.'

'Invites carelessness,' she said.

'Ah, well. For what it is worth, Apsalar, I believe we will see each other again.'

She allowed that sentiment, and nodded. 'I will look forward to that.'

'Good, then there's hope for you yet.'

She watched him ride away, his two packhorses trailing. Changes came to a man in ways few could imagine. He seemed to have let go of so much ... she was envious of that. And already, she realized with a faint stab of regret, already she missed him. Too close, too dangerous by far. Just as well.

As for plague, well, he was probably right. Neither he nor Apsalar had much to fear. Too bad for everyone else, though.

The broken remnants of the road made for an agonized traverse up the limestone hillside, rocks tumbling and skittering down in clouds of dust. A flash flood had cut through the passage unknown years or decades past, revealing countless layers of sediments on the channel's steep-cut walls. Leading her horse and the pack-mules by the reins, Samar Dev studied those multi-hued layers. 'Wind and water, Karsa Orlong, without end. Time's endless dialogue with itself.'
Three paces ahead, the Toblakai warrior did not reply. He was nearing the summit, taking the down-flow path of the past flood, ragged, gnawed rock rising to either side of him. The last hamlet was days behind them now; these lands were truly wild. Reclaimed, since surely this road must have led somewhere, once, but there were no other signs of past civilization. In any case, she was less interested in what had gone before. What was to come was her fascination, the wellspring of all her inventions, her inspirations.

'Sorcery, Karsa Orlong, that is the heart of the problem.'

'What problem now, woman?'

'Magic obviates the need for invention, beyond certain basic requirements, of course. And so we remain eternally stifled—'

'To the Faces with stifled, witch. There is nothing wrong with where we are, how we are. You spit on satisfaction, leaving you always unsettled and miserable. I am a Teblor – we live simply enough, and we see the cruelty of your so-called progress. Slaves, children in chains, a thousand lies to make one person better than the next, a thousand lies telling you this is how things should be, and there's no stopping it. Madness called sanity, slavery called freedom. I am done talking now.'

'Well, I'm not. You're no different, calling ignorance wisdom, savagery noble. Without striving to make things better, we're doomed to repeat our litany of injustices—'

Karsa reached the summit and turned to face her, his expression twisting. 'Better is never what you think it is, Samar Dev.'

'What does that mean?'

He raised a hand, suddenly still. 'Quiet. Something's not right.' He slowly looked round, eyes narrowing. 'There's a ... smell.'

She joined him, dragging the horse and mules onto level ground. High rocks to either side, the edge of a gorge just beyond – the hill they were on was a ridge, blade-edged, with more jagged rock beyond. A twisted ancient tree squatting on the summit. 'I don't smell anything ...'

The Toblakai drew his stone sword. 'A beast has laired here, nearby, I think. A hunter, a killer. And I think it is close ...'

Eyes widening, Samar Dev scanned the area, her heart pounding hard in her chest. 'You may be right. There are no spirits here ...'

He grunted. 'Fled.'

Fled. Oh.

Like a mass of iron filings, the sky was slowly lowering on all sides, a heavy mist that was dry as sand. Not that that made any sense, Kalam Mekhar allowed, but this was what came of sustained terror, the wild pathetic conjurations of a beleaguered imagination. He was clinging with every part of his body that was capable of clinging to the sheer, battered underside of a sky keep, the wind or whatever it was moaning in his ears, a trembling stealing the strength from his limbs as he felt the last of Quick Ben's magic seep away.

Unanticipated, this sudden repudiation of sorcery – he could see no otataral, nothing veined through this brutal, black basalt. No obvious explanation. Leather gloves cut through, blood slicking his hands, and above, a mountain to climb, with this dry silver mist closing in around him. Somewhere far below crouched Quick Ben and Stormy, the former wondering what had gone wrong and, hopefully, trying to come up with an idea for dealing with it. The latter likely scratching his armpits and popping lice with his fingernails.

Well, there was no point in waiting for what might not come, when what was going to come was inevitable. Groaning with the effort, Kalam began pulling himself along the rock.
The last sky keep he had seen had been Moon's Spawn, and its pocked sides had been home to tens of thousands of Great Ravens. Fortunately, this did not seem to be the case here. A few more man-heights' worth of climbing and he would find himself on a side, rather than virtually upside-down as he was now. Reach there, he knew, and he would be able to rest.

Sort of.

That damned wizard. That damned Adjunct. Damned everybody, in fact, since not one of them was here, and of course they weren't, since this was madness and nobody else was this stupid. Gods, his shoulders were on fire, the insides of his thighs a solid ache edging towards numbness. And that wouldn't be good, would it?

Too old for this by far. Men his age didn't reach his age falling for stupid plans like this one. Was he getting soft? Soft-brained.

He pulled himself round a chiselled projection, scrabbled with his feet for a moment, then edged over, drew himself up and found ledges that would take his weight. A whimper escaped him, sounding pathetic even to his own ears, as he settled against the stone.

A while later, he lifted his head and began looking round, searching for a suitable outcrop or knob of rock that he could loop his rope over.

Quick Ben's rope, conjured out of nothing. Will it even work here, or will it just vanish? Hood's breath, I don't know enough about magic. Don't even know enough about Quick, and I've known the bastard for bloody ever. Why isn't he the one up here?

Because, if the Short-Tails noticed the gnat on their hide, Quick was better backup, even down there, than Kalam could have been. A crossbow quarrel would be spent by the time it reached this high – you could just pluck it out of the air. As for Stormy – a whole lot more expendable than me, as far as I'm concerned – the man swore he couldn't climb, swore that as a babe he never once made it out of his crib without help.

Hard imagining that hairy-faced miserable hulk ever fitting into a crib in the first place.

Regaining control of his breathing, Kalam looked down.

To find Quick Ben and Stormy nowhere in sight. Gods below, now what? The modest features of the ash-laden plain beneath offered little in the way of cover, especially from this height. Yet, no matter where he scanned, he saw no-one. The tracks they had made were faintly visible, leading to where the assassin had left them, and at that location there was ... something dark, a crack in the ground. Difficult to determine scale, but maybe ... maybe big enough to swallow both of the bastards.

He resumed his search for projections for the rope. And could see none. 'All right, I guess it's time. Cotillion, consider this a sharp tug on your rope. No excuses, you damned god, I need your help here.'

He waited. The moan of the wind, the slippery chill of the mist.

'I don't like this warren.'

Kalam turned his head to find Cotillion alongside him, one hand and one foot holding the god in place. He held an apple in the other hand, from which he now took a large bite.

'You think this is funny?' Kalam demanded.

Cotillion chewed, then swallowed. 'Somewhat.'

'In case you hadn't noticed, we're clinging to a sky keep, and it's got companions, a whole damned row of them.'

'If you needed a ride,' the god said, 'you'd be better off with a wagon, or a horse.'

'It's not moving. It stopped. And I'm trying to break into this one. Quick Ben and a marine were waiting below, but they've just vanished.'
Cotillion examined the apple, then took another bite.

'My arms are getting tired.'

Chewing. Swallowing. 'I'm not surprised, Kalam. Even so, you will have to be patient, since I have some questions. I'll start with the most obvious one. Why are you trying to break into a fortress filled with K'Chain Che'Malle?'

'Filled? Are you sure?'

'Reasonably.'

'Then what are they doing here?'

'Waiting, looks like. Anyway, I'm the one asking questions.'

'Fine. Go ahead, I've got all day.'

'Actually, I think that was my only question. Oh, wait, there's one more. Would you like me to return you to solid ground, so we can resume our conversation in more comfort?'

'You're enjoying this way too much, Cotillion.'

'The opportunities for amusement grow ever rarer. Fortunately, we're in something like this keep's shadow, so our descent will be relatively easy.'

'Any time.'

Cotillion tossed the apple aside, then reached out to grasp Kalam's upper arm. 'Step away and leave the rest to me.'

'Hold on a moment. Quick Ben's spells were dispelled – that's how I ended up stuck here—'

'Probably because he's unconscious.'

'He is?'

'Or dead. We should confirm things either way, yes?'

You sanctimonious blood-lapping sweat-sucking—

'Risky,' Cotillion cut in, 'making your cursing sound like praying.' A sharp tug, and Kalam bellowed as he was snatched out from the rockface. And was held, suspended in the air by Cotillion's grip on his arm. 'Relax, you damned ox, "easy" is a relative term.'

Thirty heartbeats later their feet touched ground. Kalam pulled his arm away and headed over to the fissure gaping in the place where Quick and Stormy had been waiting. He approached the edge carefully. Called down into the dark. 'Quick! Stormy!' No answer.

Cotillion was at his side. 'Stormy? That wouldn't be Adjutant Stormy, would it? Pig-eyed, hairy, scowling—'

'He's now a corporal,' Kalam said. 'And Gesler's a sergeant.'

A snort from the god, but no further comment.

The assassin leaned back and studied Cotillion. 'I didn't really think you'd answer my prayer.'

'I am a god virtually brimming with surprises.'

Kalam's gaze narrowed. 'You came damned fast, too. As if you were ... close by.'

'An outrageous assumption,' Cotillion said. 'Yet, oddly enough, accurate.'
The assassin drew the coil of rope from his shoulder, then looked around, and swore.

Sighing, Cotillion held out one hand.

Kalam gave him one end of the rope. 'Brace yourself,' he said, as he tumbled the coil down over the pit's edge. He heard a distant snap.

'Don't worry about that,' Cotillion said. 'I'll make it as long as you need.'

Hood-damned gods. Kalam worked his way over the edge, then began descending through the gloom. Too much climbing today. Either that or I'm gaining weight. His moccasins finally settled on stone. He stepped away from the rope.

From overhead a small globule of light drifted down, illuminating the nearest wall, vertical, man-made, featuring large painted panels, the images seeming to dance in the descending light. For a moment, Kalam simply stared. No idle decoration, this, but a work of art, a master's hand exuberantly displayed in each and every detail. Heavily clothed, more or less human in form, the figures were in positions of transcendence, arms upraised in worship or exaltation, faces filled with joy. Whilst, crowding their feet, dismembered body parts had been painted, blood-splashed and buzzing with flies. The mangled flesh continued down to the chamber's floor, then on out, and Kalam saw now that the bloody scene covered the entire expanse of floor, as far as he could see in every direction.

Pieces of rubble were scattered here and there, and, less than a half-dozen paces away, two motionless bodies.

Kalam headed over.

Both men lived, he was relieved to discover, though it was difficult to determine the extent of their injuries, beyond the obvious. Stormy had broken both legs, one above the knee, the other both bones below the knee. The back of his helm was dented, but he breathed evenly, which Kalam took for a good sign. Quick Ben seemed physically intact – nothing obviously shattered, at least, nor any blood. For both of them, however, internal injuries were another matter. Kalam studied the wizard's face for a moment, then slapped it.

Quick's eyes snapped open. He blinked, looked round, coughed, then sat up. 'One half of my face is numb – what happened?'

'No idea,' Kalam said. 'You and Stormy fell through a hole. The Falari's in rough shape. But somehow you made it unscathed – how did you do that?'

'Unscathed? I think my jaw's broken.'

'No it isn't. Must have hit the floor – looks a little puffy but you wouldn't be talking if it was broke.'

'Huh, good point.' He climbed to his feet and approached Stormy. 'Oh, those legs look bad. We need to set those before I can do any healing.'

'Healing? Dammit, Quick, you never did any healing in the squad.'

'No, that was Mallet's task. I was the brains, remember?'

'Well, as I recall, that didn't take up much of your time.'

'That's what you think.' The wizard paused and looked round. 'Where are we? And where did that light come from?'

'Compliments of Cotillion, who is on the other end of that rope.'

'Oh. Well, he can do the healing, then. Get him down here.'

'Then who will hold the rope?'
'We don't need it. Hey, weren't you climbing the Moon's Spawn? Ah, that's why your god is here. Right.'

'To utter the demon's name is to call him,' Kalam said, looking up to watch Cotillion's slow, almost lazy descent.

The god settled near Stormy and Quick Ben. A brief nod to the wizard, one eyebrow lifting, then Cotillion crouched beside the marine. 'Adjutant Stormy, what has happened to you?'

'That should be obvious,' Kalam said. 'He broke his legs.'

The god rolled the marine onto his back, pulled at each leg, drawing the bones back in line, then rose. 'That will do, I think.'

'Hardly—'

'Adjutant Stormy,' Cotillion said, 'is not quite as mortal as he might seem. Annealed in the fires of Thyrllan. Or Kurald Liosan. Or Tellann. Or all three. In any case, as you can see, he's mending already. The broken ribs are completely healed, as is the failing liver and shattered hip. And the cracked skull. Alas, nothing can be done for the brain within it.'

'He's lost his mind?'

'I doubt he ever had one,' the god replied. 'He's worse than Urko. At least Urko has interests, peculiar and pointless as they are.'

A groan from Stormy.

Cotillion walked over to the nearest wall. 'Curious,' he said. 'This is a temple to an Elder God. Not sure which one. Kilmandaros, maybe. Or Grizzin Farl. Maybe even K'rul.'

'A rather bloody kind of worship,' Kalam muttered.

'The best kind,' Quick Ben said, brushing dust from his clothes.

Kalam noted Cotillion's sly regard of the wizard and wondered at it. Ben Adaephon Delat, Cotillion knows something about you, doesn't he? Wizard, you've got too many secrets by far. The assassin then noticed the rope, still dangling from the hole far above. 'Cotillion, what did you tie the rope to?'

The god glanced over, smiled. 'A surprise. I must be going. Gentlemen ...' And he faded, then was gone.

'Your god makes me nervous, Kalam,' Quick Ben said as Stormy groaned again, louder this time. And you in turn make him nervous. And now ... He looked down at Stormy. The rips in the leggings were all that remained of the ghastly compound fractures. Adjutant Stormy. Annealed in holy fires. Still scowling.

High rock, the sediments stepped and ragged, surrounded their camp, an ancient tree to one side. Cutter sat near the small dung-fire they had lit, watching as Greyfrog circled the area, evincing ever more agitation. Nearby, Heboric Ghost Hands looked to be dozing, the hazy green emanations at the ends of his wrists dully pulsing. Scillara and Felisin Younger were packing their pipes for their new sharing of a post-meal ritual. Cutter's gaze returned to the demon.

Greyfrog, what's ailing you?

'Nervous. I have intimations of tragedy, swiftly approaching. Something ... worried and uncertain. In the air, in the sands. Sudden panic. We should leave here. Turn back. Flee.'

Cutter felt sweat bead his skin. He had never heard the demon so ... frightened. 'We should get off this ridge?'

The two women looked up at his spoken words. Felisin Younger glanced at Greyfrog, frowned, then paled.
She rose. 'We're in trouble,' she said.

Scillara straightened and walked over to Heboric, nudged him with a boot. 'Wake up.'

The Destriant of Treach blinked open his eyes, then sniffed the air and rose in a single, fluid motion.

Cutter watched all this in growing alarm. Shit. He kicked sand over the fire. 'Collect your gear, everyone.'


'Why take chances?' Cutter asked. 'There's enough light – we'll see if we can find a more defensible place to camp.'

'Appropriate compromise. Nerves easing their taut sensitivity. Averted? Unknown.'

'Usually,' Heboric said in a rough voice, pausing to spit. 'Usually, running from one thing throws you into the path of another.'

'Well, thanks for that, old man.'

Heboric gave Cutter an unpleasant smile. 'My pleasure.'

The cliff-face was pocked with caves which had, over countless centuries, seen use as places of refuge, as crypts for internment of the dead, as storage chambers, and as sheltered panels for rock-paintings. Detritus littered the narrow ledges that had been used as pathways; here and there a dark sooty stain marred overhangs and crevasses where fires had been lit, but nothing looked recent to Mappo's eye, and he recognized the funerary ceramics as belonging to the First Empire era.

They were approaching the summit of the escarpment, Icarium scrambling up towards an obvious notch cut into the edge by past rains. The lowering sun on their left was red behind a curtain of suspended dust that had been raised by the passing of a distant storm. Bloodflies buzzed the air around the two travellers, frenzied by the storm's brittle, energized breath.

Icarium's drive had become obsessive, a barely restrained ferocity. He wanted judgement, he wanted the truth of his past revealed to him, and when that judgement came, no matter how harsh, he would stand before it and raise not a single hand in his own defence.

And Mappo could think of nothing to prevent it, short of somehow incapacitating his friend, of striking him into unconsciousness. Perhaps it would come to that. But there were risks to such an attempt. Fail and Icarium's rage would burgeon into life, and all would be lost.

He watched as the Jhag reached the notch and clambered through, then out of sight. Mappo quickly followed. Reaching the summit, he paused, wiping grit from his hands. The old drainage channel had carved a channel through the next tiers of limestone, creating a narrow, twisting track flanked by steep walls. A short distance beyond, Mappo could see the edge of another drop-off, towards which Icarium was heading.

Thick shadows within the channel, insects swarming in the few shafts of sunlight spearing through a gnarled tree. Three strides from reaching Icarium's side, and the gloom seemed to explode around the Trell. He caught a momentary glimpse of something closing on Icarium from the pinnacle of stone to the Jhag's right, then figures swarmed him.

The Trell lashed out, felt his fist connect with flesh and bone to his left, the sound solid and crunching. A spatter of blood and phlegm.

A brawny arm snaked round from behind to close on his neck, twisting his head back, the glistening skin of that limb sliding as if oiled before the arm locked tight. Another figure plunged into view from the front, long-taloned hands snapping out, puncturing Mappo's belly. He bellowed in agony as the claws raked across in an eviscerating slash.
That failed, for the Trell's hide was thicker than the leather armour covering it. Even so, blood sprayed. The creature behind him tightened its stranglehold. He could feel something of its immense weight and size. Unable to draw a weapon, Mappo pivoted, then flung himself backward into a rock wall. The crunch of bone and skull behind him, a gasp from the beast that rose into a screech of pain.

The creature with its claws in Mappo's belly had been dragged closer by the Trell's backward lunge. He closed his hands round its squat, bony skull, flexed, then savagely twisted the head to one side. The neck snapped. Another scream, this time seeming to come from all sides.

Roaring, Mappo staggered forward, grasping at the forearm drawn across his neck. The beast's weight slammed into him, sent him stumbling.

He caught a glimpse of Icarium, collapsing beneath a swarm of dark, writhing creatures.

Too late he felt his leading foot pitch down over the crumbled edge of the cliff-side, down into ... open air. The creature's weight pushed him further forward, then, as it saw the precipice they were both about to plunge over, the forearm loosened.

But Mappo held fast, twisting to drag the beast with him as he fell.

Another shriek, and he finally caught full sight of the thing. Demonic, mouth opened wide, needle-like fangs fully locked in their hinges, each as long as Mappo's thumb, glistening black eyes, the pupils vertical and the hue of fresh blood.

_T'rolbaarahl._

_How?_

He saw its rage, its horror, as they both plummeted from the cliff.

Falling.

_Falling ..._

_Gods, this was—_
BOOK TWO

BENEATH THIS NAME
In darkness he came, this brutal slayer of kin, discharged and unleashed, when all but ghosts fled the wild dishevelled swagger – oh he knew pain, twin fires of vast oblivion burning his soul— and so the ghosts did gather, summoned by one who would stand, mortal and feckless, in the terrible slayer's path, would stand, this precious fool, and gamble all in the clasping of hand, warm to cold, and be led to the place long vanished, and beasts long vanquished would at his word awaken once more.

And who was there to warn him? Why, no-one, and what found its way free was no friend to the living. When you play horror against horror, dear listener, leave all hope behind— and ride a fast horse.

Master Blind
Saedevar of the Widecut Jhag
CHAPTER SEVEN

Never bargain with a man who has nothing to lose.

*Sayings of the Fool*

Thenys Bule

Leoman of the Flails staggered from the inner sanctum, a sheen of sweat on his face. In a hoarse voice he asked, 'Is it night yet?'

Corabb rose quickly, then sat back down on the bench as blackness threatened to engulf him – he had been sitting too long, watching Dunsparrow attempt to pace a trench in the stone floor. He opened his mouth to reply, but the Malazan woman spoke first.

'No, Leoman, the sun rides the horizon.'

'Movement yet from the Malazan camps?'

'The last runner reported half a bell ago. Nothing at that time.'

There was a strange, triumphant gleam in Leoman's eyes that troubled Corabb, but he had no time to ask as the great warrior strode past. 'We must hurry. Back to the palace – some final instructions.'

The enemy was attacking this very night? How could Leoman be so certain? Corabb stood once again, more slowly this time. The High Priestess had forbidden witnesses to the ritual, and when the Queen of Dreams manifested, even the High Priestess and her acolytes had left the chamber with discomfited expressions, leaving Leoman alone with the goddess. Corabb fell in two steps behind his leader, prevented from drawing closer by that damned woman, Dunsparrow.

'Their mages will make detection difficult,' the Third was saying as they headed out of the temple.

'No matter,' Leoman snapped. 'It's not like we have any worthy of the name anyway. Even so, we need to make it look as if we're trying.'

Corabb frowned. Trying? He did not understand any of this. 'We need soldiers on the walls!' he said. 'As many as can be mustered!'

'We can't hold the walls,' Dunsparrow said over her shoulder. 'You must have realized that, Corabb Bhilan Thenualas.'

'Then – then, why are we here?'

The sky overhead was darkening, the bruise of dusk only moments away.

Through empty streets, the three of them rushed along. Corabb's frown deepened. The Queen of Dreams. Goddess of divination and who knew what else. He despised all gods, except, of course, for Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Meddlers, deceivers, murderers one and all. That Leoman would seek one out ... this was troubling indeed.

Dunsparrow's fault, he suspected. She was a woman. The Queen's priesthood was mostly women – at least, he thought it was – there'd been a High Priestess, after all, a blurry-eyed matron swimming in the fumes of durhang and likely countless other substances. Just to stand near her was to feel drunk. Too seductive by far. Nothing good was going to come of this, nothing at all.

They approached the palace and, finally, some signs of activity. Warriors moving about, weapons clanking, shouts from the fortifications. So, the outer walls would be breached – no other reason for all this preparation.
Leoman expected a second siege, here at the palace itself. And soon.

'Warleader!' Corabb said, shouldering Dunsparrow aside. 'Give me command of the palace gates! We shall hold against the Malazan storm in the name of the Apocalypse!'

Leoman glanced back at him, considering, then he shook his head. 'No, friend. I need you for a far more important task.'

'What will that be, Great Warrior? I am equal to it.'

'You'd better be,' Leoman said.

Dunsparrow snorted.

'Command me, Commander.'

This time she laughed outright. Corabb scowled at her.

Leoman replied, 'Your task this night is this, my friend. Guard my back.'

'Ah, we shall be leading the fight, then, in the very frontmost ranks! Glorious, we shall deliver unto the Malazan dogs a judgement they shall never forget.'

Leoman slapped him on the shoulder. 'Aye, Corabb,' he said. 'That we shall.'

They continued on, into the palace.

Dunsparrow was still laughing.

Gods, how Corabb hated her.

Lostara Yil swept back the tent-flap and marched inside. She found Pearl lounging on looted silk pillows, a hookah of wine-flavoured durhang settled like a bowl in his lap. Through the smoke haze, he met her fury with a lazy, fume-laden regard, which of course made her even angrier.

'I see you've planned out the rest of this night, Pearl. Even as this damned army prepares to assault Y'Ghatan.'

He shrugged. 'The Adjunct doesn't want my help. I could have snuck into the palace by now, you know – they have no mages to speak of. I could be at this very moment sliding a knife across Leoman's throat. But no, she won't have it. What am I to do?'

'She doesn't trust you, Pearl, and to be honest, I'm not surprised.'

His brows lifted. 'Darling, I am offended. You, more than anyone else, know the sacrifices I have made to protect the Adjunct's fragile psyche. Needless to say,' he added, pausing for a lungful of the cloying smoke, 'I have of late been tempted to shatter that psyche with the truth about her sister, just out of spite.'

'Your restraint impresses me,' Lostara said. 'Of course, if you did something as cruel as that, I'd have to kill you.'

'What a relief, knowing how you endeavour to protect the purity of my soul.'

'Purity is not the issue,' she replied. 'Not yours, at least.'

He smiled. 'I was attempting to cast myself in a more favourable light, my sweet.'

'It is clear to me, Pearl, that you imagined our brief romance – if one could call it that – as indicative of genuine feelings. I find that rather pathetic. Tell me, do you plan on ever returning me to my company in the Red Blades?'
'Not quite yet, I'm afraid.'

'Has she given us another mission?'

'The Adjunct? No, but as you may recall, what we did for Tavore was a favour. We work for the Empress.'

'Fine. What does our Empress command?'

His eyes were heavy-lidded as they studied her for a moment. 'Wait and see.'

'She commands us to wait and see?'

'All right, since you insist, you are temporarily detached from me, a notion that should give you untold satisfaction. Go join the marines, or the sappers, or whoever in Hood's name is attacking tonight. And if you get a limb lopped off don't come crawling back to me – gods, I can't believe I just said that. Of course you can come crawling back to me, just be sure to bring the limb along.'

'You don't possess High Denul, Pearl, so what point in bringing back the limb?'

'I'd just like to see it, that's all.'

'If I do come crawling back, Pearl, it will be to stick a knife in your neck.'

'With those cheery words you can go now, dear.'

She wheeled and marched from the tent.

Fist Keneb joined Tene Baralta in the mustering area just inside the north pickets. Moths and biting flies were swarming in the crepuscular air. Heaps of rocky earth rose like modest barrows where the soldiers had dug their trenches. As yet, few squads had assembled, so as not to reveal the army's intentions too early, although Keneb suspected that Leoman and his warriors already knew all that needed to be known. Even so, the Fist noted as he stared at the distant, uneven wall, topmost among the tiers of earth and rubble, there seemed to be no activity. Y'Ghatan was deathly quiet, virtually unlit as darkness spread its cloak.

Tene Baralta was in full armour: scaled vest, chain skirt and camail, greaves and vambraces of beaten bronze rimmed with iron. He was adjusting the straps of his helm as Keneb came to his side.

'Blistig is not happy,' Keneb said.

Baralta's laugh was low. 'Tonight belongs to you and me, Keneb. He only moves in if we get in trouble. Temul was wondering ... this plan, it matches his own. Did you advise the Adjunct?'

'I did. Inform Temul that she was pleased that his strategy matched her own in this matter.'

'Ah.'

'Have your company's mages begun?' Keneb asked.

A grunt, then, 'They say there's no-one there, no-one waiting to counter them. Nil and Nether have made the same discovery. Could Leoman have lost all his mages, do you think?'

'I don't know. Seems unlikely.'

'I trust you've heard the rumours, Keneb.'

'About what?'

'Plague. From the east. It has swept through Ehrlitan. If we fail tonight and find ourselves bogged down outside this city ...'

Keneb nodded. 'Then we must succeed, Tene Baralta.'
A rider was galloping on the road behind and to their right, fast approaching. Both men turned as the pounding hoofs reverberated through the ground at their feet. 'An urgent message?' Keneb wondered, squinting to make out the grey-cloaked figure, face hidden by a hood. A longsword at his side, the scabbard banded in white enamel. 'I do not recog—'

The rider rode straight for them. Bellowing in anger, Tene Baralta leapt to one side. Keneb followed, then spun as the rider flew past, his white horse reaching the trenches, and launching itself over. The picket guards shouted. A crossbow discharged, the quarrel striking the stranger on the back, then caroming off into the night. Still riding at full gallop, the figure now leaning forward over the horse's neck, they sailed over the narrow inside trench, then raced for the city.

Where a gate cracked open, spilling muted lantern light.

'Hood's breath!' Tene Beralta swore, regaining his feet. 'An enemy rides right through our entire army!'

'We've no exclusive claim on bravery,' Keneb said. 'And I admit to a grudging admiration – I am glad to have witnessed it.'

'A rider to bring word to Leoman—'

'Nothing he doesn't already know, Tene Baralta. Consider this a lesson, a reminder—'

'I need none, Keneb. Look at this, my helm's full of dirt. Light grey cloak, white horse and white-banded sword. A tall bastard. I will find him, I swear it, and he will pay for his temerity.'

'We've enough concerns ahead of us this night,' Keneb said. 'If you go off hunting one man, Tene Baralta ...'

He emptied the dirt from the helm. 'I hear you. Pray to Treach, then, that the bastard crosses my path one more time this night.'

_Treach, is it! Fener ... gone so quickly from men's minds. A message no god would dare to heed, I think._

Lieutenant Pores stood with Captain Kindly and the Korelri Faradan Sort, within sight of their respective companies. Word of a spy in the army's midst, boldly riding into Y'Ghatan, had everyone more on edge than they already were, given that at any moment would come the order to move. Sappers in the lead, of course, disguised within gloomy magic.

Magic. _It's all gloomy_. Worse than sappers, in fact. In combination, well, this night was headed straight into the Abyss, as far as Pores was concerned. He wondered where old Ebron was, and if he was participating in the rituals – he missed his old squad. Limp, Bell, and that new lass, Sinn – now there was a scary creature. Well, maybe he didn't miss them all that much. Dangerous, one and all, and mostly to each other.

Captain Kindly had been trying to take the measure of the woman standing beside him – a choice of phrase that brought a small smile to the lieutenant's mouth. _Take her measure. But ain't nobody's got that close, from what I hear._ In any case, it was frustrating being unable to get a sense of a fellow officer. Cold iron, probably – you don't stand the Wall long enough to survive without something icy, brutal and calculated wrapped round the soul – but this one was cold in every other way besides. Rarest of all, a woman of few words. He smiled again.

'Wipe that grin off your face, Lieutenant,' Kindly said, 'or I'll conclude you've lost your mind and promote you.'

'Apologies, Captain, I promise I won't do it again. Please don't promote me.'

'You two are idiots,' Faradan Sort said.

_Well, that's one way to halt a conversation._
Sergeant Hellian looked on the wavering scene, comforted by an overwhelming sense of propriety, although the way everyone was swaying was making her nauseous. Corporal Urb separated himself from the squad and came up to her.

‘You ready for this, Sergeant?’

‘Ready for what?’ she demanded. Then scowled, all sense of propriety vanishing. ‘If that bastard hadn’t disappeared the way he did, I wouldn’t be trading my sword for a jug of that local rot, would I?’ She reached down for the weapon, her hand groping as it found only air, then the empty scabbard. ‘Why didn’t you stop me, Urb? I mean, it was my sword, after all. What am I s’posed to use?’

He shifted nervously, then leaned closer. ‘Get a new one from the armoury, Sergeant.’

‘And that’ll get back to the captain and we’ll get shipped off somewhere even worse.’

‘Worse? Where is worse than this, Sergeant?’

‘Korel. Theftian Penins’la. Black Coral, under the empty eyes of the Tiste Andii. The Wreckers’ Coast on North Assail—’

‘Ain’t no Malazan forces there.’

‘No, but it’s worse than this.’

‘One story from some addled sailor in Kartool and you’re now convinced that Hood himself strides the shadows—’

‘He’s stridin’ our shallows – shadows, I mean.’

‘Listen, Sergeant, we’re about to head into battle—’

‘Right, where’s that jug?’ She looked round, found it lying on its side near somebody’s bedroll. ‘Hey, who in my squad ain’t packed up their kit?’

‘That’s yours, Sergeant,’ Urb said.

‘Oh.’ Collecting the jug, she gave it a shake and was pleased at the sloshing sounds within. She glanced over to stare at her ... squad. There were two soldiers. Two. Some squad. Captain had said something about a few newcomers on the way. ‘Well, where are they?’

‘Who?’ Urb asked. ‘Your squad? They’re right in front of you.’

‘Touchy and Brethless.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, where are the rest? Didn’t we have more?’

‘Had four marching with us the last day, but they were reassigned.’

‘So my squad is a corporal and two soljers.’

‘Twins, Sergeant,’ Touchy said. ‘But I’m older, as I’m sure you can tell.’

‘And mentally underdeveloped, Sergeant,’ Brethless said. ‘Those last few minutes were obviously crucial, as I’m sure you can tell.’

Hellian turned away. ‘They look the same to me, Urb. All right, has the word come yet? We s’posed to be mustering somewhere right now?’

‘Sergeant, you might want to pass that jug around – we’re about to get in a fight and I don’t know about you and them two, but I joined the local city guard so’s I wouldn’t have to do any of this. I been to the latrines four
times since supper and I'm still all squishy inside.'

At Urb's suggestion Hellian clutched the jug tight to her chest. 'Getyerown.'

'Sergeant.'

'All right, a couple mouthfuls each, then I get the rest. I see anybody take more'n two swallows and I cut 'em down where they stand.'

'With what?' Urb asked as he pulled the jug from her reluctant hands.

Hellian frowned. With what? What was he talking about? Oh, right. She thought for a moment, then smiled. 'I'll borrow your sword, of course.' There, what a pleasing solution.

Sergeant Balm squatted in the dirt, studying the array of pebbles, stone discs and clay buttons resting on the elongated Troughs board. He muttered under his breath, wondering if this was a dream, a nightmare and he was still asleep. He glanced across at Sergeant Moak, then looked back down at the game-board.

Something was wrong. He could make no sense of the pieces. He'd forgotten how to play the game. Straws, discs, buttons, pebbles – what were they all about? What did they signify? Who was winning? 'Who's playing this damned game?' he demanded.

'You and me, you Dal Honese weasel,' Moak said.

'I think you're lying. I never seen this game before in my life.' He glared round at all the faces, the soldiers all looking down to watch, all looking at him now. Strange expressions – had he ever seen any of them before? He was a sergeant, wasn't he? 'Where's my damned squad? I'm supposed to be with my damned squad. Has the call come? What am I doing here?' He shot upright, making sure one foot toppled the game-board. Pieces flew, soldiers jumping back.

'Bad omen!' one hissed, backing away.

Growling, Moak rose, reaching for the knife at his belt. 'Swamp scum, you'll pay for that. I was winning—'

'No you weren't! Those pieces were a mess! A jumble! They didn't make sense!' He reached up and scratched at his face. 'What – this is clay! My face is covered in clay! A death mask! Who did this to me?'

A familiar but musty-smelling man stepped close to Balm. 'Sergeant, your squad's right here. I'm Deadsmell —'

'I'll say.'

'Corporal Deadsmell. And that's Throatslitter, and Widdershins, Galt and Lobe—'

'All right, all right, be quiet, I ain't blind. When's the call coming? We should've heard something by now.'

Moak closed in. 'I wasn't finished with you – that was a curse, what you did, Balm, on me and my squad – since I was winning the game. You cursed us, you damned warlock—'

'I did not! It was an accident. Come on, Deadsmell, let's make our way to the pickets, I'm done waiting here.'

'You're headed the wrong way, Sergeant!'

'Lead on, then! Who designed this damned camp, anyway? None of it makes any sense!'

Behind them, Sergeant Moak made to step after them, but his corporal, Stacker, pulled him back. 'It's all right, Sergeant. I heard about this from my da. It's the Confusion. Comes to some before a battle. They lose track – of everything. It should settle down once the fighting starts – but sometimes it don't, and if that's the case with Balm, then it's his squad that's doomed, not us.'
'You sure about all that, Stacker?'

'Yeah. Remember Fist Garnet? Listen. It's all right. We should check our weapons, one last time.'

Moak sheathed his knife. 'Good idea, get them on it, then.'

Twenty paces away, Deadsmell fell in step alongside his sergeant. 'Smart, all that back there. You was losing bad. Faking the Confusion, well, Sergeant, I'm impressed.'

Balm stared at the man. Who was he again? And what was he blathering on about? What language was the fool speaking, anyway?

'I got no appetite,' Lutes said, tossing the chunk of bread away. A camp dog closed in, collected the food and scampered off. 'I feel sick,' the soldier continued.

'You ain't the only one,' Maybe said. 'I'm in there first, you know. Us sappers. Rest of you got it easy. We got to set charges, meaning we're running with cussers and crackers over rough ground, climbing rubble, probably under fire from the walls. Then, down at the foot of the wall and Hood knows what's gonna pour down on us. Boiling water, oil, hot sand, bricks, offal, barrack-buckets. So it's raining down. Set the munitions. Acid on the wax – too much and we all go up right there and then. Dozens of sappers, and any one of 'em makes a mistake, or some piece of rock drops smack onto a munition. Boom! We're as good as dead already, if you ask me. Bits of meat. Tomorrow morning the crows will come down and that's that. Send word to my family, will you? Maybe was blown to bits at Y'Ghatan, that's all. No point in going into the gory details – hey, where you going? Gods below, Lutes, do your throwing up outa my sight, will you? Hood take us, that's awful. Hey, Balgrid! Look! Our squad healer's heaving his guts out!'

Gesler, Strings, Cuttle, Truth and Pella sat around the dying coals of a hearth, drinking tea.

'They're all losing their minds with this waiting,' Gesler said.

'I get just as bad before every battle,' Strings admitted. 'Cold and loose inside, if you know what I mean. It never goes away.'

'But you settle once it's begun,' Cuttle said. 'We all do, 'cause we've done this before. We settled, and we know we settle. Most of these soldiers, they don't know nothing of the sort. They don't know how they'll be once the fighting starts. So they're all terrified they'll curl up into cringing cowards.'

'Most of them probably will,' Gesler said.

'I don't know about that, Sergeant,' Pella said. 'Saw plenty of soldiers just like these ones at Skullcup. When the rebellion hit, well, they fought and they fought well, all things considered.'

'Outnumbered.'

'Yes.'

'So they died.'

'Most of them.'

'That's the thing with war,' Gesler said. 'Ain't nearly as many surprises, when all's said and done, as you might think. Or hope. Heroic stands usually end up with not a single hero left standing. Held out longer than expected, but the end was the same anyway. The end's always the same.'

'Abyss below, Gesler,' Strings said, 'ain't you a cheery one.'

'Just being realistic, Fid. Damn, I wish Stormy was here, now it's up to me to keep an eye on my squad.'

'Yes,' Cuttle said, 'that's what sergeants do.'
'You suggesting Stormy should've been sergeant and me corporal?'

'Now why would I do that?' the sapper asked. 'You're both just as bad as each other. Now Pella here ...'

'No thanks,' Pella said.

Strings sipped his tea. 'Just make sure everybody sticks together. Captain wants us on the tip of the spear, as fast and as far in as we can get – the rest will just have to catch up. Cuttle?'

'Once the wall's blown I'll pull our sappers together and we meet you inside the breach. Where's Borduke right now?'

'Went for a walk. Seems his squad got into some kind of sympathetic heaves. Borduke got disgusted and stormed off.'

'So long as everybody's belly is empty by the time we get the call,' Cuttle said. 'Especially Maybe.'

'Especially maybe,' Gesler said, with a low laugh. 'That's a good one. You've made my day, Cuttle.'

'Believe me, it wasn't intentional.'

Seated nearby, hidden from the others in a brush-bordered hollow, Bottle smiled. So that's how the veterans get ready for a fight. Same as everyone else. That did indeed comfort him. Mostly. Well, maybe not. Better had they been confident, brash and swaggering. This – what was coming – sounded all too uncertain.

He had just returned from the mage gathering. Magical probes had revealed a muted presence in Y'Ghatan, the priestly kind, for the most part, and what there was of that was confused, panicked. Or strangely quiescent. For the sappers' advance, Bottle would be drawing upon Meanas, rolling banks of mist, tumbling darkness on all sides. Easily dispelled, if a mage of any skill was on the wall, but there didn't seem to be any. Most troubling of all, Bottle would need all his concentration to work Meanas, thus preventing him from using spirit magic. Leaving him as blind as those few enemy soldiers on the wall.

He admitted to a bad run of nerves – he hadn't been nearly so shaky at Raraku. And with Leoman's ambush in the sandstorm, well, it was an ambush, wasn't it – there'd been no time for terror. In any case, he didn't like this feeling.

Rising into a crouch, he moved away, up and out of the hollow, straightening and walking casually into the squad's camp. It seemed Strings didn't mind leaving his soldiers alone for a while before things heated up, letting them chew on their own thoughts, then – hopefully – reinsing everyone in at the last moment.

Koryk was tying yet more fetishes onto the various rings and loops in his armour, strips of coloured cloth, bird bones and chain-links to add to the ubiquitous finger bones that now signified the Fourteenth Army. Smiles was flipping her throwing-knives, the blades slapping softly on the leather of her gloves. Tarr stood nearby, shield already strapped on his left arm, short sword in his gauntleted right hand, most of his face hidden by his helm's cheek-guards.

Turning, Bottle studied the distant city. Dark – there seemed not a single lantern glowing from that squat, squalid heap. He already hated Y'Ghatan.

A low whistle in the night. Sudden stirring. Cuttle appeared. 'Sappers, to me. It's time.'

Gods below, so it is.

Leoman stood in the Falah'd's throne room. Eleven warriors were arrayed before him, glassy-eyed, their leather armour webbed in harnesses with straps and loops dangling. Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas studied them – familiar faces one and all, yet now barely recognizable beneath the blood and strips of skin. Deliverers of the Apocalypse, sworn now to fanaticism, sworn not to see the coming dawn, bound to death this night. The very sight of them, with their drugsoaked eyes, chilled Corabb.
'You know what is asked of you this night,' Leoman said to his chosen warriors. 'Leave now, my brothers and sisters, under the pure eyes of Dryjhna, and we shall meet again at Hood's Gate.'

They bowed and headed off.

Corabb watched until the last of them vanished beyond the great doors, then faced Leoman. 'Warleader, what is to happen? What have you planned? You spoke of Dryjhna, yet this night you have bargained with the Queen of Dreams. Speak to me, before I begin to lose faith.'

'Poor Corabb,' Dunsparrow murmured.

Leoman shot her a glare, then said, 'No time, Corabb, but I tell you this – I have had my fill of fanatics, through this lifetime and a dozen others, I have had my fill—'

Boots sounded on the floor in the hallway beyond, and they turned as a tall, cloaked warrior strode in, drawing his hood back. Corabb's eyes widened, and hope surged through him as he stepped forward. 'High Mage L'oric! Truly, Dryjhna shines bright in the sky tonight!'

The tall man was massaging one shoulder, wincing as he said, 'Would that I could have arrived within the damned city walls – too many mages stirring in the Malazan camp. Leoman, I did not know you had the power to summon – I tell you, I was headed elsewhere—'

'The Queen of Dreams, L'oric'

'Again? What does she want?'

Leoman shrugged. 'You were part of the deal, I'm afraid.'

'What deal?'

'I will explain later. In any case, we need you this night. Come, we climb to the South Tower.'

Another surge of hope. Corabb knew he could trust Leoman. The Holy Warrior possessed a plan, a diabolical, brilliant plan. He had been a fool to doubt. He set off in the wake of Dunsparrow, High Mage L'oric and Leoman of the Flails.

L'oric. Now we can fight the Malazans on equal terms. And in such a contest, we can naught but win!

In the dark, beyond the rough ground of the pickets, Bottle crouched a few paces away from the handful of sappers he had been assigned to protect. Cuttle, Maybe, Crump, Ramp and Widdershins. Nearby was a second group being covered by Balgrid: Taffo, Able, Gupp, Jump and Bowl. People he knew from the march, now revealed as sappers or would-be sappers. Insane. Never knew there were so many in our company. Strings was in neither group; he would be leading the rest of the squads into the breach before the smoke and dust settled.

Y'Ghatan's walls were a mess, tiered with older efforts, the last series Malazan-built in the classic sloping style, twenty paces thick at its base. As far as anyone knew, this would be the first time the sappers would challenge the engineering of imperial fortifications – he could see the gleam in their eyes.

Someone approached from his right and Bottle squinted through the gloom as the man arrived to crouch down beside him. 'Ebron, isn't it?'

'Aye, Ashok Regiment.'

Bottle smiled. 'They don't exist no more, Ebron.'

He tapped his chest, then said, 'You got a squad-mate of mine in your group.'

'The one named Crump.'

'Aye. Just thought you should know – he's dangerous.'
'Aren't they all?'

'No, this one especially. He was tossed out of the Mott Irregulars back on Genabackis.'

'Sorry, that don't mean nothing to me, Ebron.'

'Too bad. Anyway, consider yourself warned. Might think about mentioning it to Cuttle.'

'All right, I will.'

'Oponn's pull on you this night, lad.'

'And on you, Ebron.'

The man vanished into the darkness once more.

More waiting. No lights visible along the city's wall, nor the flanking corner bastions. No movement among the battlements.

A low whistle. Bottle met Cuttle's eyes, and the sapper nodded.

Meanas, the warren of shadows, illusion and deception. He fashioned a mental image of the warren, a swirling wall before him, then began focusing his will, watched as a wound formed, lurid red at first, then a hole burning through. Power poured into him. Enough! No more. Gods, why is it so strong? Faint sound, something like movement, a presence, there, on the other side of the warren's wall ...

Then ... nothing.

Of course there was no wall. That had been simply a construct, a fashioning in Bottle's mind to manifest an idea into something physical. Something that he could then breach.

Simple, really. Just incredibly dangerous. We damned mages must be mad, to play with this, to persist in the conceit that it can be managed, shaped, twisted by will alone.

Power is blood.

Blood is power.

And this blood, it belongs to an Elder God ...

A hiss from Cuttle. He blinked, then nodded as he began shaping the sorcery of Meanas. Mists, shot through with inky gloom, spreading out across the rough ground, snaking among the rubble, and the sappers set out, plunged into it, and moved on, unseen.

Bottle followed a few paces behind. The soldiers hiding in that magic could see. Nothing of the illusion confounded their senses. Illusions were usually one- or at best two-sided; seen from the other sides, well, there was nothing to see. True masters, of course, could cheat light in all directions, could fashion something that looked physically real, that moved as it should, casting its own shadow, even scuffing up illusional dust. Bottle's level of skill was nowhere near that. Balgrid had managed it – barely, it was true, but still ... impressive.

But I hate this kind of sorcery. Sure, it's fascinating. Fun to play with, on occasion, but not like tonight, not when it's suddenly life and death.

They threw wagon-planks across the narrow moat Leoman's soldiers had dug, then drew closer to the wall.

Lostara Yil came to Tene Baralta's side. They were positioned at the picket line, behind them the massed ranks of soldiery. Her former commander's face revealed surprise as he looked upon her.

'I did not think to see you again, Captain.'
She shrugged. 'I was getting fat and lazy, Commander.'

'That Claw you were with is not a popular man. The decision was made that he was better off staying in his tent – indefinitely.'

'I have no objection to that.'

Through the gloom they could see swirling clouds of deeper darkness, rolling ominously towards the city's wall.

'Are you prepared, Captain,' Baralta asked, 'to bloody your sword this night?'

'More than you could imagine, Commander.'

Waves of vertigo rippled through Sergeant Hellian, nausea threatening as she watched the magics draw ever closer to Y'Ghatan. It was Y'Ghatan, wasn't it? She turned to the sergeant standing beside her. 'What city is that? Y'Ghatan. I know about that city. It's where Malazans die. Who are you? Who's undermining the walls? Where are the siege weapons? What kind of siege is this?'

'I'm Strings, and you look to be drunk.'

'So? I hate fighting. Strip me of my command, throw me in chains, find a dungeon – only, no spiders. And find that bastard, the one who disappeared, arrest him and chain him within reach. I want to rip out his throat.'

The sergeant was staring at her. She stared back – at least he wasn't weaving back and forth. Not much, anyway.

'You hate fighting, and you want to rip out someone's throat?'

'Stop trying to confuse me, Stirrings. I'm confused 'nough as it is.'

'Where's your squad, Sergeant?'

'Somewhere.'

'Where is your corporal? What is his name?'

'Urb? I don't know.'

'Hood's breath.'

Pella sat watching his sergeant, Gesler, talking with Borduke. The sergeant of the Sixth Squad had only three soldiers left under his command – Lutes, Ibb and Corporal Hubb – the others either magicking or sapping. Of course, there were only two left to Gesler's Fifth Squad – Truth and Pella himself. The plan was to link up after the breach, and that had Pella nervous. They might have to grab anyone close by and to Hood with real squads.

Borduke was tugging at his beard as if he wanted to yank it off. Hubb stood close to his sergeant, a sickly expression on his face.

Gesler looked damn near bored.

Pella thought about his squad. *Something odd about all three of them. Gesler, Stormy and Truth. Not just that strangely gold skin, either ...* Well, he'd stick close to Truth – that lad still seemed too wide-eyed for all of this, despite what he'd already gone through. That damned ship, *Silanda*, which had been commandeered by the Adjunct and was now likely north of them, somewhere in the Kansu Sea or west of it. Along with the transport fleet and a sizeable escort of dromons. The three had sailed it, sharing the deck with still-alive severed heads and a lot worse below-decks.

Pella checked his sword one more time. He'd tied new leather strapping round the grip's tang – not as tight as
he would have liked. He hadn't soaked it yet, either, not wanting the grip still wet when he went into battle. He
drew the crossbow from his shoulder, kept a quarrel in hand, ready for a quick load once the order came to
advance.

*Blood* *y marines. *Should’ve volunteered for plain old infantry. Should’ve gotten a transfer. Should’ve never
joined up at all. Skullcup was more than enough for me, dammit. Should’ve run, that’s what I should’ve done.*

Night wind whistling about them, Corabb, Leoman, L’oric, Dunsparrow and a guard stood on the gently
swaying platform atop the palace tower. The city spread out in all directions, frighteningly dark and seeming
lifeless.

‘What are we here to see, Leoman?’ L’oric asked.

‘Wait, my friend – ah, there!’ He pointed to the rooftop of a distant building near the west wall. On its flat top
flickered muted lantern-light. Then ... gone.

‘And there!’

Another building, another flash of light.

‘Another! More, they are all in place! Fanatics! Damned fools! Dryjhna take us, this is going to work!’

Work? Corabb frowned, then scowled. He caught Dunsparrow’s gaze on him – she mouthed a kiss. Oh how
he wanted to kill her.

Heaps of rubble, broken pots, a dead, bloated dog, and animal bones, there wasn’t a single stretch of even
ground at the base of the wall. Bottle had followed on the heels of the sappers, up the first tier, brick fragments
spilling away beneath their boots, then cries of pain and cursing as someone stumbled over a wasp nest –
darkness alone had saved them from what could have been a fatal few moments – the wasps were sluggish –
Bottle was astonished they had come out at all, until he saw what the soldier had managed. Knocking over one
rock, then thumping his entire foot down the nest’s maw.

He'd momentarily relinquished Meanas, then, to slip into the swarming soul-sparks of the wasps, quelling
their panic and anger. Devoid of disguising magic for the last two tiers, the sappers had scrambled like terrified
beetles – the rock they had hidden under suddenly vanishing – and made the base of the wall well ahead of the
others. Where they crouched, unlimbering their packs of munitions.

Bottle scampered up to crouch at Cuttle’s side. ‘The gloom’s back,’ he whispered. ‘Sorry about that – good
thing they weren't black wasps – Maybe'd be dead by now.’

‘Not to mention yours truly,’ Cuttle said. ‘It was me who stepped in the damned thing.’

‘How many stings?’

‘Two or three, right leg’s numb, but that's better than it was fifteen heartbeats ago.’

‘Numb? Cuttle, that's bad. Find Lutes fast as you can once we're done here.’

‘Count on it. Now, shut up, I got to concentrate.’

Bottle watched him lift out from his pack a bundle of munitions – two cussers strapped together, looking like
a pair of ample breasts. Affixed to them at the base were two spike-shaped explosives – crackers. Gingerly
setting the assemblage on the ground beside him, Cuttle then turned his attention to the base of the wall. He
cleared bricks and rocks to make an angled hole, large and deep enough to accommodate the wall-breaker.

*That was the easy part,* Bottle reminded himself as he watched Cuttle place the explosive into the hole. Now
*comes the acid on the wax plug.* He glanced up and down the length of wall, saw other sappers doing the very
same thing Cuttle had just done. ‘Don't get ahead of the rest,’ Bottle said.
'I know what needs knowing, mage. Stick to your spells and leave me alone.'

Miffed, Bottle looked away again. Then his eyes widened. 'Hey, what's he doing – Cuttle, what's Crump doing?'

Cursing, the veteran glanced over. 'Gods below—'

The sapper from Sergeant Cord's squad had prepared not one wall-breaker, but three, the mass of cussers and crackers filling his entire pack. His huge teeth were gleaming, eyes glittering as he wrestled it loose and, lying on his back, head closest to the wall, settled it on his stomach and began crawling until there was the audible crunch of the back of his skull contacting the rearing stonework.

Cuttle scrambled over. 'You!' he hissed. 'Are you mad? Take those damned things apart!'

The man's grin collapsed. 'But I made it myself!'

'Keep your voice down, idiot!'

Crump rolled and shoved the mass of munitions up against the wall. A small glittering vial appeared in his right hand. 'Wait till you see this!' he whispered, smiling once more.

'Wait! Not yet!'

A sizzle, threads of smoke rising—

Cuttle was on his feet, and, dragging a leg, he began running. And he began screaming. 'Everyone! Back! Run, you fools! Run!'

Figures pelting away on all sides, Bottle among them.

Crump raced past as if the mage had been standing still, the man's absurdly long legs pumping high and wild, knobby knees and huge boots scything the air. Munitions had been left against the wall but unset, others remained a pace or more back. Sacks of sharpeners, smokers and burners left behind – gods below, this is going to be bad—

Shouts from atop the wall, now, voices raised in alarm. A ballista thumped as a missile was loosed at the fleeing sappers. Bottle heard the crack and skitter as it struck the ground.

Faster— He glanced over his shoulder, and saw Cuttle hobbling along in his wake. Hood take us! Bottle skidded to a halt, turned and ran back to the sapper's side.

'Fool!' Cuttle grunted. 'Just go!'

'Lean on my shoulder—'

'You've just killed yourself—'

Cuttle was no lightweight. Bottle sagged with his weight as they ran.

'Twelve!' the sapper gasped.

The mage scanned the ground ahead in growing panic. Some cover—

'Eleven!'

A shelf of old foundation, solid limestone, there, ten, nine paces—

'Ten!'

Five more paces – it was looking good – a hollow on the other side—

'Nine!'
Two paces, then down, as Cuttle screamed: 'Eight!'

The night vanished, flinging stark shadows forward as the two men tumbled down behind the shelf of limestone, into a heap of rotting vegetation. The ground lifted to meet them, a god's uppercut, driving the air from Bottle's lungs.

Sound, like a collapsing mountain, then a wall of stone, smoke, fire, and a rain filled with flames—

The concussion threw Lostara Yil from her feet moments after she'd stared, uncomprehending, at the squads of marines arrayed beyond the picket line – stared, as they were one and all flattened, rolling back before an onrushing wave – multiple explosions now, rapid-fire, marching along the wall to either side – then she was hammered in the chest, flung to the ground amidst other soldiers.

Rocks arrived in an almost-horizontal hail, fast as sling-stones, cracking off armour, thudding deep into exposed flesh – bones snapping, screams—

— the light dimmed, wavered, then contracted to a knot of flames, filling an enormous gap in Y'Ghatan's wall, almost dead-centre, and as Lostara – propped on one elbow, braving the hail of stones – watched, she saw the flanks of that huge gap slowly crumble, and, beyond, two three-storey tenements folding inward, flames shooting up like fleeing souls—

Among the slowing rain, now, body-parts.

Atop the palace tower, Corabb and the others had been thrown down – the guard who had accompanied them cartwheeling over the platform's low wall and vanishing with a dwindling scream, barely heard as the tower swayed, as the roar settled around them like the fury of a thousand demons, as huge stones slammed into the tower's side, others ricocheting off to crash among the buildings below, and, now, a terrible cracking, popping sound that sent Corabb clawing across the pavestones towards the hatch.

'It's going down!' he screamed.

Two figures reached the hatch before him – Leoman and Dunsparrow.

Cracking, sagging, the platform starting its inexorable pitch. Clouds of choking dust. Corabb reached the hatch and pulled himself into it headfirst, joining Leoman and the Malazan woman as they slithered like snakes down the winding steps. Corabb's left heel connected with a jaw and he heard L'oric's grunt of pain, then cursing in unknown languages.

That explosion – the breach of the wall – gods below, he had never seen anything like it. How could one challenge these Malazans? With their damned Moranth munitions, their gleeful disregard of the rules of honourable war.

Tumbling, rolling, sprawling out onto a scree of rubble on the main floor of the palace – chambers to their left had vanished beneath the section of tower that had broken off. Corabb saw a leg jutting from the collapsed ceiling, strangely unmarred, free even of blood or dust.

Coughing, Corabb clambered upright, eyes stinging, countless bruises upon his body, and stared at Leoman, who was already on his feet and brushing mortar dust from his clothes. Near him, L'oric and Dunsparrow were also pulling themselves free of bricks and shards of wood.

Glancing over, Leoman of the Flails said, 'Maybe the tower wasn't such a good idea after all. Come on, we need to saddle our horses – if they still live – and ride to the Temple!'

_The Temple of Scadissara? But— what— why?_

The rattle of gravel, the thump of larger chunks, and gusts of smoky, dusty heat. Bottle opened his eyes. Sebar husks, hairy and leathery, crowded his vision, his nose filling with the pungent overripe scent of sebar pulp.
The fruit's juice was considered a delicacy – the reek was nauseating – he knew he'd never be able to drink the stuff again. A groan from the rubbish somewhere to his left. 'Cuttle? That you?'

'The numb feeling's gone. Amazing what a shot of terror can do to a body.'

'You sure the leg's still there?'

'Reasonably.'

'You counted down to eight!'

'What?'

'You said eight! Then – boom!'

'Had to keep your hopes up, didn't I? Where in Hood's pit are we, anyway?'

Bottle began clawing his way free, amazed that he seemed uninjured – not even a scratch. 'Among the living, sapper.' His first view of the scene on the killing ground made no sense. Too much light – it had been dark, hadn't it? Then he saw soldiers amidst the rubble, some writhing in pain, others picking themselves up, covered in dust, coughing in the foul air.

The breach on Y'Ghatan's south wall ran a full third of its length, fifty paces in from the southwest bastion to well beyond the centre gate fortifications. Buildings had collapsed, whilst those that remained upright, flanking the raging flames of the gap, were themselves burning, although it seemed that most of that had come from the innumerable burners among the sapper-kits left behind. The fires danced on cracked stone as if seeking somewhere to go before the fuel vanished.

The breach was deep, shrouded by descending dust. Cuttle appeared at his side, plucking scraps of rotted fruit from his armour. 'We can head into that gap soon – gods, when I track down Crump—'

'Get in line, Cuttle. Hey, I see Strings ... and the squad ...'

Horns sounded, soldiers scrambling to form up. Darkness was closing in once more, as the last of the fires dwindled in the breach. The rain of dust seemed unending as Fist Keneb moved to the rally position, his officers drawing round him and bellowing orders. He saw Tene Baralta and Captain Lostara Yil at the head of a narrow column that had already begun moving.

The sappers had messed up. That much was clear. And some of them had not made it back. Damned fools, and they weren't even under fire.

He saw the fires guttering out in the gap, although webs of flame clung stubbornly to the still-upright buildings to either side. 'First, second and third squads,' Keneb said to Captain Faradan Sort. 'The heavies lead the way into the breach.'

'The marines are already through, Fist.'

'I know, Captain, but I want backup close behind them if things get hairy. Get them moving.'

'Aye, Fist.'

Keneb glanced back to the higher ground on the other side of the road and saw a row of figures watching. The Adjunct, Tamber, Nil and Nether. Fist Blistig and Warleader Gall. Fist Temul was likely out with his horsewarriors, ranging round the city on the other sides. There was always a chance Leoman would leave his followers to their grisly fate and attempt to escape on his own. Such things were not unknown.

'Sergeant Cord!'

The soldier strolled up. Keneb noted the sigil of the Ashok Regiment on the man's battered leather armour,
but elected to ignore it. For now. 'Lead the mediums in, seventh through twelfth squads.'

'Aye, Fist, we're dogging the heavies' heels.'

'Good. This will be street and alley fighting, Sergeant, assuming the bastards don't surrender outright.'

'I'd be surprised if they did that, Fist.'

'Me too. Get going, Sergeant.'

Finally, some motion among the troops of his company. The waiting was over. The Fourteenth was heading into battle. *Hood look away from us this night. Just look away.*

Bottle and Cuttle rejoined their squad. Sergeant Strings carried his lobber crossbow, a cusser quarrel slotted and locked.

'There's a way through the flames,' Strings said, wiping sweat from his eyes, then spitting. 'Koryk and Tarr up front. Cuttle to the rear and keep a sharper in your hand. Behind the front two, me and Smiles. You're a step behind us, Bottle.'

'You want more illusions, Sergeant?'

'No, I want your other stuff. Ride the rats and pigeons and bats and spiders and whatever in Hood's name else is in there. I need eyes you can look through into places we can't see.'

'Expecting a trap?' Bottle asked.

'There's Borduke and his squad, dammit. First into the breach. Come on, on their heels!'

They sprinted forward across the uneven, rock-littered ground. Moonlight struggled through the dust haze. Bottle quested with his senses, seeking life somewhere ahead, but what he found was in pain, dying, trickling away beneath mounds of rubble, or stunned insensate by the concussions. 'We have to get past the blast area,' he said to Strings.

'Right,' the sergeant replied over a shoulder. 'That's the idea.'

They reached the edge of the vast, sculpted crater created by Crump's munitions. Borduke and his squad were scrambling up the other side, and Bottle saw that the wall they climbed was tiered with once-buried city ruins, ceilings and floors compressed, cracked, collapsed, sections of wall that had slid out and down into the pit itself, taking with them older layers of floor tiles. He saw that both Balgrid and Maybe had survived the explosion, but wondered how many sappers and squad mages they had lost. Some gut instinct told him Crump had survived.

Borduke and his squad were having a hard time of it.

'To the right,' Strings said. 'We can skirt it and get through before them!'

Borduke heard and twisted round from where he clung to the wall, three quarters of the way up. 'Bastards! Balgrid, get that fat butt of yours moving, damn you!'

Koryk found a way round the crater, clambering over the rubble, and Bottle and the others followed. Too distracted for the moment by the effort of staying on his feet, Bottle did not attempt to sense the myriad, minuscule life beyond the blast area, in the city itself. Time for that later, he hoped.

The half-blood Seti's progress halted suddenly, and the mage looked up to see that Koryk had encountered an obstacle, a broad crack in a sharply angled, subterranean floor, a man's height below ground-level. Dust-smeared tiles revealed the painted images of yellow birds in flight, all seeming to be heading deep underground with the slanting pitch of the floor.

Koryk glanced back at Strings. 'Saw the whole slab move, Sergeant. Not sure how solid our footing will be.'
'Hood take us! All right, get the ropes out, Smiles—'

'I tossed 'em,' she said, scowling. 'On the run in here. Too damned heavy—'

'And I picked them up,' Cuttle interjected, tugging the coils from his left shoulder and flinging them forward.

Strings reached out and rapped a knuckle against Smiles's chin – her head snapped back, eyes widening in shock, then fury. 'You carry what I tell you to carry, soldier,' the sergeant said.

Koyrk collected one end of the rope, backed up a few paces, then bolted forward and leapt over the fissure. He landed clean, although with very little room to spare. There was no way Tarr or Cuttle could manage such a long jump.

Strings cursed, then said, 'Those who can do what Koryk just did, go to it. And nobody leave gear behind, either.'

Moments later both Bottle and Smiles crouched at Koryk's side, helping anchor the rope as the sergeant, twin sacks of munitions dangling from him, crossed hand over hand, the bags swinging wild but positioned so that they never collided with one another. Bottle released the rope and moved forward to help, once Strings found footing on the edge.

Cuttle followed. Then Tarr, with the rope wrapped about himself, made his way down onto the slanted floor and was dragged quickly across as it shifted then slid away beneath his weight. Armour and weapons clanking, the rest of the squad pulled the corporal onto level ground.

'Gods,' Cuttle gasped. 'The man weighs as much as a damned bhederin!'

Koryk re-coiled the rope and handed it, grinning, to Smiles.

They set off once more, up over a ridge of wreckage from some kind of stall or lean-to that had abutted the inner wall, then more rubble, beyond which was a street.

And Borduke and his squad were just entering it, spread out, crossbows at the ready. The bearded sergeant was in the lead, Corporal Hubb on his right and two steps behind. Ibb was opposite the corporal, and two paces behind the pair were Tavos Pond and Balgrid, followed by Lutes, with the rear drawn up by the sapper Maybe. Classic marine advance formation.

The buildings to the sides were dark, silent. Something odd about them, Bottle thought, trying to work out what it might be ... no shutters on the windows – they're all open. So are the doors ... every door, in fact—

'Sergeant—'

The arrows that suddenly sped down from flanking windows, high up, were loosed at the precise moment that a score of figures rushed out from nearby buildings, screaming, spears, scimitars and shields at the ready. Those arrows had been fired without regard to the charging warriors, and two cried out as iron-barred points tore into them.

Bottle saw Borduke spin round, saw the arrow jutting from his left eye socket, saw a second arrow transfixing his neck. Blood was spraying as he staggered, clawing and clutching at his throat and face. Behind him, Corporal Hubb curled up round an arrow in his gut, then sank to the cobbles. Ibb had taken an arrow in the left shoulder, and he was plucking at it, swearing, when a warrior rushed in on him, scimitar swinging to strike him across the side of his head. Bone and helm caved in, a gush of blood, and the soldier fell.

Strings's squad arrived, intercepting a half-dozen warriors. Bottle found himself in the midst of a vicious exchange, Koryk on his left, the half-Seti's longsword batting away a scimitar, then driving point first into the man's throat. A screaming visage seemed to lunge at Bottle, as if the warrior was seeking to tear into his neck with bared teeth, and Bottle recoiled at the madness in the man's eyes, then reached in with his mind, into the warrior's fierce maelstrom of thoughts – little more than fractured images and black rage – and found the most primitive part of his brain; a burst of power and the man's coordination vanished. He crumpled, limbs twitching.
Cold with sweat, Bottle backed away another step, wishing he had a weapon to draw, beyond the bush-knife in his right hand.

Fighting on all sides. Screams, the clash of metal, snapping of chain links, grunts and gasps.

And still arrows rained down.

One cracked into the back of Strings's helm, pitching him down to his knees. He twisted round, lifting his crossbow, glaring at the building opposite – its upper windows crowded with archers.

Bottle reached out and grasped Koryk's baldric. 'Back! Fid's cusser! Everyone! Back!'

The sergeant raised the crossbow to his shoulder, aimed towards an upper window—

There were heavy infantry among them now, and Bottle saw Taffo, from Mosel's squad, wading into a crowd of warriors, now ten paces from the building – from Strings's target—

—as the crossbow thumped, the misshapen quarrel flying out, up, into the maw of the window.

Bottle threw himself flat, arms covering his head—

The upper floor of the building exploded, huge sections of wall bulging, then crashing down into the street. The cobbles jumped beneath Bottle.

Someone rolled up against him and he felt something flop heavy and slimy onto his forearm, twitching and hot. A sudden reek of bile and faeces.

The patter of stones, piteous moans, the lick of flames. Then another massive crash, as what remained of the upper floor collapsed into the level below. The groan of the nearest wall preceded its sagging dissolution. Then, beyond the few groans, silence.

Bottle lifted his head. To find Corporal Harbyn lying beside him. The lower half of the soldier's body was gone, entrails spilled out. Beneath the helm's ridge, eyes stared sightlessly. Pulling away, Bottle leaned back on his hands and crabbed across the rock-strewn street. Where Taffo had been fighting a mob of warriors, there was now nothing but a heap of rubble and a few dust-sheathed limbs jutting from beneath it, all motionless.

Koryk moved past him, stabbing down at stunned figures with his sword. Bottle saw Smiles cross the half-Seti's path, her two knives already slick with blood.

Bodies in the street. Figures slowly rising, shaking their heads, spitting blood. Bottle twisted round onto his knees, dipped his head, and vomited onto the cobbles.

'Fiddler – you bastard!'

Coughing, but stomach quiescent for the moment, Bottle looked over to see Sergeant Mosel advancing on Strings.

'We had them! We were rushing the damned building!'

'Then rush that one!' Strings snapped, pointing at the tenement on the other side of the street. 'They just been knocked back, that's all – any moment now and another rain of arrows—'

Cursing, Mosel gestured at the three heavies left – Mayfly, Flashwit and Uru Hela – and they lumbered into the building's doorway.

Strings was fitting another quarrel into his crossbow, this one loaded with a sharper. 'Balgrid! Who's left in your squad?'

The portly mage staggered over. 'What?' he shouted. 'I can't hear you! What?'

'Tavos Pond!'
'Here, Sergeant. We got Maybe, uhm, Balgrid – but he's bleeding out from his ears. Lutes is down, but he should live – with some healing. We're out of this—'

'To Hood you are. Pull Lutes clear – there's a squad coming up – the rest of you are with me—'

'Balgrid's deaf!'

'Better he was mute – we got hand signals, remember? Now remind the bastard of that! Bottle, help Tarr out. Cuttle, take Koryk to that corner up ahead and wait there for us. Smiles, load up on quarrels – I want that weapon of yours cocked and your eyes sharp on everything from rooftops on down.'

Bottle climbed to his feet and made his way to where Tarr was struggling to clamber free of rubble – a part of the wall had fallen on him, but it seemed his armour and shield had withstood the impact. Lots of swearing, but nothing voiced in pain. 'Here,' Bottle said, 'give me your arm—'

'I'm fine,' the corporal said, grunting as he kicked his feet clear. He still gripped his shortsword, and snagged on its tip was a hairy piece of scalp, coated in dust and dripping from the underside. 'Look at that,' he said, gesturing up the street with his sword, 'even Cuttle's shut up now.'

'Fid had no choice,' Bottle said. 'Too many arrows coming down—'

'I ain't complaining, Bottle. Not one bit. See Borduke go down? And Hubb? That could've been us, if we'd reached here first.'

'Abyss take me, I hadn't thought of that.'

He glanced over as a squad of medium infantry arrived – Sergeant Cord's – Ashok Regiment and all that. 'What in Hood's name happened?'

'Ambush,' Bottle said. 'Sergeant Strings had to take a building down. Cusser.'

Cord's eyes widened. 'Bloody marines,' he muttered, then headed over to where Strings crouched. Bottle and Tarr followed.

'You formed up again?' Cord asked their sergeant. 'We're bunching up behind you—'

'We're ready, but send word back. There'll be ambushes aplenty. Leoman means us to buy every street and every building with blood. Fist Keneb might want to send the sappers ahead again, under marine cover, to drop buildings – it's the safest way to proceed.'

Cord looked round. 'Safest way? Gods below.' He turned. 'Corporal Shard, you heard Fid. Send word back to Keneb.'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'Sinn,' Cord added, speaking to a young girl nearby, 'put that knife away – he's already dead.'

She looked up, even as her blade cut through the base of the dead warrior's right index finger. She held it up for display, then stuffed it into a belt pouch.

'Nice girl you got there,' Strings said. 'Had us one of those, once.'

'Shard! Hold back there! Send Sinn with the message, will you?'

'I don't want to go back!' Sinn shouted.

'Too bad,' Cord said. Then, to Strings: 'We'll link up with Mosel's heavies behind you.'

Strings nodded. 'All right, squad, let's try out the next street, shall we?'

Bottle swallowed back another surge of nausea, then he joined the others as they scrambled towards Koryk and Cuttle. Gods, this is going to be brutal.
Sergeant Gesler could smell it. Trouble in the night. Unrelieved darkness from gaping windows, yawning doorways, and on flanking streets, where other squads were moving, the sounds of pitched battle. Yet, before them, no movement, no sound – nothing at all. He raised his right hand, hooked two fingers and made a downward tugging motion. Behind him he heard boots on the cobbles, one padding off to his left, the other to his right, away, halting when the soldiers reached the flanking buildings. Truth on his left, Pella on his right, crossbows out, eyes on opposite rooftops and upper windows.

Another gesture and Sands came up from behind to crouch at his side. 'Well?' Gesler demanded, wishing for the thousandth time that Stormy was here.

'It's bad,' Sands said. 'Ambushes.'

'Right, so where's ours? Go back and call up Moak and his squad, and Tugg's – I want those heavies clearing these buildings, before it all comes down on us. What sappers we got with us?'

'Thom Tissy's squad's got some,' Sands said. 'Able, Jump and Gupp, although they just decided to become sappers tonight, a bell or so ago.'

'Great, and they got munitions?'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'Madness. All right. Get Thom Tissy's squad up here, too. I heard one cusser go off already – might be the only way to do this.'

'Okay, Sergeant. I'll be right back.'

Under-strength squads and a night engagement in a strange, hostile city. Had the Adjunct lost her mind?

Twenty paces away, Pella crouched low, his back against a mud-brick wall. He thought he'd caught movement in a high window opposite, but he couldn't be certain – not enough to call out the alarm. Might well have been a curtain or something, plucked by the wind.

*Only ... there ain't much wind.*

Eyes fixed on that particular window, he slowly raised his crossbow.

Nothing. Just darkness.

Distant detonations – sharpers, he guessed, somewhere to the south. *We're supposed to be pushing in hard and fast, and here we are, bogged down barely one street in from the breach. Gesler's gotten way too cautious, I think.*

He heard the clank of weapons, armour and the thud of footfalls as more squads came up. Flicking his gaze away from the window, he watched as Sergeant Tugg led his heavies towards the building opposite. Three soldiers from Thorn Tissy's squad paddled up to the doorway of the building Pella was huddled against. Jump, Gupp and Able. Pella saw sharpers in their hands – and nothing else. He crouched lower, then returned his attention to the distant window, cursing under his breath, waiting for one of them to toss a grenade in through the doorway.

On the other side of the street, Tugg's squad plunged into the building – there was a shout from within, the clang of weapons, sudden screams—

Then more shrieking, this time from the building at Pella's back, as the three sappers rushed inside. Pella cringed – *no, you fools! You don't carry them inside – you throw them!*

A sharp crack, shaking dust from the wall behind Pella, grit raining down onto the back of his neck, then screams. Another concussion – ducking still lower, Pella looked back up at the opposite window—
To see, momentarily, a single flash—
—to feel the shock of surprise—
—as the arrow sped at him. A hard, splintering cracking sound. Pella's head was thrown back, helm
crunching against the wall. Something, wavering, at the upper edge of his vision, but those edges were growing
darker. He heard his crossbow clatter to the cobbles at his feet, then distant pain as his knees struck the stones,
the jolt peeling skin away – he'd done that once, as a child, playing in the alley. Stumbling, knees skidding on
gritty, filthy cobbles—

So filthy, the murk of hidden diseases, infections – his mother had been so angry, angry and frightened.
They'd had to go to a healer, and that had cost money – money they had been saving for a move. To a better
part of the slum. The dream ... put away, all because he'd skinned his knees.

Just like now. And darkness closing in.

*Oh Momma, I skinned my knees. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I skinned my knees ...*

As mayhem was exploding in the buildings to either side, Gesler crouched lower. He glanced over to his right
and saw Pella. An arrow was jutting from his forehead. He was on his knees for a moment, his weapon falling,
then he sank down to the side.

Sharpers going off in that building, then something worse – a burner, the flare of red flame bursting through
the ground-floor windows. Shrieks – someone stumbled outside, wreathed in flames – a Malazan, running,
arms waving, slapping – straight for Moak and his squad—

'Get away!' Gesler bellowed, rising and raising his crossbow.

Moak had pulled out his rain-cape – the soldiers were rushing towards the burning man – they didn't see –
*the satchel – the munitions—*

Gesler fired his crossbow. The quarrel caught the sapper in the midsection, even as the munitions went off.

Flung back, punched in the chest, Gesler sprawled, rolled, then came to his feet.

Moak, Stacker, Rove. Burnt, Guano and Mud. *All gone, all pieces of meat and shattered bone.* A helm, the
head still in it, struck a wall, spun wildly for a moment, then wobbled to a halt.

'Truth! To me!' Gesler waved as he ran towards the building the heavies had entered, and where the sounds
of fighting had grown fiercer. 'You see Sands?' he demanded as he reloaded his crossbow.

'N-no, Sergeant. Pella—'

'Pella's dead, lad.' He saw Thorn Tissy and what was left of his squad – Tulip and Ramp – heading towards
the doorway after Tugg and his heavies. *Good, Thorn's thinking clear—*

The building that had swallowed Able, Jump and Gupp was a mass of flames, the heat pouring out like
scalding liquid. Gods, *what did they set off in there?*

He darted through the doorway, skidded to a halt. Sergeant Tugg's fighting days were over – the soldier had
been speared through just below the sternum. He had thrown up a gout of bloody bile before dying. At the inner
doorway opposite, leading into a hall, lay Robello, his head caved in. Beyond, out of sight, the rest of the
heavies were fighting.

'Hang back, Truth,' Gesler said, 'and use that crossbow to cover our backs. Tissy, let's go.'

The other sergeant nodded, gesturing towards Tulip and Ramp.

They plunged into the hallway.
Hellian stumbled after Urb, who suddenly halted – it was like hitting a wall – she bounced off, fell on her behind. 'Ow, you bloody ox!'

All at once there were soldiers around them, pulling back from the street corner, dragging fallen comrades.

'Who? What?'

A woman dropped down beside her. 'Hanno. We lost our sergeant. We lost Sobelone. And Toles. Ambush—'

One hand leaning hard on Hanno's shoulder, Hellian pulled herself upright. She shook her head. 'Right,' she said, something cold and hard straightening within her, as if her spine had turned into a sword, or a spear, or whatever else won't bend, no, it'll bend, maybe, but not break. Gods, I feel sick. 'Join up with my squad. Urb, what squad are we?'

'No idea, Sergeant.'

'Don't matter, then, you're with us, Hanno. Ambush? Fine, let's go get the bastards. Touchy, Brethless, pull out those grenados you stole—'

The twins faced her – innocence, indignation, both dreadful efforts, then the two pulled out munitions. 'They're smokers, Sergeant, and one cracker,' Touchy said. 'That's all—'

'Smokers? Perfect. Hanno, you're going to lead us into the building the bastards attacked from. Touchy, you throw yours ahead of her. Brethless, pick the open flank and do the same. We ain't gonna stand around – we ain't even going in slow and cautious. I want fast, you all got that? Fast.'

'Sergeant?'

'What is it, Urb?'

'Nothing. Only, I'm ready, I guess.'

Well that makes one of us. I knew I'd hate this city.

'Weapons out, soldiers, it's time to kill people.'

They set off.

'We done left everybody behind,' Galt said.

'Shut that whining,' Sergeant Balm snapped, wiping sweat and mud from his eyes. 'We just made it easier for the rest of 'em.' He glared at the soldiers in his squad. Breathing hard, a few cuts here and there, but nothing serious. They'd carved through that ambush quick and dirty, like he'd wanted it.

They were on a second floor, in a room filled with bolts of cloth – a fortune's worth of silks. Lobe had said they'd come from Darujhistan, of all places. A damned fortune's worth, and now most of it was soaked with blood and bits of human meat.

'Maybe we should check the top floor,' Throatslitter said, eyeing the nicks in his long-knives. 'Thought I heard some scuffing, maybe.'

'All right, take Widdershins. Deadsmell, go to the stairs—'

'Leading up? It's a ladder.'

'Fine, the Hood-damned fucking ladder, then. You're backup and mouthpiece, got it? Hear any scrapping upstairs and you join it, but not before letting us know about it. Understood?'

'Clear as piss, Sergeant.'

'Good, the three of you go. Galt, stay at the window and keep looking at what's opposite you. Lobe, do the same at that window. There's more crap waiting for us and we're gonna carve right through all of it.'
A short while later, the sound of footfalls padding back and forth from above ceased and Deadsmell called out from the hallway that Throatslitter and Widdershins were coming down the ladder. A dozen heartbeats later and all three entered the silk room. Throatslitter came close to Balm’s side and crouched. ‘Sergeant,’ he said, his voice near a whisper.

‘What?’

‘We found something. Don't much like the looks of it. We think you should take a look.’

Balm sighed, then straightened. ‘Galt?’

‘They’re there, all right, all three floors.’

‘Lobe?’

‘Same here, including on the roof, some guy with a hooded lantern.’

‘Okay, keep watching. Lead on, Throatslitter. Deadsmell, back into the hallway. Widdershins, do some magic or something.’

He followed Throatslitter back to the ladder. The floor above was low-ceilinged, more of an attic than anything else. Plenty of rooms, the walls thick, hardened clay.

Throatslitter led him up to one such wall. At his feet stood huge urns and casks. ‘Found these,’ he said, reaching down behind one cask and lifting into view a funnel, made from a gourd of some sort.

‘All right,’ Balm said, ‘what about it?’

His soldier kicked one of the casks. ‘These ones are full. But the urns are empty. All of ’em.’

‘Okay ...’

‘Olive oil.’

‘Right, this city's famous for it. Go on.’

Throatslitter tossed the funnel aside, then drew a knife. ‘See these damp spots on these walls? Here.’ He pointed with the knife-tip, then dug into the patch. ‘The clay’s soft, recently plugged. These walls, they're hollow.’

‘For Fener's sake, man, what are you going on about?’

‘Just this. I think these walls – the whole building, it's filled with oil.’

‘Filled? With ... with oil?’

Throatslitter nodded.

Filled with oil? What, some kind of piping system to supply it downstairs? No, for Hood’s sake, Balm, don’t be an idiot. ‘Throatslitter, you think other buildings are rigged like this? Is that what you're thinking?’

‘I think, Sergeant, that Leoman's turned Y’Ghatan into one big trap. He wants us in here, fighting in the streets, pushing in and in—’

‘But what about his followers?’

‘What about them?’

But ... that would mean ... He thought back – the faces of the enemy, the fanaticism, the gleam of drugged madness. ‘Abyss take us!’

‘We got to find Fist Keneb, Sergeant. Or the captains. We got—’
'I know, I know. Let's get out of here, before that bastard with the lantern throws it!'

It had begun messy, only to get messier still. Yet, from that initial reeling back, as ambushes were unveiled one after another, mauling the advance squads of marines, Fist Keneb's and Fist Tene Baralta's companies had rallied, regrouped, then pushed inward, building by building, street by street. Somewhere ahead, Keneb knew, what was left of the marines was penetrating still further, cutting through the fanatic but poorly armed and thoroughly undisciplined warriors of Leoman's renegade army.

He had heard that those warriors were in a drug-fuelled frenzy, that they fought without regard to injury, and that none retreated, dying where they stood. What he had expected, truth be told. A last stand, a heroic, martyred defence. For that was what Y'Ghatan had been, what it was, and what it would always be.

They would take this city. The Adjunct would have her first true victory. Bloody, brutal, but a victory nonetheless.

He stood one street in from the breach, smouldering rubble behind him, watching the line of wounded and unconscious soldiers being helped back to the healers in camp, watching fresh infantry filing forward, through the secured areas, and ahead to the battle that was the closing of the Malazan fist around Leoman and his followers, around the last living vestiges of the rebellion itself.

He saw that Red Blade officer of Tene Baralta's, Lostara Yil, leading three squads towards the distant sounds of fighting. And Tene himself stood nearby, speaking with Captain Kindly.

Keneb had sent Faradan Sort ahead, to make contact with the advance squads. There was to be a second rendezvous, near the palace itself, and hopefully everyone was still following the battle plan.

Shouts, then cries of alarm – from behind him. From outside the breach! Fist Keneb spun round, and saw a wall of flame rising in the killing field beyond – where the narrow, deep trench had been dug by Leoman's warriors. Buried urns filled with olive oil began exploding from the trench, spraying burning liquid everywhere. Keneb saw the line of retreating wounded scatter apart near the trench, figures aflame. Shrieks, the roar of fire—

His horrified gaze caught motion to his right, up on the nearest building's rooftop, where it faced onto the rubble of the breach. A figure, lantern in one hand, flaring torch in the other – bedecked in web-slung flasks, surrounded by amphorae, at the very edge of the roof, arms outstretched, kicking over the tall clay jars – ropes affixed between them and his ankles, the weight then plunging the figure over the side.

Down into the rubble of the breach.

He struck, vanished from view, then a sudden flaring of flames, rushing out in sheets—

And Keneb saw, upon other rooftops, lining the city's walls, more figures – flinging themselves down. Down, then the glow of raging fire, rising up, encircling – from the bastions, more flames, billowing out, spreading wild like a flood unleashed.

Heat rushed upon Keneb, driving him back a step. Oil from shattered casks, beneath the wreckage of fallen wall and collapsed buildings, suddenly caught flame. The breach was closing, demonic fire lunging into sight.

Keneb looked about, horror rising within him, and saw the half-dozen signallers of his staff huddled near a fragment of rubble. Bellowing, he ran to them. 'Sound the recall! Damn you, soldiers, sound the recall!'

Northeast of Y'Ghatan, Temul and a company of Wickans rode up the slope to the Lothal road. They had seen no-one. Not a single soul fleeing the city. The Fourteenth's horse-warriors had fully encircled it. Wickans, Seti, Burned Tears. There would be no escape.

Temul had been pleased, hearing that the Adjunct's thinking had followed identical tracks with his own. A sudden strike, hard as a knife pushed into a chest, straight into the heart of this cursed rebellion. They had heard the munitions go off – loud, louder than expected, and had seen the flame-shot black clouds billowing upward,
along with most of Y'Ghatan's south wall.

Reining in on the road, seeing beneath them the signs of the massive exodus that had clogged this route only days earlier.

A flaring of firelight, distant rumbling, as of thunder, and the horse-warriors turned as one to face the city. Where walls of flame rose behind the stone walls, from the bastions, and the sealed gates, then, building after building within, more flames, and more.

Temul stared, his mind battered by what he was seeing, what he now understood.

A third of the Fourteenth Army was in that city by now. A third.

And they were already as good as dead.

Fist Blistig stood beside the Adjunct on the road. He felt sick inside, the feeling rising up from a place and a time he had believed left behind him. Standing on the walls of Aren, watching the slaughter of Coltaine's army. Hopeless, helpless—

'Fist,' the Adjunct snapped, 'get more soldiers filling in that trench.'

He started, then half-turned and gestured towards one of his aides – the woman had heard the command, for she nodded and hurried off. Douse the trench, aye. But ... what's the point? The breach had found a new wall, this one of flames. And more had risen all round the city, beginning just within the tiered walls, buildings bursting, voicing terrible roars as fiery oil exploded out, flinging mud-bricks that were themselves deadly, burning missiles. And now, further in, at junctures and along the wider streets, more buildings were igniting. One, just beyond the palace, had moments earlier erupted, with geysers of burning oil shooting skyward, obliterating the darkness, revealing the sky filling with tumbling black clouds.

'Nil, Nether,' the Adjunct said in a brittle voice, 'gather our mages – all of them – I want the flames smothered in the breach. I want—'

'Adjunct,' Nether cut in, 'we have not the power.'

'The old earth spirits,' Nil added in a dull tone, 'are dying, fleeing the flames, the baking agony, all dying or fleeing. Something is about to be born ...'

Before them, the city of Y'Ghatan was brightening into day, yet a lurid, terrible day.

Coughing, staggering, wounded soldiers half-carried, halfdragged through the press – but there was nowhere to go. Keneb stared – the air burning his eyes – at the mass of his soldiers. Seven, eight hundred. Where were the others? But he knew.

Gone. Dead.

In the streets beyond, he could see naught but fire, leaping from building to building, filling the fierce, hot air, with a voice of glee, demonic, hungry and eager.

He needed to do something. Think of something, but this heat, this terrible heat – his lungs were heaving, desperate despite the searing pain that blossomed with each strained breath. Lungful after lungful, yet it was as if the air itself had died, all life sucked from it, and so could offer him nothing.

His own armour was cooking him alive. He was on his knees, now, with all the others. 'Armour!' he rasped, not knowing if anyone could hear him. 'Get it off! Armour! Weapons!' Gods below, my chest – the pain—

A blade-on-blade parry, holding contact, two edges rasping against each other, then, as the warrior pushed harder with his scimitar, Lostara Yil ducked low, disengaged her sword downward, slashing up and under,
taking him in the throat. Blood poured out. Stepping past, she batted aside another weapon thrusting at her – a spear – hearing splinters from the shaft as she pushed it to one side. In her left hand was her kethra knife, which she punched into her foe’s belly, twisting as she yanked it back out again.

Lostara staggered free of the crumpling warrior, a flood of sorrow shooting through her as she heard him call out a woman’s name before he struck the cobbles.

The fight raged on all sides, her three squads now down to fewer than a dozen soldiers, whilst yet more of the berserk fanatics closed in from the flanking buildings – market shops, shuttered doors kicked down and now billowing smoke, carrying out into the street the reek of overheated oil, spitting, crackling sounds – something went thump and all at once there was fire—

Everywhere.

Lostara Yil cried out a warning, even as another warrior rushed her. Parrying with the knife, stop-thrusting with her sword, then kicking the impaled body from her blade, his sagging weight nearly tugging the weapon from her hand.

Terrible shrieks behind her. She whirled.

A flood of burning oil, roaring out from buildings to either side, sweeping among the fighters – their legs, then clothes – telaba, leathers, linens, the flames appearing all over them. Warrior and soldier, the fire held to no allegiance – it was devouring everyone.

She staggered away from that onrushing river of death, stumbled and fell, sprawling, onto a corpse, clambered onto it a moment before fiery oil poured around her, swept past her already burning island of torn flesh—

A building exploded, the fireball expanding outward, plunging towards her. She cried out, throwing up both arms, as the searing incandescence reached out to take her—

A hand from behind, snagging her harness—

Pain – the breath torn from her lungs – then ... nothing.

'Stay low!' Balm shouted as he led his squad down the twisting alley. After his bellowed advice, the sergeant resumed his litany of curses. They were lost. Pushed back in their efforts to return to Keneb and the breach, they were now being herded. By flames. They had seen the palace a short while earlier, through a momentary break in the smoke, and as far as Balm could determine they were still heading in that direction – but the world beyond had vanished, in fire and smoke, and pursuing in their wake was the growing conflagration. Alive, and hunting them.

'It's building, Sergeant! We got to get out of this city!'

'You think I don't know that, Widdershins? What in Hood’s name do you think we're trying to do here? Now be quiet—'

'We're gonna run out of air. '

'We are already, you idiot! Now shut that mouth of yours!' 

They reached an intersection and Balm halted his soldiers. Six alley-mouths beckoned, each leading into tracks as twisted and dark as the next. Smoke was tumbling from two of them, on their left. Head spinning, every breath growing more pained, less invigorating, the Dal Honese wiped hot sweat from his eyes and turned to study his soldiers. Deadsmell, Throatslitter, Widdershins, Galt and Lobe. Tough bastards one and all. This wasn't the right way to die – there were right ones, and this wasn't one of them. 'Gods,' he muttered, 'I'll never look at a hearth the same again.'
'You got that right, Sergeant,' said Throatslitter, punctuating his agreement with a hacking cough.

Balm pulled off his helm. 'Strip down, you damned fools, before we bake ourselves. Hold on to your weapons, if you can. We ain't dying here tonight. You understand me? All of you listen – do you understand me?'

'Aye, Sergeant,' Throatslitter said. 'We hear you.'

'Good. Now, Widdershins, got any magic to make us a path? Anything at all?'

The mage shook his head. 'Wish I did. Maybe soon, though.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean a fire elemental's being born here, I think. A fire spirit, a godling. We got a firestorm on the way, and that will announce its arrival – and that's when we die if we ain't dead already. But an elemental is alive. It's got a will, a mind, damned hungry and eager to kill. But it knows fear, fear because it knows it won't last long – too fierce, too hot – days at best. And it knows other kinds of fear, too, and that's where maybe I can do something – illusions. Of water, but not just water. A water elemental.' He stared round at the others, who were all staring back, then shrugged. 'Maybe, maybe not. How smart is an elemental? Got to be smart to be fooled, you see. Dog-smart, at least, better if it was smarter. Problem is, not everybody agrees that elementals even exist. I mean, I'm convinced it's a good theory—'

Balm cracked him across the head. 'All this on a theory? You wasted all that air on that? Gods below, Widdershins, I'm minded to kill you right now.' He rose. 'Let's get going, while we can. To Hood with the damned palace – let's take the alley opposite and when the theoretical elemental arrives we can shake its hand and curse it to the nonexistent Abyss. Come on – and you, Widdershins, not another word, got it?'

The soldier returned, wreathed in flames. Running, running from the pain, but there was nowhere to go. Captain Faradan Sort aimed the crossbow and loosed a quarrel. Watched the poor man fall, grow still as the flames leapt all over him, blackening the skin, cracking open the flesh. She turned away. 'Last quarrel,' she said, tossing the weapon to one side.

Her new lieutenant, with the mouthful name of Madan'Tul Rada, said nothing – a characteristic Faradan was already used to, and of which she was, most of the time, appreciative.

Except now, when they were about to roast. 'All right,' she said, 'scratch that route – and I'm out of scouts. No back, no forward, and, from the looks of it, no left and no right. Any suggestions?'

Madan'Tul Rada's expression soured, jaw edging down as tongue probed a likely rotted molar, then he spat, squinted in the smoke, and unslung his round shield to study its charred face. Looked up again, slowly tracking, then: 'No.'

They could hear a wind above them, shrieking, whirling round and round over the city, drawing the flames up, spinning tails of fire that slashed like giant swords through the convulsing smoke. It was getting harder and harder to breathe.

The lieutenant's head lifted suddenly, and he faced the wall of flame up the street, then rose.

Faradan Sort followed suit, for she could now see what he had seen – a strange black stain spreading out within the flames, the tongues of fire flickering back, dying, the stain deepening, circular, and out from its heart staggered a figure shedding charred leathers, clasps and buckles falling away to bounce on the street.

Stumbling towards them, flames dancing in the full head of hair – dancing, yet not burning. Closer, and Faradan Sort saw it was a girl, a face she then recognized. 'She's from Cord's Ashok squad. That's Sinn.'

'How did she do that?' Madan'Tul Rada asked.

'I don't know, but let's hope she can do it again. Soldier! Over here!'
An upper level had simply sheared away, down, crashing in an explosion of dust and smoke onto the street. Where Bowl had been crouching. He had not even seen it coming, Hellian suspected. Lucky bastard. She looked back at her squad. Blistered, red as boiled lobsters. Armour shed, weapons flung away – too hot to hold. Marines and heavies. Herself the only sergeant. Two corporals – Urb and Reem – their expressions dulled. Red-eyed all of them, gasping in the dying air, damn near hairless. Not much longer, I think. Gods, what I would do for a drink right now. Something nice. Chilled, delicate, the drunk coming on slow and sly, peaceful sleep beckoning as sweet as the last trickle down my ravaged throat. Gods, I'm a poet when it comes to drink, oh yes. 'Okay, that way's blocked now. Let's take this damned alley—'

'Why?' Touchy demanded.

'Because I don't see flames down there, that's why. We keep moving until we can't move no more, got it?'

'Why don't we just stay right here – another building's bound to land on us sooner or later.'

'Tell you what,' Hellian snarled. 'You do just that, but me, I ain't waiting for nothing. You want to die alone, you go right ahead.'

She set off.

Everyone followed. There was nothing else to do.

Eighteen soldiers – Strings had carried them through. Three more skirmishes, bloody and without mercy, and now they crouched before the palace gates – which yawned wide, a huge mouth filled with fire. Smoke billowed above the fortification, glowing in the night. Bottle, on his knees, gasping, slowly looked round at his fellow soldiers. A few heavies, the whole of Strings's squad, and most of Sergeant Cord's, along with the few marines surviving from Borduke's squad.

They had hoped, prayed, even, to arrive and find other squads – anyone, more survivors, defying this damned conflagration ... this far. Just this far, that's all. It would have been enough. But they were alone, with no sign anywhere that any other Malazans had made it.

If Leoman of the Flails was in the palace, he was naught but ashes, now.

'Crump, Maybe, Cuttle, over to me,' Strings ordered, crouching and setting down his satchel. 'Any other sappers? No? Anyone carrying munitions? All right, I just checked mine – the wax is way too soft and getting softer – it's all gonna go up, and that's the plan. All of it, except the burners – toss those – the rest goes right into the mouth of that palace—'

'What's the point?' Cord demanded. 'I mean, fine by me if you're thinking it's a better way to go.'

'I want to try and blow a hole in this growing firestorm – knock it back – and we're heading through that hole, for as long as it survives – Hood knows where it'll lead. But I don't see any fire right behind the palace, and that'll do for me. Problems with that, Cord?'

'No. I love it. It's brilliant. Genius. If only I hadn't tossed my helm away.'

A few laughs. Good sign.

Then hacking coughs. Bad sign.

Someone shrieked, and Bottle turned to see a figure lumbering out from a nearby building, flasks and bottles hanging from him, another bottle in one hand, a torch in the other – heading straight for them. And they had discarded their crossbows.

A bellowing answer from a soldier in Cord's squad, and the man, Bell, rushed forward to intercept the fanatic.
'Get back!' Cord screamed.

Sprinting, Bell flung himself at the man, colliding with him twenty paces away, and both went down.

Bottle dropped flat, rolled away, bumping up against other soldiers doing the same.

A whoosh, then more screams. Terrible screams. And a wave of heat, blistering, fierce as the breath of a forge.

Then Strings was swearing, scrambling with his collection of satchels. 'Away from the palace! Everyone!'

'Not me!' Cuttle growled. 'You need help.'

'Fine. Everyone else! Sixty, seventy paces at least! More if you can! Go!'

Bottle climbed upright, watched as Strings and Cuttle ran crab-like towards the palace gates. Then he looked round. Sixty paces? We ain't got sixty paces – flames were devouring buildings in every direction he could see, now.

Still, as far away as possible. He began running.

And found himself colliding with someone – who gripped his left arm and spun him round.

Gesler. And behind him Thorn Tissy, then a handful of soldiers. 'What are those fools doing?' Gesler demanded.

'Blow – a hole – through the storm—'

'Puckered gods of the Abyss. Sands – you still got your munitions?'

'Aye, Sergeant—'

'Damned fool. Give 'em to me—'

'No,' said Truth, stepping in between. 'I'll take them. We've gone through fire before, right, Sergeant?' With that he snatched the satchel from Sands's hands and ran towards the palace gates—

Where Strings and Cuttle had been forced back – the heat too fierce, the flames slashing bright arms out at them.

'Damn him!' Gesler hissed. 'That was a different kind of fire—'

Bottle pulled loose from the sergeant's grip. 'We got to get going! Away!'

Moments later all were running – except Gesler, who was heading towards the sappers outside the gate. Bottle hesitated. He could not help it. He had to see—

Truth reached Cuttle and Strings, tugged their bags away, slung them over a shoulder, then shouted something and ran towards the palace gates.

Both sappers leapt to their feet, retreating, intercepting Gesler – who looked determined to follow his young recruit – Cuttle and Strings dragged the sergeant back. Gesler struggled, turning a ravaged face in Truth's direction—

But the soldier had plunged into the flames.

Bottle ran back, joined with the two sappers to help drag a shrieking Gesler away.

Away.

They had managed thirty paces down the street, heading towards a huddled mass of soldiers shying from a wall of flames, when the palace blew up behind them.
And out, huge sections of stone flung skyward.

Batted into the air, tumbling in a savage wind, Bottle rolled in the midst of bouncing rubble, limbs and bodies, faces, mouths opened wide, everyone screaming – in silence. No sound – no ... nothing.

Pain in his head, stabbing fierce in his ears, a pressure closing on his temples, his skull ready to implode—

The wind suddenly reversed, pulling sheets of flame after it, closing in from every street. The pressure loosed. And the flames drew back, writhing like tentacles.

Then the air was still.

Coughing, staggering upright, Bottle turned.

The palace's heart was gone, split asunder, and naught but dust and smoke filled the vast swath of rubble.

'Now!' Strings shrieked, his voice sounding leagues away. 'Go! Everyone! Go!'

The wind returned, sudden, a scream rising to a wail, pushing them onward – onto the battered road between jagged, sagging palace walls.

Dunsparrow had been first to the temple doors, shoving them wide even as explosions of fire lit up the horizon, all round the city ... all within the city walls.

Gasping, heart pounding and something like a knifeblade twisting in his gut, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas followed Leoman and the Malazan woman into the Temple of Scalissara, L'oric two paces behind him.

No, not Scalissara – the Queen of Dreams. Scalissara the matron goddess of olive oil would not have ... no, she would not have allowed this. Not ... this.

And things had begun to make sense. Terrible, awful sense, like chiselled stones fitting together, raising a wall between humanity ... and what Leoman of the Flails had become.

The warriors – who had ridden with them, lived with them since the rebellion first began, who had fought at their side against the Malazans, who even now fought like fiends in the streets – they were all going to die. Y'Ghatan, this whole city, it's going to die.

Hurrying down the central hallway, into the nave, from which gusted a cold, dusty wind, wind that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. Reeking of mould, rot and death.

Leoman spun to L'oric. 'Open a gate, High Mage! Quickly!'

'You must not do this,' Corabb said to his commander. 'We must die, this night. Fighting in the name of Dryjhna—'

'Hood take Dryjhna!' Leoman rasped.

L'oric was staring at Leoman, as if seeing him, understanding him, for the first time. 'A moment,' he said.

'We've no time for that!'

'Leoman of the Flails,' the High Mage said, unperturbed, 'you have bargained with the Queen of Dreams. A precipitous thing to do. That goddess has no interest in what's right and what's wrong. If she once possessed a heart, she flung it away long ago. And now you have drawn me into this – you have used me, so that a goddess may make use of me in turn. I do not—'

'The gate, damn you! If you have objections, L'oric, raise them with her!'

'They are all to die,' Corabb said, backing away from his commander, 'so that you can live.'

'So that we can live, Corabb! There is no other way – do you think that the Malazans would ever leave us be?
No matter where or how far we fled? I thank Hood's dusty feet the Claw hasn't struck already, but I do not intend to live the rest of my life looking over my shoulder! I was a bodyguard, damn you – it was her cause, not mine!'

'Your warriors – they expected you to fight at their sides—'

'They expected nothing of the sort. The fools wanted to die. In Dryjhna's name.' He bared his teeth in contempt. 'Well, let them! Let them die! And best of all, they are going to take half the Adjunct's army with them. There's your glory, Corabb!' He advanced on him, pointing towards the temple doors. 'You want to join the fools? You want to feel your lungs searing with the heat, your eyes bursting, skin cracking? You want your blood to boil in your veins?'

'An honourable death, Leoman of the Flails, compared to this.'

He voiced something like a snarl, spun back to L'oric. 'Open the way – and fear not, I made no promises to her regarding you, beyond bringing you here.'

'The fire grows into life outside this temple, Leoman,' L'oric said. 'I may not succeed.'

'Your chances diminish with each moment that passes,' Leoman said in a growl.

There was panic in the man's eyes. Corabb studied it, the way it seemed so ... out of place. There, in the features he thought he knew so well. Knew every expression possible. Anger, cold amusement, disdain, the stupor and lidded eyes within the fumes of durhang. Every expression ... except this one. Panic.

Everything was crumbling inside, and Corabb could feel himself drowning. Sinking ever deeper, reaching up towards a light that grew ever more distant, dimmer.

With a hissed curse, L'oric faced the altar. Its stones seemed to glow in the gloom, so new, the marble unfamiliar – from some other continent, Corabb suspected – traced through with purple veins and capillaries that seemed to pulse. There was a circular pool beyond the altar, the water steaming – it had been covered the last time they had visited; he could see the copper panels that had sealed it lying against a side-wall.

The air swirled above the altar.

She was waiting on the other side. A flicker, as if reflected from the pool of water, then the portal opened, engulfing the altar, edges spreading, curling black, then wavering fitfully. L'oric gasped, straining beneath some invisible burden. 'I cannot hold this long! I see you, Queen!'

'From the portal came a languid, cool voice, 'L'oric, son of Osserc. I seek no geas from you.'

'Then what do you want?'

A moment, during which the portal wavered, then: 'Sha'ik is dead. The Whirlwind Goddess is no more. Leoman of the Flails, a question.' A new tone to her voice, something like irony. 'Is Y'Ghatan – what you have done here – is this your Apocalypse?'

The desert warrior scowled, then said, 'Well, yes.' He shrugged. 'Not as big as we'd hoped ...'

'But, perhaps, enough. L'oric. The role of Sha'ik, the Seer of Dryjhna, is ... vacant. It needs to be filled—'

'Why?' L'oric demanded.

'Lest something else, something less desirable, assume the mantle.'

'And the likelihood of that?'

'Imminent.'

Corabb watched the High Mage, sensed a rush of thoughts behind the man's eyes, as mysterious implications fell into place following the goddess's words. Then, 'You have chosen someone.'
'Yes.'
'Someone who needs ... protecting.'

'Yes.'
'Is that someone in danger?'
'Very much so, L'oric. Indeed, my desires have been anticipated, and we may well have run out of time.'

'Very well. I accept.'
'Come forward, then. You, and the others. Do not delay – I too am sorely tried maintaining this path.'

His soul nothing but ashes, Corabb watched the High Mage stride into the portal, and vanish within the swirling, liquid stain.

Leoman faced him one more time, his voice almost pleading as he said, 'My friend ...'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas shook his head.

'Did you not hear? Another Sha'ik – a new Sha'ik—'

'And will you find her a new army as well, Leoman? More fools to lead to their deaths? No, I am done with you, Leoman of the Flails. Take your Malazan wench and be gone from my sight. I choose to die here, with my fellow warriors.'

Dunsparrow reached out and grasped Leoman's arm. 'The portal's crumbling, Leoman.'

The warrior, last commander of Dryjhna, turned away, and, the woman at his side, strode into the gate. Moments later it dissolved, and there was nothing.

Nothing but the strange, swirling wind, skirling dustdevils tracking the inlaid tile floor.

Corabb blinked, looked round. Outside the temple, it seemed the world was ending, voicing a death-cry ever rising in timbre. No ... not a death-cry. Something else ...

Hearing a closer sound – from a side passage – a scuffle – Corabb drew his scimitar. Approached the curtain barring the corridor. With the tip of his blade, he swung the cloth aside.

To see children. Crouching, huddled. Ten, fifteen – sixteen in all. Smudged faces, wide eyes, all looking up at him. 'Oh gods,' he murmured. 'They have forgotten you.'

They all have. Every single one of them.

He sheathed his weapon and stepped forward. 'It's all right,' he said. 'We shall find us a room, yes? And wait this out.'

Something else ... Thunder, the death of buildings, the burgeoning wails of fire, howling winds. This is what is outside, the world beyond, this ... spirits below, Dryjhna—

Outside, the birth-cries of the Apocalypse rose still higher.

'There!' Throatslitter said, pointing.

Sergeant Balm blinked, the smoke and heat like broken glass in his eyes, and could just make out a half-score figures crossing the street before them. 'Who?'

'Malazans,' Throatslitter said.

From behind Balm: 'Great, more for the clam-bake, what a night we're going to have—'
'When I said be quiet, Widdershins, I meant it. All right, let's go meet them. Maybe they ain't as lost as us.'

'Oh yeah? Look who's leading them! That drunk, what's her name? They're probably trying to find a bar!'

'I ain't lying, Widdershins! One more word and I'll skewer you!'

Urb's huge hand landed on her arm, gripping hard, turning her round, and Hellian saw a squad stumbling towards them. 'Thank the gods,' she said in a ravaged voice, 'they got to know where they're going—'

A sergeant approached in a half-crouch. Dal Honese, his face patchy with dried mud. 'I'm Balm,' he said. 'Wherever you're headed, we're with you!'

Hellian scowled. 'Fine,' she said. 'Just fall in and we'll all be rosy in no time.'

'Got us a way out?'

'Yeah, down that alley.'

'Great. What's down there?'

'The only place not yet burning, you Dal Honese monkrat!' She waved at her troop and they continued on. Something was visible ahead. A huge, smudgy dome of some kind. They were passing temples now, the doors swinging wide, banging in the gusting, furnace-hot wind. What little clothes she was still wearing had begun smoking, thready wisps stretching out from the rough weave. She could smell her own burning hair.

A soldier came up alongside her. He was holding twin long-knives in gloved hands. 'You ain't got no cause to curse Sergeant Balm, woman. He brought us through this far.'

'What's your name?' Hellian demanded.

'Throatslitter—'

'Nice. Now go and slit your own throat. Nobody's gotten through nowhere, you damned idiot. Now, unless you got a bottle of chilled wine under that shirt, go find someone else to annoy.'

'You was nicer drunk,' he said, falling back.

Yeah, everyone's nicer drunk.

At the far edge of the collapsed palace, Limp's left leg was trapped by a sliding piece of stonework, his screams loud enough to challenge the fiery wind. Cord, Shard and a few others from the Ashok squad pulled him free, but it was clear the soldier's leg was broken.

Ahead was a plaza of some sort, once the site of a market of some kind, and beyond it rose a huge domed temple behind a high wall. Remnants of gold leaf trickled down the dome's flanks like rainwater. A heavy layer of smoke roiled across the scene, making the dome seem to float in the air, firelit and smeared. Strings gestured for everyone to close in.

'We're heading for that temple,' he said. 'It likely won't help – there's a damned firestorm coming. Never seen one myself, and I'm wishing that was still the case. Anyway,' he paused to cough, then spit, 'I can't think of anything else.'

'Sergeant,' Bottle said, frowning, 'I sense ... something. Life. In that temple.'

'All right, maybe we'll have to fight to find a place to die. Fine. Maybe there's enough of 'em to kill us all and that ain't so bad.'

'All right, let's try and get across this plaza.'

It looked easy, but they were running out of air, and the winds racing across the concourse were blistering hot – no cover provided by building walls. Bottle knew they might not make it. Raspings heat tore at his eyes, poured like sand into his throat with every gasping breath. Through blurred pain, he saw figures appear off to his right, racing out of the smoke. Ten, fifteen, then scores, spilling onto the concourse, some of them on fire, others with spears— 'Sergeant!'

'Gods below!'

The warriors were attacking. Here, in this square, this ... furnace. Burning figures fell away, stumbling, clawing at their faces, but the others came on.

'Form up!' Strings bellowed. 'Fighting retreat – to that temple wall!'

Bottle stared at the closing mass. Form up? Fighting retreat? With what?

One of Cord's soldiers appeared beside him, and the man reached out, gesturing. 'You! A mage, right?'

Bottle nodded.

'I'm Ebron – we got to take these bastards on – with magic – no other weapons left—'

'All right. Whatever you got, I'll add to it.'

Three heavy infantry, the women Flashwit, Mayfly and Uru Hela, had drawn knives and were forming up a front line. A heartbeat later, Shortnose joined them, huge hands closed into fists.

The lead score of attackers closed to within fifteen paces, and launched their spears as if they were javelins. In the momentary flash of the shafts crossing the short distance, Bottle saw that the wood had ignited, spinning wreaths of smoke.

Shouted warnings, then the solid impact of the heavy weapons. Uru Hela was spun round, a spear transfixing her left shoulder, the shaft scything into Mayfly's neck with a cracking sound. As Uru Hela stumbled to her knees, Mayfly staggered, then straightened. Sergeant Strings sprawled, a spear impaling his right leg. Swearing, he pulled at it, his other leg kicking like a thing gone mad. Tavos Pond staggered into Bottle, knocking him down as the soldier, one side of his face slashed away, the eye dangling, stumbled on, screaming.

Moments before the frenzied attackers reached them, a wave of sorcery rose in a wall of billowing, argent smoke, sweeping out to engulf the warriors. Shrieks, bodies falling, skin and flesh blackening, curling away from bones. Sudden horror.

Bottle had no idea what kind of magic Ebron was using, but he unleashed Meanas, redoubling the smoke's thickness and breadth – illusionul, but panic tore into the warriors. Falling, tumbling out of the smoke, hands at their eyes, writhing, vomit gushing onto the cobbles. The attack shattered against the sorcery, and as the wind whipped the poisonous cloud away, they could see nothing but fleeing figures, already well beyond the heap of bodies.

Bodies smouldering, catching fire.

Koryk had reached Strings, who had pulled the spear from his leg, and began stuffing knots of cloth into the puncture wounds. Bottle went to them – no spurting blood from the holes, he saw. Still, lots of blood had smeared the cobbles. 'Wrap that leg!' he ordered the half-Seti. 'We've got to get off this plaza!'

Cord and Corporal Tulip were attending to Uru Hela, whilst Scant and Balgrid had chased down and tackled Tavos Pond to the ground. Bottle watched as Scant pushed the dangling eye back into its socket, then fumbled with a cloth to wrap round the soldier's head.

'Drag the wounded!' Sergeant Gesler yelled. 'Come on, you damned fools! To that wall! We need to find us a way in!'
Numbed, Bottle reached down to help Koryk lift Strings.

He saw that his fingers had turned blue. He was deafened by a roaring in his head, and everything was spinning round him.

Air. We need air.

The wall rose before them, and then they were skirting it. Seeking a way in.

Lying in heaps, dying of asphyxiation. Keneb pulled himself across shattered stone, blistered hands clawing through the rubble. Blinding smoke, searing heat, and now he could feel his mind, starving, disintegrating – wild, disjointed visions – a woman, a man, a child, striding out from the flames.

Demons, servants of Hood.

Voices, so loud, the wail endless, growing – and darkness flowed out from the three apparitions, poured over the hundreds of bodies—

Yes, his mind was dying. For he felt a sudden falling off of the vicious heat, and sweet air filled his lungs. Dying, what else can this be? I have arrived. At Hood's Gate. Gods, such blessed relief— Someone's hands pulled at him – spasms of agony from fingers pressing into burnt skin – and he was being rolled over.

Blinking, staring up into a smeared, blistered face. A woman. He knew her.

And she was speaking.

We're all dead, now. Friends. Gathering at Hood's Gate—

'Fist Keneb! There are hundreds here!'

Yes.

'Still alive! Sinn is keeping the fire back, but she can't hold on much longer! We're going to try and push through! Do you understand me! We need help, we need to get everyone on their feet!'

What? 'Captain,' he whispered. 'Captain Faradan Sort.'

'Yes! Now, on your feet, Fist!'

A storm of fire was building above Y'Ghatan. Blistig had never seen anything like it. Flames, twisting, spinning, slashing out long tendrils that seemed to shatter the billowing smoke. Wild winds tore into the clouds, annihilating them in flashes of red.

The heat— Gods below, this has happened before. This Hood-damned city ...

A corner bastion exploded in a vast fireball, the leaping gouts writhing, climbing—

The wind that struck them from behind staggered everyone on the road. In the besiegers' camp, tents were torn from their moorings, flung into the air, then racing in wild billows towards Y'Ghatan. Horses screamed amidst curtains of sand and dust rising up, whipping like the fiercest storm.

Blistig found himself on his knees. A gloved hand closed on his cloak collar, pulled him round. He found himself staring into a face that, for a moment, he did not recognize. Dirt, sweat, tears, and an expression buckled by panic – the Adjunct. 'Pull the camp back! Everyone!'

He could barely hear her, yet he nodded, turned into the wind and fought his way down from the road. Something is about to be born, Nil said. Something ...

The Adjunct was shouting. More commands. Blistig, reaching the edge of the road, dragged himself down
onto the back slope. Nil and Nether moved past him, towards where the Adjunct still stood on the road.

The initial blast of wind had eased slightly, this time a longer, steadier breath drawn in towards the city and its burgeoning conflagration.

‘There are soldiers!’ the Adjunct screamed. ‘Beyond the breach! I want them out!’

The child Grub clambered up the slope, flanked by the dogs Bent and Roach.

And now other figures were swarming past Blistig. Khundryl. Warlocks, witches. Keening voices, jabbering undercurrents, a force building, rising from the battered earth. Fist Blistig twisted round – a ritual, magic, what were they doing? He shot a glance back at the chaos of the encampment, saw officers amidst scrambling figures – they weren’t fools. They were already pulling back—

Nil’s voice, loud from the road. ‘We can feel her! Someone! Spirits below, such power!’

‘Help her, damn you!’

A witch shrieked, bursting into flames on the road. Moments later, two warlocks huddled near Blistig seemed to melt before his eyes, crumbling into white ash. He stared in horror.

Help her? Help who? What is happening? He pulled himself onto the road’s edge once more.

And could see, in the heart of the breach, a darkening within the flames.

Fire flickered round another witch, then snapped out as something rolled over everyone on the road – cool, sweet power – like a merciful god’s breath. Even Blistig, despiser of all things magic, could feel this emanation, this terrible, beautiful will.

Driving the flames in the breach back, opening a swirling dark tunnel.

From which figures staggered.

Nether was on her knees near the Adjunct – the only person on the road still standing – and Blistig saw the Wickan girl turn to Tavore, heard her say, ‘It’s Sinn. Adjunct, that child’s a High Mage. And she doesn’t even know it—’

The Adjunct turned, saw Blistig.

‘Fist! On your feet. Squads and healers forward. Now! They’re coming through – Fist Blistig, do you understand me? They need help!’

He clambered to his knees, but got no further. He stared at the woman. She was no more than a silhouette, the world behind her nothing but flames, a firestorm growing, ever growing. Something cold, riven through with terror, filled his chest.

A vision.

He could only stare.

Tavore snarled, then turned to the scrawny boy standing nearby. ‘Grub! Find some officers down in our camp! We need—’

‘Yes, Adjunct! Seven hundred and ninety-one, Adjunct. Fist Keneb. Fist Tene Baralta. Alive. I’m going to get help now.’

And then he was running past Blistig, down the slope, the dogs padding along in his wake.

A vision. An omen, yes. I know now, what awaits us. At the far end. At the far end of this long, long road. Oh gods ...

She had turned about, now, her back to him. She was staring at the burning city, at the pathetic, weaving line
of survivors stumbling through the tunnel. Seven hundred and ninety-one. Out of three thousand.

But she is blind. Blind to what I see.

The Adjunct Tavore. And a burning world.

The doors slammed open, pulling in an undercurrent of smoke and heat that swept across Corabb's ankles, then up and round, the smoke massing in the dome, pulled and tugged by wayward currents. The warrior stepped in front of the huddled children and drew out his scimitar.

He heard voices – Malazan – then saw figures appearing from the hallway's gloom. Soldiers, a woman in the lead. Seeing Corabb, they halted.

A man stepped past the woman. His blistered face bore the mangled traces of tattooing. 'I am Iutharal Galt,' he said in a ragged voice. 'Pardu—'

'Traitor,' Corabb snapped. 'I am Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, Second to Leoman of the Flails. You, Pardu, are a traitor.'

'Does that matter any more? We're all dead now, anyway.'

'Enough of this,' a midnight-skinned soldier said in badly accented Ehrlii. 'Throatslitter, go and kill the fool —'

'Wait!' the Pardu said, then ducked his head and added: 'Sergeant. Please. There ain't no point to this—'

'It was these bastards that led us into this trap, Galt,' the sergeant said.

'No,' Corabb said, drawing their attention once more. 'Leoman of the Flails has brought us to this. He and he alone. We – we were all betrayed—'

'And where's he hiding?' the one named Throatslitter asked, hefting his long-knives, a murderous look in his pale eyes.

'Fled.'

'Temul will have him, then,' Iutharal Galt said, turning to the sergeant. 'They've surrounded the city—'

'No use,' Corabb cut in. 'He did not leave that way.' He gestured behind him, towards the altar. 'A sorcerous gate. The Queen of Dreams – she took him from here. Him and High Mage L'oric and a Malazan woman named Dunsparrow—'

The doors opened once again and the Malazans whirled, then, as voices approached – cries of pain, coughing, cursing – they relaxed. More brethren, Corabb realized. More of the damned enemy. But the Pardu had been right. The only enemy now was fire. He swung back to look upon the children, flinched at their terror-filled eyes, and turned round once more, for he had nothing to say to them. Nothing worth hearing.

As he stumbled into the hallway, Bottle gasped. Cold, dusty air, rushing past him – where? how? – and then Cuttle pushed the doors shut once more, swearing as he burned his hands.

Ahead, at the threshold leading into the altar chamber, stood more Malazans. Balm and his squad. The Kartoolian drunk, Hellian. Corporal Reem and a few others from Sobelone's heavies. And, beyond them in the nave itself, a lone rebel warrior, and behind him, children.

But the air – the air ...

Koryk and Tarr dragged Strings past him. Mayfly and Flashwit had drawn their meat-knives again, even as the rebel flung his scimitar to one side, the weapon clanging hollowly on the tiled floor. Gods below, one of them has actually surrendered.
Heat was radiating from the stone walls – the firestorm outside would not spare this temple for much longer. The last twenty paces round the temple corner to the front façade had nearly killed them – no wind, the air filled with the crack of exploding bricks, buckling cobbled stones, the flames seeming to feed upon the very air itself, roaring down the streets, spiralling upward, flaring like huge hooded snakes above the city. And the sound – he could hear it still, beyond the walls, closing in – the sound ... is terrible. Terrible.

Gesler and Cord strode over to Balm and Hellian, and Bottle moved closer to listen in on their conversation.

'Anybody here worship the Queen of Dreams?' Gesler asked.

Hellian shrugged. 'I figure it's a little late to start.

Anyway, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas – our prisoner over there – he said Leoman's already done that deal with her. Of course, maybe she ain't into playing favourites—'

A sudden loud crack startled everyone – the altar had just shattered – and Bottle saw that Crump, the insane saboteur, had just finished pissing on it.

Hellian laughed. 'Well, scratch that idea.'

'Hood's balls,' Gesler hissed. 'Someone go kill that bastard, please.'

Crump had noticed the sudden attention. He looked round innocently. 'What?'

'Want a word or two with you,' Cuttle said, rising. 'Bout the wall—'

'It weren't my fault! I ain't never used cussers afore!'

'Crump—'

'And that ain't my name neither, Sergeant Cord. It's Jamber Bole, and I was High Marshall in the Mott Irregulars—'

'Well, you ain't in Mott any more, Crump. And you ain't Jamber Bole either. You're Crump, and you better get used to it.'

A voice from behind Bottle: 'Did he say Mott Irregulars?'

Bottle turned, nodded at Strings. 'Aye, Sergeant.'

'Gods below, who recruited him?'

Shrugging, Bottle studied Strings for a moment. Koryk and Tarr had carried him to just within the nave's entrance, and the sergeant was leaning against a flanking pillar, the wounded leg stretched out in front of him, his face pale. 'I better get to that—'

'No point, Bottle – the walls are going to explode – you can feel the heat, even from this damned pillar. It's amazing there's air in here ...' His voice fell away, and Bottle saw his sergeant frown, then lay both hands palm-down on the tiles. 'Huh.'

'What is it?'

'Cool air, coming up from between the tiles.'

Crypts? Cellars? But that would be dead air down there ... I'll be back in a moment, Sergeant,' he said, turning and heading towards the cracked altar. A pool of water steamed just beyond. He could feel that wind, now, the currents rising up from the floor. Halting, he settled down onto his hands and knees.

And sent his senses downward, seeking life-sparks.

Down, through layers of tight-packed rubble, then, movement in the darkness, the flicker of life. Panicked, clambering down, ever down, the rush of air sweeping past slick fur – rats. Fleeing rats.
Fleeing. Where? His senses danced out, through the rubble beneath, brushing creature after creature. Darkness, sighing streams of air. Smells, echoes, damp stone ...

‘Everyone!’ Bottle shouted, rising. 'We need to break through this floor! Whatever you can find – we need to bash through!'

They looked at him as if he'd gone mad.

‘We dig down! This city – it's built on ruins! We need to find a way down – through them – damn you all – that air is coming from somewhere!’

‘And what are we?’ Cord demanded. 'Ants?'

‘There's rats, below – I looked through their eyes – I saw! Caverns, caves – passages!’

‘You did what?’ Cord advanced on him.

‘Hold it, Cord!’ Strings said, twisting round where he sat. 'Listen to him. Bottle – can you follow one of those rats? Can you control one?'

Bottle nodded. 'But there are foundation stones, under this temple – we need to get through—'

‘How?’ Cuttle demanded. 'We just got rid of all our munitions!'

Hellian cuffed one of her soldiers. 'You, Brethless! Still got that cracker?'

Every sapper in the chamber suddenly closed in on the soldier named Brethless. He stared about in panic, then pulled out a wedge-shaped copper-sheathed spike.

‘Back off him!’ Strings shouted. 'Everyone. Everyone but Cuttle. Cuttle, you can do this, right? No mistakes.'

‘None at all,’ Cuttle said, gingerly taking the spike from Brethless's hand. 'Who's still got a sword? Anything hard and big enough to break these tiles—'

'I do.' The man who spoke was the rebel warrior. 'Or, I did – it's over there.' He pointed.

The scimitar went into the hands of Tulip, who battered the tiles in a frenzy that had inset precious stones flying everywhere, until a rough angular hole had been chopped into the floor.

‘Good enough, back off, Tulip. Everybody, get as close to the outer walls as you can and cover your faces, your eyes, your ears—'

‘How many hands you think each of us has got?’ Hellian demanded.

Laughter.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas stared at them all as if they'd lost their minds.

A reverberating crack shuddered through the temple, and dust drifted down. Bottle looked up with all the others to see tongues of fire reaching down through a fissure in the dome, which had begun sagging. 'Cuttle—'

'I see it. Pray this cracker don't bring it all down on us.'

He set the spike. 'Bottle, which way you want it pointing?'

'Towards the altar side. There's a space, two maybe three arm-lengths down.'

'Three? Gods below. Well, we'll see.'

The outer walls were oven-hot, sharp cracking sounds filling the air as the massive temple began settling. They could hear the grate of foundation stones sliding beneath shifting pressures. The heat was building.
'Six and counting!' Cuttle shouted, scrambling away.

*Five ... four ... three ...*

The cracker detonated in a deadly hail of stone-chips and tile shards. People cried out in pain, children screamed, dust and smoke filling the air – and then, from the floor, the sounds of rubble falling, striking things far below, bouncing, tumbling down, down ...

'Bottle.'

At Strings's voice, he crawled forward, towards the gaping hole. He needed to find another rat. Somewhere down below. *A rat my soul can ride. A rat to lead us out.*

He said nothing to the others of what else he had sensed, flitting among life-sparks in the seeming innumerable layers of dead, buried city below – that it went down, and down, and down – the air rising up stinking of decay, the pressing darkness, the cramped, tortured routes. Down. *All those rats, fleeing, downward. None, none within my reach clambering free, into the night air. None.*

*Rats will flee. Even when there's nowhere to go.*

Wounded, burned soldiers were being carried past Blistig. Pain and shock, flesh cracked open and lurid red, like cooked meat – which, he realized numbly, was what it was. The white ash of hair – on limbs, where eyebrows had once been, on blistered pates. Blackened remnants of clothing, hands melted onto weapon grips – he wanted to turn away, so desperately wanted to turn away, but he could not.

He stood fifteen hundred paces away, now, from the road and its fringes of burning grass, and he could still feel the heat. Beyond, a fire god devoured the sky above Y'Ghatan – Y'Ghatan, crumbling inward, melting into slag – the city's death was as horrible to his eyes as the file of Keneb and Baralta's surviving soldiers.

*How could he do this? Leoman of the Flails, you have made of your name a curse that will never die. Never.*

Someone came to his side and, after a long moment, Blistig looked over. And scowled. The Claw, Pearl. The man's eyes were red – durhang, it could be nothing else, for he had remained in his tent, at the far end of the encampment, as if indifferent to this brutal night.

'Where is the Adjunct?' Pearl asked in a low, rough voice.

'Helping with the wounded.'

'Has she broken? Is she on her hands and knees in the blood-soaked mud?'

Blistig studied the man. Those eyes – had he been weeping? No. Durhang. 'Say that again, Claw, and you won't stay alive for much longer.'

The tall man shrugged. 'Look at these burned soldiers, Fist. There are worse things than dying.'

'The healers are among them. Warlocks, witches, from my company—'

'Some scars cannot be healed.'

'What are you doing here? Go back to your tent.'

'I have lost a friend this night, Fist. I will go wherever I choose.'

Blistig looked away. Lost a friend. What of over two thousand Malazan soldiers? *Keneb has lost most of his marines and among them, invaluable veterans. The Adjunct has lost her first battle – oh, the imperial records will note a great victory, the annihilation of the last vestiges of the Sha'ik rebellion. But we, we who are here this night, we will know the truth for the rest of our lives.*

*And this Adjunct Tavore, she is far from finished. I have seen.* 'Go back to the Empress,' Blistig said. 'Tell her
the truth of this night—"

'And what would be the point of that, Fist?'

He opened his mouth, then shut it again.

Pearl said, 'Word will be sent to Dujek Onearm, and he in turn will report to the Empress. For now, however, it is more important that Dujek know. And understand, as I am sure he will.'

'Understand what?'

'That the Fourteenth Army can no longer be counted on as a fighting force on Seven Cities.'

Is that true? 'That remains to be seen,' he said. 'In any case, the rebellion is crushed—'

'Leoman escaped.'

'What?'

'He has escaped. Into the Warren of D'riss, under the protection of the Queen of Dreams – only she knows, I suppose, what use he will be to her. I admit, that part worries me – gods are by nature unfathomable, most of the time, and she is more so than most. I find this detail ... troubling.'

'Stand here, then, and fret.' Blistig turned away, made for the hastily erected hospital tents. Hood take that damned Claw. The sooner the better. How could he know such things? Leoman... alive. Well, perhaps that could be made to work in their favour, perhaps his name would become a curse among the people of Seven Cities as well. The Betrayer. The commander who murdered his own army.

But it is how we are. Look at High Fist Pormqual, after all. Yet, his crime was stupidity. Leoman's was ... pure evil. If such a thing truly exists.

The storm raged on, unleashing waves of heat that blackened the surrounding countryside. The city's walls had vanished – for no human-built wall could withstand this demon's fury. A distant, pale reflection was visible to the east. The sun, rising to meet its child.

His soul rode the back of a small, insignificant creature, fed on a tiny, racing heart, and looked through eyes that cut into the darkness. Like some remote ghost, tethered by the thinnest of chains, Bottle could feel his own body, somewhere far above, slithering through detritus, cut and scraped raw, face gone slack, eyes straining. Battered hands pulled him along – his own, he was certain – and he could hear soldiers moving behind him, the crying of children, the scrape and catch of buckles, leather straps snagging, rubble being pushed aside, clawed at, clambered over.

He had no idea how far they had gone. The rat sought out the widest, highest passages, following the howling, whistling wind. If people remained in the temple, awaiting their turn to enter this tortured tunnel, that turn would never come, for the air itself would have burst aflame by now, and soon the temple would collapse, burying their blackened corpses in melting stone.

Strings would have been among those victims, for the sergeant had insisted on going last, just behind Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. Bottle thought back to those frantic moments, before the dust-clouds had even cleared, as chunks of the domed ceiling rained down ...

'Bottle!'

'I'm looking!' Questing down, through cracks and fissures, hunting life. Warm-blooded life. Brushing then closing in on the muted awareness of a rat, sleek, healthy – but overheating with terror. Overwhelming its meagre defences, clasping hard an iron control about its soul – that faint, flickering force, yet strong enough to reach beyond the flesh and bones that sheltered it. Cunning, strangely proud, warmed by the presence of kin, the rule of the swarm's master, but now all was in chaos, the drive of survival overpowering all else. Racing
down, following spoor, following the rich scents in the air—

And then it turned about, began climbing upwards once more, and Bottle could feel its soul in his grasp. Perfectly still, unresisting now that it had been captured. Observing, curious, calm. There was more, he had always known – so much more to creatures. And so few who understood them the way he did, so few who could reach out and grasp such souls, and so find the strange web of trust all tangled with suspicion, fear with curiosity, need with loyalty.

He was not leading this morsel of a creature to its death. He would not do that, could not, and somehow it seemed to understand, to sense, now, a greater purpose to its life, its existence.

'I have her,' Bottle heard himself saying.

'Get down there, then!'

'Not yet. She needs to find a way up – to lead us back down—'

'Gods below!'

Gesler spoke: 'Start adopting children, soldiers. I want one between everyone behind Cuttle, since Cuttle will be right behind Bottle—'

'Leave me to the last,' Strings said.

'Your leg—'

'That's exactly right, Gesler.'

'We got other injured – got someone guiding or dragging each of 'em. Fid—'

'No. I go last. Whoever's right ahead of me, we're going to need to close up this tunnel, else the fire'll follow us down—'

'There are copper doors. They covered the pool.' That was Corabb Bhilan Thenu'allas. 'I will stay with you. Together, we shall use those panels to seal our retreat.'

'Second to last?' someone snarled. 'You'll just kill Fid and—'

'And what, Malazan? No, would I be allowed, I would go last. I stood at Leoman's side—'

'I'm satisfied with that,' Strings said. 'Corabb, you and I, that will do.'

'Hold on,' said Hellian, leaning close to Bottle. 'I ain't going down there. Someone better kill me right now—'

'Sergeant—'

'No way, there's spiders down there—'

The sound of a fist cracking into a jaw, then a collapsing body.

'Urb, you just knocked out your own sergeant.'

'Aye. I known her a long time, you see. She's a good sergeant, no matter what all of you think.'

'Huh. Right.'

'It's the spiders. No way she'd go down there – now I got to gag her and tie her arms and feet – I'll drag her myself—'

'If she's a good sergeant, Urb, how do you treat bad ones?'

'Ain't had any other sergeant, and I mean to keep it that way.'
Below, the broad crevasse that Bottle had sensed earlier, his rat scrambling free, now seeking to follow that wide but shallow crack – too shallow? No, they could scrape through, and there, beneath it, a tilted chamber of some kind, most of the ceiling intact, and the lower half of a doorway – he sent the rat that way, and beyond the doorway ... 'I have it! There's a street! Part of a street – not sure how far——'

'Never mind! Lead us down, damn you! I'm starting to blister everywhere! Hurry!'

All right. Why not? At the very least, it'll purchase us a few more moments. He slithered down into the pit. Behind him, voices, the scrabble of boots, the hissing of pain as flesh touched hot stone.

Faintly: 'How hot is that water in that pool? Boiling yet? No? Good, those with canteens and skins, fill 'em now——'

Into the crevasse ... while the rat scurried down the canted, littered street, beneath a ceiling of packed rubble ...

Bottle felt his body push through a fissure, then plunge downward, onto the low-ceilinged section of street. Rocks, mortar and potsherds under his hands, cutting, scraping as he scrabbled forward. Once walked, this avenue, in an age long past. Wagons had rattled here, horse-hoofs clumping, and there had been rich smells. Cooking from nearby homes, livestock being driven to the market squares. Kings and paupers, great mages and ambitious priests. All gone. Gone to dust.

The street sloped sharply, where cobbles had buckled, sagging down to fill a subterranean chamber – no, an old sewer, brick-lined, and it was into this channel his rat had crawled.

Pushing aside broken pieces of cobble, he pulled himself down into the shaft. Desiccated faeces in a thin, shallow bed beneath him, the husks of dead insects, carapaces crunching as he slithered along. A pale lizard, long as his forearm, fled in a whisper into a side crack. His forehead caught strands of spider's web, tough enough to halt him momentarily before audibly snapping. He felt something alight on his shoulder, race across his back, then leap off.

Behind him Bottle heard Cuttle coughing in the dust in his wake, as it swept over the sapper on the gusting wind. A child had been crying somewhere back there, but was now silent, only the sound of movement, gasps of effort. Just ahead, a section of the tunnel had fallen in. The rat had found a way through, so he knew the barrier was not impassable. Reaching it, he began pulling away the rubble.

Smiles nudged the child ahead of her. 'Go on,' she murmured, 'keep going. Not far now.' She could still hear the girl's sniffles – not crying, not yet, anyway, just the dust, so much dust now, with those people crawling ahead. Behind her, small hands touched her blistered feet again and again, lancing vicious stabs of pain up her legs, but she bit back on it, making no outcry. Damned brat don't know any better, does he? And why they got such big eyes, looking up like that? Like starving puppies. 'Keep crawling, little one. Not much farther ...'

The child behind her, a boy, was helping Tavos Pond, whose face was wrapped in bloody bandages. Koryk was right behind them. Smiles could hear the half-Seti, going on and on with some kind of chant. Probably the only thing keeping the fool from deadly panic. He liked his open savannah, didn't he. Not cramped, twisting tunnels.

None of this bothered her. She'd known worse. Times, long ago, she'd lived in worse. You learned to only count on what's in reach, and so long as the way ahead stayed clear, there was still hope, still a chance.

If only this brat of a girl wouldn't keep stopping. Another nudge. 'Go on, lass. Not much more, you'll see ...'

Gesler pulled himself along in pitch darkness, hearing Tulip's heavy grunts ahead of him, Crump's maddening singing behind him. The huge soldier whose bare feet Gesler's outstretched hands kept touching was having a hard time, and the sergeant could feel the smears of blood Tulip left behind as he squeezed and pulled himself through the narrow, twisting passage. Thick gasps, coughing – no, not coughing—
'Abyss take us, Tulip,' Gesler hissed, 'what's so funny?'

'Tickling,' the man called back. 'You. Keep. Tickling.

My. Feet.'

'Just keep moving, you damned fool!'

Behind him, Crump's idiotic song continued.

'and I says oh I says them marsh trees
got soft feet, and moss beards all the way down
and they sway in the smelly breeze
from that swamp water all yella'n'brown

oh we was in the froggy toady down
belly-down in the leeches and collectin' spawn
'cause when you give those worms a squeeze
the blue pinky ropes come slimin' down—

and don't they taste sweet!
and don't they taste sweet!
sweet as peat, oh yes
sweet as peat—'

Gesler wanted to scream, like someone up ahead was doing. Scream, but he couldn't summon the breath – it was all too close, too fetid, the once cool sliding air rank with sweat, urine and Hood knew what else. Truth's face kept coming back to him, rising in his mind like dread accusation. Gesler and Stormy, they'd pulled the recruit through so much since the damned rebellion. Kept him alive, showed him the ways of staying alive in this Hood-cursed world.

'And what does he do? He runs into a burning palace. With a half-dozen cussers on his back. Gods, he was right on one thing, though, the fire couldn't take him – he went way in, and that's what's saved us ... so far. Blew that storm back. Saved us ...'

Soldiers all round him were blistered, burned. They coughed with every breath drawn into scorched lungs. But not me. He could sense that godling, within that firestorm. Could sense it, a child raging with the knowledge that it was going to die all too soon. Good, you don't deserve nothing more. Fire couldn't hurt him, but that didn't mean he had to kneel before it in prayer, did it? He didn't ask for any of this. Him and Stormy and Truth – only, Truth was dead, now. He'd never expected ...

'and I says oh I says that ole bridge
got feeta stone, and mortar white as bone
and the badgers dangle from the ledge
swinging' alla day alla way home

oh we was pullin' vines from you know where
and stuffin' our ears with sweety sweet loam
just 'get them badgers flyin' outa there
inta them cook pots in the hearthy home—

and don't they taste sweet!
and don't they taste sweet!
sweet as peat, oh yes
sweet as peat—'

When he got out of here, he was going to wring Crump's scrawny neck. High Marshal? Gods below—

'and I says oh I says that warlock's tower—'
Corporal Tarr pulled on Balgrid's arms, ignoring the man's squeals. How the mage had managed to stay fat through that endless march was baffling. And now, all too likely to prove deadly. Mind you, fat could be squeezed, when muscled bulk couldn't. That was something, at least.

Balgrid shrieked as Tarr dragged him through the crevasse. 'You're tearing my arms off!'

'You plug up here, Balgrid,' Tarr said, 'and Urb behind you's gonna take out his knife—'

A muted voice from the huge man behind Balgrid: 'Damn right. I'll joint you like a pig, mage. I swear it.'

The darkness was the worst of all – never mind the spiders, the scorpions and centipedes, it was the darkness that clawed and chewed on Tarr's sanity. At least Bottle had a rat's eyes to look through. Rats could see in the dark, couldn't they? Then again, maybe they couldn't. Maybe they just used their noses, their whiskers, their ears. Maybe they were too stupid to go insane.

_or they're already insane. We're being led by an insane rat—_

'I'm stuck again, oh gods! I can't move!'

'Stop yelling,' Tarr said, halting and twisting round yet again. Reaching out for the man's arms. 'Hear that, Balgrid?'

'What? What?'

'Not sure. Thought I heard Urb's knives coming outa their sheaths.'

The mage heaved himself forward, kicking, clawing.

'You stop moving again,' Balm snarled to the child in front of him, 'and the lizards will get you. Eat you alive. Eat us all alive. Those are crypt lizards, you damned whelp. You know what crypt lizards do? I'll tell you what they do. They eat human flesh. That's why they're called crypt lizards, only they don't mind if it's living flesh—'

'For Hood's sake!' Deadsmell growled behind him. 'Sergeant – that ain't the way—'

'Shut your mouth! He's still moving, ain't he? Oh yes, ain't he just. Crypt lizards, runt! Oh yes!'

'Hope you ain't nobody's uncle, Sergeant.'

'You're getting as bad as Widdershins, Corporal, with that babbling mouth of yours. I want a new squad—'

'Nobody'll have you, not after this—'

'You don't know nothing, Deadsmell.'

'I know if I was that child ahead of you, I'd shit right in your face.'

'Quiet! You give him ideas, damn you! Do it, boy, and I'll tie you up, oh yes, and leave you for the crypt lizards—'

'Listen to me, little one!' Deadsmell called out, his voice echoing. 'Them crypt lizards, they're about as long as your thumb! Balm's just being a—'

'I'm going to skewer you, Deadsmell. I swear it!'
hammering like a trapped beast in his chest.

Pulling himself through a narrow space, he sank down onto what seemed to be the surface of a street, although his head scraped stone rubble above. He slithered forward, gasping, and heard the sergeant slip down after him.

Then the ground shook, dust pouring down thick as sand. Thunder, one concussion after another, pounding down from above. A rush of searing hot air swept over them from behind. Smoke, dust—

'Forward!' Strings screamed. 'Before the ceiling goes—'

Corabb reached back, groping, until he clasped one of the Malazan's hands— the man was half-buried under rubble, his breath straining beneath the settling weight. Corabb pulled, then pulled harder.

A savage grunt from the Malazan, then, amidst clattering, thumping bricks and stones, Corabb tugged the man clear.

'Come on!' he hissed. 'There's a pit ahead, a sewer – the rest went down there – grab my ankles, Sergeant—'

The wind was beating back the roiling heat.

Corabb pitched headfirst into the pit, dragging Strings with him.

The rat had reached a vertical shaft, rough-walled enough so that she could climb down. The wind howled up it, filled with rotted leaves, dust and insect fragments. The creature was still descending when Bottle pulled himself up to the ledge. The detritus bit at his eyes as he peered down.

Seeing nothing. He pulled free a piece of rubble and tossed it downward, out from the wall. His soul, riding the rat's own, sensed its passage. Rodent ears pricked forward, waiting. Four human heartbeats later there was a dull, muted crack of stone on stone, a few more, then nothing. Oh gods ...

Cuttle spoke behind him. 'What's wrong?'

'A shaft, goes straight down – a long away down.'

'Can we climb it?'

'My rat can.'

'How wide is it?'

'Not very, and gets narrower.'

'We got wounded people back here, and Hellian's still unconscious.'

Bottle nodded. 'Do a roll call – I want to know how many made it. We also need straps, rope, anything and everything. Was it just me or did you hear the temple come down?'

Cuttle turned about and started the roll call and the request for straps and rope, then twisted round once more. 'Yeah, it went down all right. When the wind dropped off. Thank Hood it's back, or we'd be cooking or suffocating or both.'

Well, we're not through this yet ...

'I know what you're thinking, Bottle.'

'You do?'

'Think there's a rat god? I hope so, and I hope you're praying good and hard.'

A rat god. Maybe. Hard to know with creatures that don't think in words. 'I think one of us, one of the bigger,
stronger ones, could wedge himself across. And help people down.’

‘If we get enough straps and stuff to climb down, aye. Tulip, maybe, or that other corporal, Urb. But there ain't room to get past anyone.’

*I know. I'm going to try and climb down.*

‘Where's the rat?’

‘Down below. It's reached the bottom. It's waiting there. Anyway, here goes.’ Drawing on the Thyr Warren to pierce the darkness, he moved out to the very edge. The wall opposite looked to be part of some monumental structure, the stones skilfully cut and fitted. Patches of crumbling plaster covered parts of it, as did sections of the frieze fronting that plaster. It seemed almost perfectly vertical – the narrowing of the gap was caused by the wall on his side – a much rougher facing, with projections remaining from some kind of elaborate ornamentation. A strange clash of styles, for two buildings standing so close together. Still, both walls had withstood the ravages of being buried, seemingly unaffected by the pressures of sand and rubble. ‘All right,’ he said to Cuttle, who had drawn up closer, ‘this might not be so bad.’

‘You're what, twenty years old? No wounds, thin as a spear ...’

‘Fine, you've made your point.’ Bottle pushed himself further out, then drew his right leg round. Stretching it outward, he slowly edged over, onto his stomach. ‘Damn, I don't think my leg's long—’

The ledge he leaned on splintered – it was, he suddenly realized, nothing but rotted wood – and he began sliding, falling.

He spun over, kicking out with both legs as he plummeted, throwing both arms out behind and to the sides. Those rough stones tore into his back, one outcrop cracking into the base of his skull and throwing his head forward. Then both feet contacted the stone of the wall opposite.

Flinging him over, headfirst—

*Oh Hood*—

Sudden tugs, snapping sounds, then more, pulling at him, resisting, slowing his descent.

*Gods, webs*—

His left shoulder was tugged back, turning him over. He kicked out again and felt the plastered wall under his foot. Reached out with his right arm, and his hand closed on a projection that seemed to sink like sponge beneath his clutching fingers. His other foot contacted the wall, and he pushed with both legs until his back was against rough stone.

And there were spiders, each as big as an outstretched hand, crawling all over him.

Bottle went perfectly still, struggling to slow his breathing.

Hairless, short-legged, pale amber – but there was no light – and he realized that the creatures were glowing, somehow lit from within, like lantern-flame behind thick, gold-tinted glass. They had swarmed him, now. From far above, he heard Cuttle calling down in desperate, frightened tones.

Bottle reached out with his mind, and immediately recoiled at the blind rage building in the spiders. And flashes of memory – the rat – their favoured prey – somehow evading all their snares, climbing down right past them, unseeing, unaware of the hundreds of eyes tracking its passing. And now *this*.

Heart thundering in his chest, Bottle quested once more. A hive mind, of sorts – no, an extended family – they would mass together, exchange nutrients – when one fed, they all fed. They had never known light beyond what lived within them, and, until recently, never known wind. *Terrified ... but not starving, thank Hood.* He sought to calm them, flinched once more as all motion ceased, all attention fixed now on him. Legs that had been scrambling over his body went still, tiny claws claspine hard in his skin.
Calm. No reason to fear. An accident, and there will be more – it cannot be helped. Best go away now, all of you. Soon, the silence will return, we will have gone past, and before long, this wind will end, and you can begin to rebuild. Peace ... please.

They were not convinced.

The wind paused suddenly, then a gust of heat descended from above.

Flee! He fashioned images of fire in his mind, drew forth from his own memory scenes of people dying, destruction all around—

The spiders fled. Three heartbeats, and he was alone. Nothing clinging still to his skin, nothing but strands of wiry anchor lines, tattered sheets of web. And, trickling down his back, from the soles of his feet, from his arms: blood.

Damn, I'm torn up bad, I think. Pain, now, awakening ... everywhere. Too much – Consciousness fled.

From far above: 'Bottle!'

Stirring ... blinking awake. How long had he been hanging here?

'I'm here, Cuttle! I'm climbing down – not much farther, I think!' Grimacing against the pain, he started working his feet downward – the space was narrow enough, now, that he could straddle the gap. He gasped as he pulled his back clear of the wall.

Something whipped his right shoulder, stinging, hard, and he ducked – then felt the object slide down the right side of his chest. The strap of a harness.

From above: 'I'm climbing down!'

Koryk called behind him, 'Shard, you still with us?' The man had been gibbering – they'd all discovered an unexpected horror. That of stopping. Moving forward had been a tether to sanity, for it had meant that, somewhere ahead, Bottle was still crawling, still finding a way through. When everyone had come to a halt, terror had slipped among them, closing like tentacles around throats, and squeezing.

Shrieks, panicked fighting against immovable, packed stone and brick, hands clawing at feet. Rising into a frenzy.

Then, voices bellowing, calling back – they'd reached a shaft of some kind – they needed rope, belts, harness straps – they were going to climb down.

There was still a way ahead.

Koryk had, through it all, muttered his chant. The Child Death Song, the Seti rite of passage from whelp into adulthood. A ritual that had, for girl and boy alike, included the grave log, the hollowed-out coffin and the night-long internment in a crypt of the bloodline. Buried alive, for the child to die, for the adult to be born. A test against the spirits of madness, the worms that lived in each person, coiled at the base of the skull, wrapped tight about the spine. Worms that were ever eager to awaken, to crawl, gnawing a path into the brain, whispering and laughing or screaming, or both.

He had survived that night. He had defeated the worms.

And that was all he needed, for this. All he needed.

He had heard those worms, eating into soldiers ahead of him, soldiers behind him. Into the children, as the worms raced out to take them as well. For an adult to break under fear – there could be no worse nightmare for the child that witnessed such a thing. For with that was torn away all hope, all faith.

Koryk could save none of them. He could not give them the chant, for they would not know what it meant, and they had never spent a night in a coffin. And he knew, had it gone on much longer, people would start
dying, or the madness would devour their minds, completely, permanently, and that would kill everyone else. Everyone.

The worms had retreated, and now all he could hear was weeping – not the broken kind, but the relieved kind – weeping and gibbering. And he knew they could taste it, could taste what those worms had left behind, and they prayed: *not again. No closer, please. Never again.* 'Corporal Shard?'

'W-what, damn you?'

'Limp. How is he? I keep kicking at him, hitting what I think is an arm, but he's not moving. Can you climb ahead, can you check?'

'He's knocked out.'

'How did that happen?'

'I crawled onto him and pounded his head against the floor until he stopped screaming.'

'You sure he's alive?'

'Limp? His skull's solid rock, Koryk.'

He heard movement back there, asked, 'What now?'

'I'll prove it to you. Give this broke leg a twist—'

Limp shrieked.

'Glad you're back, soldier,' Shard said.

'Get away from me, you bastard!'

'Wasn't me who panicked. Next time you think about panicking, Limp, just remind yourself I'm here, right behind you.'

'I'm going to kill you someday, Corporal—'

'As you like. Just don't do it again.'

Koryk thought back to the babbling noises he'd heard from Shard, but said nothing.

More scuffling sounds, then a bundle of rope and leather straps – most of them charred – was pushed into Koryk's hands. He dragged it close, then shoved it out ahead to the small boy huddled behind Tavos Pond. 'Push it on, lad,' he said.

'You,' the boy said. 'I heard you. I listened.'

'And you was all right, wasn't you?'

'Yes.'

'I'll teach it to you. For the next time.'

'Yes.'

Someone had shouted back instructions, cutting through the frenzy of terror, and people had responded, stripping away whatever could be used as a rope. Chilled beneath a gritty layer of sweat, Tarr settled his forehead onto the stones under him, smelling dust mingled with the remnants of his own fear. When the bundle reached him he drew it forward, then struggled out of what was left of his own harness and added it to the pathetic collection.
Now, at least, they had a reason to wait, they weren't stopped because Bottle had run out of places to crawl.
Something to hold onto. He prayed it would be enough.

Behind him, Balgrid whispered, 'I wish we was marching across the desert again. That road, all that space on
both sides ...'

'I hear you,' Tarr said. 'And I also remember how you used to curse it. The dryness, the sun—'

'Sun, hah! I'm so crisp I'll never fear the sun again. Gods, I'll kneel in prayer before it, I swear it. If freedom
was a god, Tarr...

*If freedom was a god. Now that's an interesting thought ...*

'Thank Hood all that screaming's stopped,' Balm said, plucking at whatever was tingling against all his skin,
ingling, prickling like some kind of heat rash. Heat rash, that was funny—

'Sergeant,' Deadsmell said, 'it was you doing all that screaming.'

'Quiet, you damned liar. Wasn't me, was the kid ahead of me.'

'Really? I didn't know he spoke Dal Honese—'

'I will skewer you, Corporal. Just one more word, I swear it. Gods, I'm itchy all over, like I been rolling in
Fool's pollen—'

'You get that after you been panicking, Sergeant. Fear sweat, it's called. You didn't piss yourself too, did
you? I'm smelling—'

'I got my knife out, Deadsmell. You know that? All I got to do is twist round and you won't be bothering me
no more.'

'You tossed your knife, Sergeant. In the temple—'

'Fine! I'll kick you to death!'

'Well, if you do, can you do it before I have to crawl through your puddle?'

'The heat is winning the war,' Corabb said.

'Aye,' answered Strings behind him, his voice faint, brittle. 'Here.'

Something was pushed against Corabb's feet. He reached back, and his hand closed on a coil of rope. 'You
were carrying this?'

'Was wrapped around me. I saw Smiles drop it, outside the temple – it was smouldering, so that's not a
surprise ...'

As he drew it over him, Corabb felt something wet, sticky on the rope. Blood. 'You're bleeding out, aren't
you?'

'Just a trickle. I'm fine.'

Corabb crawled forward – there was some space between them and the next soldier, the one named
Widdershins. Corabb could have kept up had he been alone back here, but he would not leave the Malazan
sergeant behind. Enemy or no, such things were not done.

He had believed them all monsters, cowards and bullies. He had heard that they ate their own dead. But no,
they were just people. No different from Corabb himself. *The tyranny lies at the feet of the Empress. These –
they're all just soldiers. That's all they are.* Had he gone with Leoman... he would have discovered none of this.
He would have held onto his fierce hatred for all Malazans and all things Malazan.

But now ... the man behind him was dying. A Falari by birth – just another place conquered by the empire. Dying, and there was no room to get to him, not here, not yet.

'Here,' he said to Widdershins. 'Pass this up.'

'Hood take us, that's real rope!'

'Aye. Move it along fast now.'

'Don't order me around, bastard. You're a prisoner. Remember that.'

Corabb crawled back.

The heat was building, devouring the thin streams of cool air sliding up from below. They couldn't lie still for much longer. We must move on. From Strings: 'Did you say something, Corabb?'

'No. Nothing much.'

From above came sounds of Cuttle making his way down the makeshift rope, his breath harsh, strained. Bottle reached the rubble-filled base of the fissure. It was solidly plugged. Confused, he ran his hands along both walls. His rat? Ah, there – at the bottom of the sheer, vertical wall his left hand plunged into air that swept up and past. An archway. Gods, what kind of building was this? An archway, holding the weight of at least two – maybe three – storeys' worth of stonework. And neither the wall nor the arch had buckled, after all this time. Maybe the legends are true. Maybe Y'Ghatan was once the first Holy City, the greatest city of all. And when it died, at the Great Slaughter, every building was left standing – not a stone taken. Standing, to be buried by the sands.

He lowered himself to twist feet-first through the archway, almost immediately contacting heaps of something – rubble? – nearly filling the chamber beyond. Rubble that tipped and tilted with clunking sounds, rocked by his kicking feet.

Ahead, his rat roused itself, startled by the loud sounds as Bottle slid into the chamber. Reaching out with his will, he grasped hold of the creature's soul once more. 'All right, little one. The work begins again ...' His voice trailed away.

He was lying on row upon row of urns, stacked so high they were an arm's reach from the chamber's ceiling. Groping with his hands, Bottle found that the tall urns were sealed, capped in iron, the edges and level tops of the metal intricately incised with swirling patterns. The ceramic beneath was smooth to the touch, finely glazed. Hearing Cuttle shouting that he'd reached the base behind him, he crawled in towards the centre of the room. The rat slipped through another archway opposite, and Bottle sensed it clambering down, alighting on a clear, level stone floor, then waddling ahead.

Grasping the rim of one urn's iron cap, he strained to pull it loose. The seal was tight, his efforts eliciting nothing. He twisted the rim to the right – nothing – then the left. A grating sound. He twisted harder. The cap slid, pulled loose from its seal. Crumbled wax fell away. Bottle pulled upward on the lid. When that failed, he resumed twisting it to the left, and quickly realized that the lid was rising, incrementally, with every full turn. Probing fingers discovered a canted, spiralling groove on the rim of the urn, crusted with wax. Two more turns and the iron lid came away.

A pungent, cloying smell arose.

I know that smell ... honey. These things are filled with honey. For how long had they sat here, stored away by people long since dust? He reached down, and almost immediately plunged his hand into the cool, thick contents. A balm against his burns, and now, an answer to the sudden hunger awakening within him.

'Bottle?'
'Through here. I'm in a large chamber under the straight wall. Cuttle, there's urns here, hundreds of them. Filled with honey.' He drew his hands free and licked his fingers. 'Gods, it tastes fresh. When you get in here, salve your burns, Cuttle—'

'Only if you promise we're not going to crawl through an ant nest anywhere ahead.'

'No ants down here. What's the count?'

'We got everybody.'

'Strings?'

'Still with us, though the heat's working its way down.'

'Enough rope and straps, then. Good.'

'Aye. So long as they hold. Seems Urb's proposing to carry Hellian down. On his back.'

'Is the next one on their way?'

'Aye. How do these lids come off?'

'Turn them, widdershins. And keep turning them.'

Bottle listened as the man worked on one of the lids. 'Can't be very old, this stuff, to still be fresh.'

'There's glyphs on these lids, Cuttle. I can't see them, but I can feel them. My grandmother, she had a ritual blade she used in her witchery – the markings are the same, I think. If I'm right, Cuttle, this iron work is Jaghut.'

'What?'

'But the urns are First Empire. Feel the sides. Smooth as eggshell – if we had light I'd wager anything they're skyblue. So, with a good enough seal ...'

'I can still taste the flowers in this, Bottle.'

'I know.'

'You're talking thousands and thousands of years.'

'Yes.'

'Where's your favourite rat?'

'Hunting us a way through. There's another chamber opposite, but it's open, empty, I mean – we should move in there to give the others room ...'

'What's wrong?'

Bottle shook his head. 'Nothing, just feeling a little ... strange. Cut my back up some ... it's gone numb—'

'Hood's breath, there was some kind of poppy in that honey, wasn't there? I'm starting to feel ... gods below, my head's swimming.'

'Yeah, better warn the others.'

Though he could see nothing, Bottle felt as if the world around him was shuddering, spinning. His heart was suddenly racing. Shit. He crawled towards the other archway. Reached in, pulled himself forward, and was falling.

The collision with the stone floor felt remote, yet he sensed he'd plunged more than a man's height. He
remembered a sharp, cracking sound, realized it had been his forehead, hitting the flagstones.

Cuttle thumped down on top of him, rolled off with a grunt.

Bottle frowned, pulling himself along the floor. The rat – where was she? Gone. *I lost her. Oh no, I lost her.*

Moments later, he lost everything else as well.

Corabb had dragged an unconscious Strings down the last stretch of tunnel. They’d reached the ledge to find the rope dangling from three sword scabbards wedged across the shaft, and vague sounds of voices far below. Heat swirled like serpents around him as he struggled to pull the Malazan up closer to the ledge.

Then he reached out and began drawing up the rope.

The last third of the line consisted of knots and straps and buckles – he checked each knot, tugged on each strand, but none seemed on the verge of breaking. Corabb bound the Malazan’s arms, tight at the wrists; then the man’s ankles – one of them sheathed in blood, and, checking for bandages, he discovered none remaining, just the ragged holes left by the spear – and from the rope at the ankles he made a centre knot between the sergeant’s feet. With the rope end looped in one hand, Corabb worked the man’s arms over his head, then down so that the bound wrists were against his sternum. He then pushed his own legs through, so that the Malazan’s bound feet were against his shins. Drawing up the centre-knotted rope he looped it over his head and beneath one arm, then cinched it into a tight knot.

He worked his way into the shaft, leaning hard for the briefest of moments on the wedged scabbards, then succeeding in planting one foot against the opposite wall. The distance was a little too great – he could manage only the tips of his feet on each wall, and as the weight of Strings on his back fully settled, the tendons in his ankles felt ready to snap.

Gasping, Corabb worked his way down. Two manheights, taken in increasing speed, control slipping away with every lurch downward, then he found a solid projection on which he could rest his right foot, and the gap had narrowed enough to let his left hand reach out and ease the burden on that leg.

Corabb rested.

The pain of deep burns, the pounding of his heart. Some time later, he resumed the descent. Easier now, the gap closing, closing.

Then he was at the bottom, and he heard something like laughter from his left, low, which then trailed away.

He searched out that side and found the archway, through which he tossed the rope, hearing it strike a body a little way below.

*Everyone’s asleep. No wonder. I could do with that myself.*

He untied Strings, then clambered through, found his feet balancing on tight-packed, clunking jars, the sounds of snoring and breathing on all sides and a sweet, cloying smell. He pulled Strings after him, eased the man down.

Honey. Jars and jars of honey. *Good for bums, I think. Good for wounds.* Finding an opened jar, Corabb scooped out a handful, crawled over to the sergeant and pushed the honey into the puncture wounds. Salved the burns, on Strings and on himself. Then he settled back. Numbing bliss stole through him.

*Oh, this honey, it’s Carelbarra. The God Bringer. Oh ...*

Fist Keneb tottered into the morning light, stood, blinking, looking round at the chaotic array of tents, many of them scorched, and all the soldiers – stumbling, wandering or standing motionless, staring across the blasted landscape towards the city. Y’Ghatan, blurred by waves of rising heat, a misshapen mound melted down atop its ragged hill, fires still flickering here and there, pale orange tongues and, lower down, fierce deep red.
Ash filled the air, drifting down like snow.

It hurt to breathe. He was having trouble hearing – the roar of that firestorm still seemed to rage inside his head, as hungry as ever. How long had it been? A day? Two days? There had been healers. Witches with salves, practitioners of Denul from the army itself. A jumble of voices, chanting, whispers, some real, some imagined.

He thought of his wife. Selv was away from this accursed continent, safe in her family estate back on Quon Tali. And Kesen and Vaneb, his children. They'd survived, hadn't they? He was certain they had. A memory of that, strong enough to convince him of its truth. That assassin, Kalam, he'd had something to do with that.

Selv. They had grown apart, in the two years before the rebellion, the two years – was it two? – that they had been in Seven Cities, in the garrison settlement. The uprising had forced them both to set aside all of that, for the children, for survival itself. He suspected she did not miss him; although his children might. He suspected she would have found someone else by now, a lover, and the last thing she would want was to see him again.

Well, there could be worse things in this life. He thought back on those soldiers he'd seen with the fiercest burns – gods how they had screamed their pain.

Keneb stared at the city. And hated it with all his soul.

The dog Bent arrived to lie down beside him. A moment later Grub appeared. 'Father, do you know what will come of this? Do you?'

'Come of what, Grub?'

The boy pointed at Y'Ghatan with one bare, sootstained arm. 'She wants us to leave. As soon as we can.' He then pointed towards the morning sun. 'It's the plague, you see, in the east. So. We're marching west. To find the ships. But I already know the answer. To find what's inside us, you got to take everything else away, you see?'

'No, Grub. I don't see."

The Hengese lapdog, Roach, scrambled into view, sniffing the ground. Then it began digging, as if in a frenzy. Dust engulfed it.

'Something's buried,' Grub said, watching Roach.

'I imagine there is."

'But she won't see that.' The boy looked up at Keneb. 'Neither will you."

Grub ran off, Bent loping at his side. The lapdog kept digging, making snuffling, snorting sounds.

Keneb frowned, trying to recall what Grub had said earlier – was it the night of the breach? Before the fated order went out? Had there been a warning hidden in the lad's words? He couldn't remember – the world before the fire seemed to have burned away to nothing in his mind. It had been a struggle to conjure up the names of his wife, his children, their faces. I don't understand. What has happened to me?

In the command tent, the Adjunct stood facing Nil and Nether. Fist Blistig watched from near the back wall, so exhausted he could barely stand. Tavore had placed him in charge of the healing – setting up the hospitals, organizing the Denul healers, the witches and the warlocks. Two days and one or maybe one and a half nights – he was not sure he could count the short chaotic time before the sun rose on the night of the breach. Without his officers that first night, he would have been relieved of command before dawn. His soul had been drowning in the pit of the Abyss.

Blistig was not yet certain he had climbed back out.

Nil was speaking, his voice a monotone, dulled by too long in the sorcery he had grown to hate.'... nothing
but death and heat. Those who made it out—they are driving the spirits insane. They flee, snapping their bindings. They curse us, for this vast wound upon the land, for the crimes we have committed—'

'Not our crimes,' the Adjunct cut in, turning away, her gaze finding Blistig. 'How many did we lose today, Fist?'

'Thirty-one, Adjunct, but the witches say that few will follow, now. The worst are dead, the rest will live.'

'Begin preparations for the march—have we enough wagons?'

'Provided soldiers pack their own food for a while,' Blistig said. 'Speaking of which, some stores were lost—we'll end up chewing leather unless we can arrange a resupply.'

'How long?'

'A week, if we immediately begin rationing. Adjunct, where are we going?'

Her eyes grew veiled for a moment, then she looked away. 'The plague is proving ... virulent. It is the Mistress's own, I gather, the kiss of the goddess herself. And there is a shortage of healers ...'

'Lothal?'

Nil shook his head. 'The city has already been struck, Fist.'

'Sotka,' said the Adjunct. 'Pearl has informed me that Admiral Nok's fleet and the transports have been unable to dock in any city east of Ashok on the Maadil Peninsula, so he has been forced around it, and expects to reach Sotka in nine days, assuming he can draw in for water and food in Taxila or Rang.'

'Nine days?' asked Blistig. 'If the plague's in Lothal already . . .'

'Our enemy now is time,' the Adjunct said. 'Fist, you have orders to break camp. Do it as quickly as possible. The Rebellion is over. Our task now is to survive.' She studied Blistig for a moment. 'I want us on the road tonight.'

'Tonight? Aye, Adjunct. I had best be on my way, then.' He saluted, then headed out. Outside, he halted, momentarily blinking, then, recalling his orders, he set off.

After Blistig's footsteps had trailed away, the Adjunct turned to Nether. 'The Mistress of Plague, Nether. Why now? Why here?'

The Wickan witch snorted. 'You ask me to fathom the mind of a goddess, Adjunct? It is hopeless. She may have no reason. Plague is her aspect, after all. It is what she does.' She shook her head, said nothing more.

'Adjunct,' Nil ventured, 'you have your victory. The Empress will be satisfied—it has to be. We need to rest—'

'Pearl informs me that Leoman of the Flails is not dead.'

Neither Wickan replied, and the Adjunct faced them once more. 'You both knew that, didn't you?'

'He was taken ... away,' Nil said. 'By a goddess.'

'Which goddess? Poliel?'

'No. The Queen of Dreams.'

'The Goddess of Divination? What possible use could she have for Leoman of the Flails?'

Nil shrugged.
Outside the tent a rider reined in and a moment later Temul, dust-sheathed and dripping blood from three parallel slashes tracking the side of his face, strode in, dragging a dishevelled child with him. 'Found her, Adjunct,' he said.

'Where?'

'Trying to get back into the ruins. She has lost her mind.'

The Adjunct studied the child, Sinn, then said, 'She had best find it again. I have need of High Mages. Sinn, look at me. Look at me.'

She gave no indication of even hearing Tavore, her head still hanging down, ropes of burnt hair hiding her face.

Sighing, the Adjunct said, 'Take her and get her cleaned up. And keep her under guard at all times – we will try this again later.'

After they had left, Nil asked, 'Adjunct, do you intend to pursue Leoman? How? There is no trail to follow – the Queen of Dreams could have spirited him to another continent by now.'

'No, we shall not pursue, but understand this, Wickan, while he yet lives there will be no victory in the eyes of the Empress. Y'Ghatan will remain as it always has been, a curse upon the empire.'

'It will not rise again,' Nil said.

Tavore studied him. 'The young know nothing of history. I am going for a walk. Both of you, get some rest.'

She left.

Nil met his sister's eyes, then smiled. 'Young? How easily she forgets.'

'They all forget, brother.'

'Where do you think Leoman has gone?'

'Where else? Into the Golden Age, Nil. The glory that was the Great Rebellion. He strides the mists of myth, now. They will say he breathed fire. They will say you could see the Apocalypse in his eyes. They will say he sailed from Y'Ghatan on a river of Malazan blood.'

'The locals believe Coltaine ascended, Nether. The new Patron of Crows—'

'Fools. Wickans do not ascend. We just ... reiterate.'

Lieutenant Pores was awake, and he lifted his good hand to acknowledge his captain as Kindly halted at the foot of the camp cot.

'They say your hand melted together, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, sir. My left hand, as you see.'

'They say they have done all they could, taken away the pain, and maybe one day they will manage to cut each finger free once again. Find a High Denul healer and make your hand look and work like new again.'

'Yes, sir. And until then, since it's my shield hand, I should be able to—'

'Then why in Hood's name are you taking up this cot, Lieutenant?'

'Ah, well, I just need to find some clothes, then, sir, and I'll be right with you.'

Kindly looked down the row of cots. 'Half this hospital is filled with bleating lambs – you up to being a wolf, Lieutenant? We march tonight. There's not enough wagons and, even more outrageous, not enough palanquins.
and no howdahs to speak of – what is this army coming to, I wonder?'

'Shameful, sir. How does Fist Tene Baralta fare, sir?'

'Lost that arm, but you don't hear him whining and fussing and moaning.'

'No?'

'Of course not, he's still unconscious. Get on your feet, soldier. Wear that blanket.'

'I lost my arm torc, sir—'

'You got the burn mark where it was, though, haven't you? They see that and they'll know you for an officer. That and your ferocious comportment.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good, now enough of wasting my time. We've work to do, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Lieutenant, if you remain lying there another heartbeat, I will fold that cot up with you in it, do you understand me?'

'Yes, sir!'

She sat unmoving, limbs limp as a doll's, while an old Wickan woman washed her down and another cut away most of her hair, and did not look up as Captain Faradan Sort entered the tent.

'That will do,' she said, gesturing for the two Wickans to leave. 'Get out.'

Voicing, in tandem, strings of what the captain took to be curses, the two women left.

Faradan Sort looked down on the girl. 'Long hair just gets in the way, Sinn. You're better off without it. I don't miss mine at all. You're not talking, but I think I know what is going on. So listen. Don't say anything. Just listen to me ...'

The dull grey, drifting ash devoured the last light of the sun, while dust-clouds from the road drifted down into the cut banks to either side. Remnant breaths of the dead city still rolled over the Fourteenth Army – all that remained of the firestorm, yet reminder enough for the mass of soldiers awaiting the horn blasts that would announce the march.

Fist Keneb lifted himself into the saddle, gathered the reins. All round him he could hear coughing, from human and beast alike, a terrible sound. Wagons, burdened with the cloth-swathed wounded, were lined up on the road like funeral carts, smoke-stained, flame-blackened and reeking of pyres. Among them, he knew, could be found Fist Tene Baralta, parts of his body burned away and his face horribly scarred – a Denul healer had managed to save his eyes, but the man's beard had caught fire, and most of his lips and nose were gone. The concern now was for his sanity, although he remained, mercifully, unconscious. And there were others, so many others ...

He watched Temul and two riders cantering towards him. The Wickan leader reined in, shaking his head. 'Nowhere to be found, Fist. It's no surprise – but know this: we've had other desertions, and we've tracked them all down. The Adjunct has issued the command to kill the next ones on sight.'

Keneb nodded, looked away.

'From now on,' Temul continued, 'my Wickans will not accept counter-orders from Malazan officers.'

The Fist's head turned back and he stared at Temul. 'Fist, your Wickans are Malazans.'
The young warrior grimaced, then wheeled his horse. 'They're your problem now, Fist. Send out searchers if you like, but the Fourteenth won't wait for them.'

Even as he and his aides rode away, the horns sounded, and the army lurched into motion.

Keneb rose in his saddle and looked around. The sun was down, now. Too dark to see much of anything. And somewhere out there were Captain Faradan Sort and Sinn. Two deserters. *That damned captain. I thought she was ... well, I didn't think she'd do something like this.*

Y'Ghatan had broken people, broken them utterly – he did not think many would recover. *Ever.*

The Fourteenth Army began its march, down the western road, towards the Sotka Fork, in its wake dust and ash, and a destroyed city.

Her head was serpentine, the slitted, vertical eyes lurid green, and Balm watched her tongue slide in and out with fixed, morbid fascination. The wavy, ropy black tendrils of her hair writhed, and upon the end of each was a tiny human head, mouth open in piteous screams.

Witch Eater, Thesorma Raadil, all bedecked in zebra skins, her four arms lifting this way and that, threatening with the four sacred weapons of the Dal Hon tribes. Bola, kout, hook-scythe and rock – he could never understand that: where were the more obvious ones? Knife? Spear? Bow? Who thought up these goddesses anyway? What mad, twisted, darkly amused mind conjured such monstrosities? *Whoever it was – is – I hate him. Or her. Probably her. It's always her. She's a witch, isn't she? No, Witch Eater. Likely a man, then, and one not mad or stupid after all. Someone has to eat all those witches.*

Yet she was advancing on him. Balm. A mediocre warlock – no, a lapsed warlock – just a soldier, now, in fact. A sergeant, but where in Hood's name was his squad? The army? What was he doing on the savannah of his homeland? *I ran from there, oh yes I did. Herd cattle? Hunt monstrous, vicious beasts and call it a fun pastime? Not for me. Oh no, not Balm. I've drunk enough bull blood to sprout horns, enough cow milk to grow udders – 'so you, Witch Eater, get away from me!'*

'She'll not have you! No, I have need of you!'
dead and dying who cry out the truth of things!

Balm looked up. Brithan Troop, the eleven-headed vulture goddess. 'Oh, leave me alone! All of you!'

From every side, now, a growing clamour of voices. Gods and goddesses, the whole Dal Honese menagerie of disgusting deities.

_Oh, why do we have so many of them!_

It was her sister, not her. She remembered, as clearly as if it had been yesterday, the night of lies that lumbered into the Itko Kanese village when the seas had been silent, empty, for too long. When hunger, no, starvation, had arrived, and all the civil, modern beliefs – the stately, just gods – were cast off once again. In the name of Awakening, the old grisly rites had returned.

The fish had gone away. The seas were lifeless. Blood was needed, to stir the Awakening, to save them all.

They'd taken her sister. Smiles was certain of it. Yet, here were the rough, salt-gnawed hands of the elders, carrying her drugged, insensate body down onto the wet sands – the tide drawn far back and waiting patiently for this warm gift – whilst she floated above herself, looking on in horror.

All wrong. Not the way it had happened. They'd taken her twin sister – so much power in the Mirror Birth, after all, and so rare in the small village where she'd been born.

Her sister. That was why she'd fled them all. Cursing every name, every face glimpsed that night. Running and running, all the way to the great city to the north – and, had she known what awaited her there ...

_No, I'd do it again. I would. Those bastards. 'For the lives of everyone else, child, give up your own. This is the cycle, this is life and death, and that eternal path lies in the blood. Give up your own life, for the lives of all of us.'_

Odd how those priests never volunteered themselves for that glorious gift. How they never insisted that they be the ones tied and weighted down to await the tide's wash, and the crabs, the ever hungry crabs.

And, if it was so damned blissful, why pour durhang oil down her throat, until her eyes were like black pearls and she couldn't even walk, much less think? Still less comprehend what was happening, what they were planning to do to her?

Drifting above the body of herself, Smiles sensed the old spirits drawing close, eager and gleeful. And, somewhere in the depths beyond the bay, waited the Eldest God. Mael himself, that feeder on misery, the cruel taker of life and hope.

Rage rising within her, Smiles could feel her body straining at the numbing turgid chains – she would not lie unmoving, she would not smile up when her mother kissed her one last time. She would not blink dreamily when the warm water stole over her, into her.

_Hear me! All you cursed spirits, hear me! I defy you!_

_Oh yes, flinch back! You know well enough to fear, because I swear this – I will take you all down with me. I will take you all into the Abyss, into the hands of the demons of chaos. It's the cycle, you see. Order and chaos, a far older cycle than life and death, wouldn't you agree?_

_So, come closer, all of you._

_In the end, it was as she had known. They'd taken her sister, and she, well, let's not be coy now, you delivered the last kiss, dear girl. And no durhang oil to soothe away the excuse, either._

_Running away never feels as fast, never as far, as it should._

_You could believe in whores. He had been born to a whore, a Seti girl of fourteen who'd been flung away by_
her parents – of course, she hadn't been a whore then, but to keep her new son fed and clothed, well, it was the clearest course before her.

And he had learned the ways of worship among whores, all those women knitted close to his mother, sharing fears and everything else that came with the profession. Their touch had been kindly and sincere, the language they knew best.

A half-blood could call on no gods. A half-blood walked the gutter between two worlds, despised by both.

Yet he had not been alone, and in many ways it was the half-bloods who held closest to the traditional ways of the Seti. The full-blood tribes had gone off to wars – all the young lance warriors and the women archers – beneath the standard of the Malazan Empire. When they had returned, they were Seti no longer. They were Malazan.

And so Koryk had been immersed in the old rituals – those that could be remembered – and they had been, he had known even then, godless and empty. Serving only the living, the half-blood kin around each of them.

There was no shame in that.

There had been a time, much later, when Koryk had come upon his own language, protecting the miserable lives of the women from whom he had first learned the art of empty worship. A mindful dialect, bound to no cause but that of the living, of familiar, ageing faces, of repaying the gifts the now unwanted once-whores had given him in his youth. And then watching them one by one die. Worn out, so scarred by so many brutal hands, the indifferent usage by the men and women of the city – who proclaimed the ecstasy of god-worship when it suited them, then defiled human flesh with the cold need of carnivores straddling a kill.

Deep in the sleep of Carelbarra, the God Bringer, Koryk beheld no visitors. For him, there was naught but oblivion.

As for the fetishes, well, they were for something else. Entirely something else.

'Go on, mortal, pull it.'

Crump glowered, first at Stump Flit, the Salamander God, Highest of High Marshals, then at the vast, gloomy swamp of Mott. What was he doing here? He didn't want to be here. What if his brothers found him?

'No.'

'Go on, I know you want to. Take my tail, mortal, and watch me thrash about, a trapped god in your hands, it's what you all do anyway. All of you.'

'No. Go away. I don't want to talk to you. Go away.'

'Oh, poor Jamber Bole, all so alone, now. Unless your brothers find you, and then you'll want me on your side, yes you will. If they find you, oh my, oh my.'

'They won't. They ain't looking, neither.'

'Yes they are, my foolish young friend—'

'I ain't your friend. Go away.'

'They're after you, Jamber Bole. Because of what you did—'

'I didn't do nothing!'

'Grab my tail. Go on. Here, just reach out ...'

Jamber Bole, now known as Crump, sighed, reached out and closed his hand on the Salamander God's tail. It bolted, and he was left holding the end of the tail in his hand.
Stump Flit raced away, laughing and laughing.

Good thing too, Crump reflected. It was the only joke it had.

Corabb stood in the desert, and through the heat-haze someone was coming. A child. Sha'ik reborn, the seer had returned, to lead still more warriors to their deaths. He could not see her face yet – there was something wrong with his eyes. Burned, maybe. Scoured by blowing sand, he didn't know, but to see was to feel pain. To see her was ... terrible.

No, Sha'ik, please. This must end, it must all end. We have had our fill of holy wars – how much blood can this sand absorb? When will your thirst end?

She came closer. And the closer she drew to where he was standing, the more his eyes failed him, and when he heard her halt before him, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas was blind.

Yet not deaf, as she whispered, 'Help me.'

'Open your eyes, friend.'

But he didn't want to. Everybody demanded decisions.

From him, all the time, and he didn't want to make any more. Never again. The way it was now was perfect. This slow sinking away, the whisperings that meant nothing, that weren't even words. He desired nothing more, nothing else.

'Wake up, Fiddler. One last time, so we can talk. We need to talk, friend.'

All right. He opened his eyes, blinked to clear the mists – but they didn't clear – in fact, the face looking down at him seemed to be made of those mists. 'Hedge. What do you want?'

The sapper grinned. 'I bet you think you're dead, don't you? That you're back with all your old buddies. A Bridgeburner, where the Bridgeburners never die. The deathless army – oh, we cheated Hood, didn't we just. Hah! That's what you're thinking, yeah? Okay, then, so where's Trotts? Where are all the others?'

'You tell me.'

'I will. You ain't dead. Not yet, maybe not for a while either. And that's my point. That's why I'm here. You need a kicking awake, Fid, else Hood'll find you and you won't see none of us ever again. The world's been burned through, where you are right now. Burned through, realm after realm, warren after warren. It ain't a place anybody can claim. Not for a long time. Dead, burned down straight to the Abyss.'

'You're a ghost, Hedge. What do you want with me? From me?'

'You got to keep going, Fid. You got to take us with you, right to the end—'

'What end?'

'The end and that's all I can say—'

'Why?'

'Cause it ain't happened yet, you idiot! How am I supposed to know? It's the future and I can't see no future. Gods, you're so thick, Fid. You always were.'

'Me? I didn't blow myself up, Hedge.'

'So? You're lying on a bunch of urns and bleeding out – that's better? Messing up all that sweet honey with your blood—'
'What honey? What are you talking about?'

'You better get going, you're running outta time.'

'Where are we?'

'No place, and that's the problem. Maybe Hood'll find you, maybe no-one will. The ghosts of Y'Ghatan – they all burned. Into nothing. Destroyed, all those locked memories, thousands and thousands. Thousands of years ... gone, now. You've no idea the loss ...'

'Be quiet. You're sounding like a ghost.'

'Time to wake up, Fid. Wake up, now. Go on ...'

Wildfires had torn across the grasslands, and Bottle found himself lying on blackened stubble. Nearby lay a charred carcass. Some kind of four-legged grass-eater – and around it had gathered a half-dozen human-like figures, fine-furred and naked. They held sharp-edged stones and were cutting into the burnt flesh.

Two stood as sentinels, scanning the horizons. One of them was ... her.

My female. Heavy with child, so heavy now. She saw him and came over. He could not look away from her eyes, from that regal serenity in her gaze.

There had been wild apes on Malaz Island once. He remembered, in Jakatakan, when he was maybe seven years old, seeing a cage in the market, the last island ape left, captured in the hardwood forests on the north coast. It had wandered down into a village, a young male seeking a mate – but there were no mates left. Half-starved and terrified, it had been cornered in a stable, clubbed unconscious, and now it crouched in a filthy bamboo cage at the dockside market in Jakatakan.

The seven-year-old boy had stood before it, his eyes level with that black-furred, heavy-browed beast's own eyes, and there had been a moment, a single moment, when their gazes locked. A single moment that broke Bottle's heart. He'd seen misery, he'd seen awareness – the glint that knew itself, yet did not comprehend what it had done wrong, what had earned it the loss of its freedom. It could not have known, of course, that it was now alone in the world. The last of its kind. And that somehow, in some exclusively human way, that was its crime.

Just as the child could not have known that the ape, too, was aged seven.

Yet both saw, both knew in their souls – those darkly flickering shapings, not yet solidly formed – that, for this one time, they were each looking upon a brother.

Breaking his heart.

Breaking the ape's heart, too – but maybe, he'd thought since, maybe he just needed to believe that, a kind of flagellation in recompense. For being the one outside the cage, for knowing that there was blood on the hands of himself and his kind.

Bottle's soul, broken away ... and so freed, gifted or cursed with the ability to travel, to seek those duller lifesparks and to find that, in truth, they were not dull at all, that the failure in fully seeing belonged to himself.

Compassion existed when and only when one could step outside oneself, to suddenly see the bars from inside the cage.

Years later, Bottle had tracked down the fate of that last island ape. Purchased by a scholar who lived in a solitary tower on the wild, unsettled coast of Geni, where there dwelt, in the forests inland, bands of apes little different from the one he had seen; and he liked to believe, now, that that scholar's heart had known compassion; and that those foreign apes had not rejected this strange, shy cousin. His hope: that there had been a reprieve, for that one, solitary life.
His fear was that the creature's wired skeleton stood in one of the tower's dingy rooms, a trophy of uniqueness.

Amidst the smell of ash and charred flesh, the female crouched down before him, reached out to brush hard finger pads across his forehead.

Then that hand made a fist, lifting high, then flashing down—

He flinched, eyes snapping open and seeing naught but darkness. Hard rims and shards digging into his back – the chamber, the honey, oh gods my head aches ... Groaning, Bottle rolled over, the shard fragments cutting and crunching beneath him. He was in the room beyond the one containing the urns, although at least one had followed him to shatter on the cold stone floor. He groaned again. Smeared in sticky honey, aches all over him ... but the burns, the pain – gone. He drew a deep breath, then coughed. The air was foul. He needed to get everyone going – he needed—

'Bottle? That you?'

Cuttle, lying nearby. 'Aye,' said Bottle. 'That honey—'

'Kicked hard, didn't it just. I dreamed ... a tiger, it had died – cut to pieces, in fact, by these giant undead lizards that ran on two feet. Died, yet ascended, only it was the death part it was telling me about. The dying part – I don't understand. Treach had to die, I think, to arrive. The dying part was important – I'm sure of it, only ... gods below, listen to me. This air's rotten – we got to get moving.'

Yes. But he'd lost the rat, he remembered that, he'd lost her. Filled with despair, Bottle sought out the creature —

—and found her. Awakened by his touch, resisting not at all as he captured her soul once more, and, seeing through her eyes, he led the rat back into the room.

'Wake the others, Cuttle. It's time.'

Shouting, getting louder, and Gesler awoke soaked in sweat. That, he decided, was a dream he would never, ever revisit. Given the choice. Fire, of course, so much fire. Shadowy figures dancing on all sides, dancing around him, in fact. Night, snapped at by flames, the drumming of feet, voices chanting in some barbaric, unknown language, and he could feel his soul responding, flaring, burgeoning as if summoned by some ritual.

At which point Gesler realized. They were dancing round a hearth. And he was looking out at them – from the very flame itself. No, he

Oh Truth, you went and killed yourself. Damned fool.

Soldiers were awakening on all sides of the chamber – shouts and moans and a chorus of clunking urns.

This journey was not yet done. They would go on, and on, deeper and deeper, until the passage dead-ended, until the air ran out, until a mass of rubble shook loose and crushed them all.

Any way at all, please, except fire.

How long had they been down here? Bottle had no idea. Memories of open sky, of sunlight and the wind, were invitations to madness, so fierce was the torture of recalling all those things one took for granted. Now, the world was reduced to sharp fragments of brick, dust, cobwebs and darkness. Passages that twisted, climbed, dropped away. His hands were a battered, bloody mess from clawing through packed rubble.

And now, on a sharp down-slope, he had reached a place too small to get through. Feeling with his half-numbed hands, he tracked the edges. Some kind of cut cornerstone had sagged down at an angle from the ceiling. Its lowermost corner – barely two hand's-widths above the rutted, sandy floor – neatly bisected the
passage.

Bottle settled his forehead against the gritty floor. Air still flowed past, a faint stirring now, nothing more than that. And water had run down this track, heading somewhere.

'What's wrong?' Cuttle asked behind him.

'We're blocked.'

Silence for a moment, then, 'Your rat gone ahead? Past the block?'

'Yes. It opens out again – there's an intersection of some kind ahead, a hole coming down from above, with air pulling down from it and straight into a pit in the floor. But, Cuttle – there's a big cut stone, no way to squeeze past it. I'm sorry. We have to go back—'

'To Hood we do, move aside if you can, I want to feel this for myself.'

It was not as easy as it sounded, and it was some time before the two men managed to swap positions. Bottle listened to the sapper muttering under his breath, then cursing.

'I told you—'

'Be quiet, I'm thinking. We could try and break it loose, only the whole ceiling might come down with it. No, but maybe we can dig under, into the floor here. Give me your knife.'

'I ain't got a knife any more. Lost it down a hole.'

'Then call back for one.'

'Cuttle—'

'You ain't giving up on us, Bottle. You can't. You either take us through or we're all dead.'

'Damn you,' Bottle hissed. 'Hasn't it occurred to you that maybe there's no way through? Why should there be? Hood, rats can live down here, why should there be a tunnel big enough for us, some convenient route all the way out from under this damned city? To be honest, I'm amazed we've gotten this far. Look, we could go back, right to the temple – and dig our way out—'

'You're the one who doesn't understand, soldier. There's a mountain sitting over the hole we dropped into, a mountain that used to be the city's biggest temple. Dig out? Forget it. There's no going back, Bottle. Only forward; now get me a knife, damn you.'

Smiles drew out one of her throwing-knives and passed it up to the child ahead of her. Something told her that this was it – as far as they would go. Except maybe for the children. The call had come to send the urchins ahead. At the very least, then, they could go on, find a way out. All this effort – somebody had better live through it.

Not that they'd get very far, not without Bottle. That spineless bastard – imagine, depending on him. The man who could see eye to eye with rats, lizards, spiders, fungi. Matching wits, and it was a tough battle, wasn't it just.

Still, he wasn't a bad sort – he'd taken half the load that day on the march, after that bitch of a captain revealed just how psychotic she really was. That had been generous of him. Strangely generous. But men were like that, on occasion. She never used to believe that, but now she had no choice. They could surprise you.

The child behind Smiles was climbing over her, all elbows and knees and running, drippy, smearing nose. It smelled, too. Smelled bad. Awful things, children. Needy, self-centred tyrants, the boys all teeth and fists, the girls all claws and spit. Gathering into snivelling packs and sniffing out vulnerabilities – and woe to the child not cunning enough to hide their own – the others would close in like the grubby sharks they were. Great pastime, savaging someone.
If these runts are the only ones here who survive, I will haunt them. Every one of them, for the rest of their
days. 'Look,' she snarled after an elbow in the nose, 'just get your smelly slimy hide out of my face! Go on, you
little ape!'

A voice from behind her: 'Easy there. You was a child once, you know—'

'You don't know nothing about me, so shut it!'

'What, you was hatched? Hah! I believe it! Along with all the other snakes!'

'Yeah, well, whoever you are, don't even think of climbing past me.'

'And get that close? Not a chance.'

She grunted. 'Glad we're understood, then.'

If there was no way through – they'd all lose their minds. No doubt of that at all. Well, at least she had a
couple knives left – anybody fool enough to come for her and they'd pay.

The children were squirming through – even as Cuttle dug into the floor with the knife – and then huddling on
the other side. Weeping, clinging to each other, and Bottle's heart cried out for them. They would have to find
courage, but for the moment, there seemed to be no hope of that.

Cuttle's grunts and gasps, then his curse as he broke the knife's point – not very promising sounds. Ahead,
the rat circled the edge of the pit, whiskers twitching at the flow of warm air coming from the shaft. She could
climb round to the other side, and Bottle was willing the creature to do so – yet it seemed his control was
weakening, for the rat was resisting, her head tilted over the edge of the pit, claws gripping the pocked side, the
air flowing up over her ...

Bottle frowned. From the shaft above, the air had been coming down. And from the pit, flowing up. Conjoining in the tunnel, then drifting towards the children.

But the rat ... that air from below. Warm, not cool. Warm, smelling of sunlight.

'Cuttle!'

The sapper halted. 'What?'

'We've got to get past this! That pit – its edges, they've been cut. That shaft, Cuttle, it's been mined, cut
through – someone's dug into the side of the tel – there's no other possibility!'

The children's cries had ceased with Bottle's words. He went on, 'That explains this, don't you see? We ain't
the first ones to use this tunnel – people have been mining the ruins, looking for loot—'

He could hear Cuttle moving about.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm gonna kick this block out of the way—'

'No, wait! You said—'

'I can't dig through the damned floor! I'm gonna kick this bastard outa the way!'

'Cuttle, wait!'

A bellow, then a heavy thump, dust and gravel streaming from above. A second thump, then thunder shook
the floor, and the ceiling was raining down. Screams of terror through the dust-clouds. Ducking, covering his
head as stones and sherds descended on him, Bottle squeezed his eyes shut – the dust, so bright—

Bright.
But he couldn't breathe – he could barely move beneath the weight of rubble atop him.

Muted yells from behind, but the terrible hiss of rubble had ceased.

Bottle lifted his head, gasping, coughing.

To see a white shaft of sunlight, dust-filled, cutting its way down. Bathing Cuttle's splayed legs, the huge foundation stone between them. 'Cuttle?'

A cough, then, 'Gods below, that damned thing – it came down between my legs – just missed my ... oh Hood take me, I feel sick—'

'Never mind that! There's light, coming down. Sunlight!'

'Call your rat back – I can't see ... how far up. I think it narrows. Narrows bad, Bottle.'

The rat was clambering over the children, and he could feel its racing heart.

'I see it – your rat—'

'Take her in your hands, help her into the shaft over you. Yes, there's daylight – oh, it's too narrow – I might make it, or Smiles maybe, but most of the others ...'

'You just dig when you're up there, make it wider, Bottle. We're too close, now.'

'Can the children get back here? Past the block?'

'Uh, I think so. Tight, but yes.'

Bottle twisted round. 'Roll call! And listen, we're almost there! Dig your way free! We're almost there!'

The rat climbed, closer and closer to that patch of daylight.

Bottle scrambled free of the gravel. 'All right,' he gasped as he moved over Cuttle.

'Bottle!' 'What?'

'One of the urchins – she fell into the pit – she ain't making any sound – I think we lost her.'

Shit. 'Pass that rope ahead – can Smiles get over to them?'

'I'm not sure. Keep going, soldier – we'll see what we can do down here.'

Bottle worked his way upward. A sudden widening, then narrowing once more – almost within reach of that tiny opening – too small, he realized, for even so much as his hand. He pulled a large chunk of stone from the wall, dragged himself as close as he could to the hole. On a slight ledge near his left shoulder crouched the rat. He wanted to kiss the damned thing.

But not yet. Things looked badly jammed up around that hole. Big stones. Panic whispered through him.
With the rock in his hand, Bottle struck at the stone. A spurt of blood from one fingertip, crushed by the impact – he barely felt it. Hammering, hammering away. Chips raining down every now and then. His arm tiring – he was running out of reserves, he didn't have the strength, the endurance for this. Yet he kept swinging.

Each impact weaker than the one before.

*No, damn you! No!*

He swung again.

Blood spattered his eyes.

Captain Faradan Sort reined in on the ridge, just north of the dead city. Normally, a city that had fallen to siege soon acquired its scavengers, old women and children scrambling about, picking through the ruins. But not here, not yet, anyway. Maybe not for a long time.

Like a cracked pot, the steep sides of Y'Ghatan's tel had bled out – melted lead, copper, silver and gold, veins and pools filled with accreted stone chips, dust and potsherds.

Offering an arm, Sort helped Sinn slip down from the saddle behind her – she'd been squirming, whimpering and clutching at her, growing more agitated the closer the day's end came, the light failing. The Fourteenth Army had left the night before. The captain and her charge had walked their lone horse round the tel, not once, but twice, since the sun's rise.

And the captain had begun to doubt her own reading of the child Sinn, her own sense that this half-mad, now seemingly mute creature had known something, sensed something – Sinn had tried and tried to get back into the ruins before her arrest. There had to be a reason for that.

Or, perhaps not. Perhaps nothing more than an insane grief – for her lost brother.

Scanning the rubble-strewn base below the tel's north wall one more time, she noted that one scavenger at least had arrived. A child, smeared in white dust, her hair a matted snarl, was wandering perhaps thirty paces from the rough wall.

Sinn saw her as well, then began picking her way down the slope, making strange mewling sounds.

The captain unstrapped her helm and lifted it clear to settle it on the saddle horn. She wiped grimy sweat from her brow. Desertion. Well, it wasn't the first time, now, was it? If not for Sinn's magic, the Wickans would have found them. And likely executed them. She'd take a few with her, of course, no matter what Sinn did. People learned that you had to pay to deal with her. Pay in every way. A lesson she never tired of teaching.

She watched as Sinn ran to the city's cliff-side, ignoring the scavenger, and began climbing it.

Now what?

Replacing the helm, the sodden leather inside-rim momentarily cool against her brow, the strap feeling stretched as she fixed the clasp beneath her jaw, Faradan Sort collected the reins and guided her horse into a slow descent down the scree.

The scavenger was crying, grubby hands pressed against her eyes. All that dust on her, the webs in her hair – this was the true face of war, the captain knew. That child's face would haunt her memories, joining the many other faces, for as long as she lived.

Sinn was clinging to the rough wall, perhaps two manheights up, motionless.

Too much, Sort decided. The child was mad. She glanced again at the scavenger, who did not seem aware that they had arrived. Hands still pressed against eyes. Red scrapes through the dust, a trickle of blood down one shin. Had she fallen? From where?
The captain rode up to halt her horse beneath Sinn. 'Come down now,' she said. 'We need to make camp, Sinn. Come down, it's no use – the sun's almost gone. We can try again tomorrow.'

Sinn tightened her grip on the broken outcrops of stone and brick.

Grimacing, the captain side-stepped the mount closer to the wall, then reached up to pull Sinn from her perch.

Squealing, the girl lunged upward, one hand shooting into a hole—

—his strength, his will, was gone. A short rest, then he could begin again. A short rest, the voices below drifting away, it didn't matter. Sleep, now, the dark, warm embrace – drawing him down, ever deeper, then a blush of sweet golden light, wind rippling yellow grasses—

—and he was free, all pain gone. This, he realized, was not sleep. It was death, the return to the most ancient memory buried in each human soul. Grasslands, the sun and wind, the warmth and click of insects, dark herds in the distance, the lone trees with their vast canopies and the cool shade beneath, where lions dozed, tongues lolling, flies dancing round indifferent, languid eyes ...

Death, and this long buried seed. We return. We return to the world ...

And she reached for him, then, her hand damp with sweat, small and soft, prying his fingers loose from the rock they gripped, blood sticking – she clutched at his hand, as if filled with fierce need, and he knew the child within her belly was calling out in its own silent language, its own needs, so demanding ...

Nails dug into the cuts on his hand—

Bottle jolted awake, eyes blinking – daylight almost gone – and a small hand reaching through from outside, grasping and tugging at his own.

Help. 'Help – you, outside – help us—'

Crunching sounds outside, boots digging into stone, then gloved fingers slipped round one edge beside the child’s forearm, and Bottle heard: ‘You, inside – who? Can you hear me?’

A woman. Accented Ehrlii ... familiar? 'Fourteenth Army,' Bottle said. 'Malazans.' The child's grip tightened.

'Oponn's pull, soldier,' the woman said in Malazan. 'Sinn, let go of him. I need room. Make the hole bigger. Let go of him – it’s all right – you were right. We're going to get them out.'

'Sinn?' The shouts from below were getting louder. Cuttle, calling up something about a way out. Bottle twisted to call back down. 'Cuttle! We've been found! They're going to dig us out! Let everyone know!'

Sinn's hand released his, withdrew.

The woman spoke again. 'Soldier, move away from the hole – I'm going to use my sword.'
'Captain? Is that you?'

'Aye. Now, move back and cover your eyes – what? Oh, where'd all those children come from? Is that one of Fiddler's squad with them? Get down there, Sinn. There's another way out. Help them.'

The sword-point dug into the concreted brick and stone. Chips danced down.

Cuttle was climbing up from below, grunting. 'We gotta widen this some more, Bottle. That runt who dropped down the hole. We sent Smiles after her. A tunnel, angling back up – and out. A looter's tunnel. The children're all out—'

'Good. Cuttle, it's the captain. The Adjunct, she must have waited for us – sent searchers out to find us.'

'That makes no sense—'

'You're right,' Faradan Sort cut in. 'They've marched, soldiers. It's just me, and Sinn.'

'They left you behind?'

'No, we deserted. Sinn knew – she knew you were still alive, don't ask me how.'

'Her brother's down here,' Cuttle said. 'Corporal Shard.'

'Alive?'

'We think so, Captain. How many days has it been?'

'Three. Four nights if you count the breach. Now, no more questions, and cover your eyes.'

She chopped away at the hole, tugged loose chunks of brick and stone. The dusk air swept in, cool and, despite all the dust, sweet in Bottle's lungs. Faradan Sort began work on one large chunk, and broke her sword. A stream of Koreli curses.

'That your Stormwall sword, Captain? I'm sorry—'

'Don't be an idiot.'

'But your scabbard—'

'Aye, my scabbard. The sword it belonged to got left behind ... in somebody. Now, let me save my breath for this.' And she began chopping away with the broken sword. 'Hood-damned piece of Falari junk—' The huge stone groaned, then slid away, taking the captain with it.

A heavy thump from the ground beyond and below, then more cursing.

Bottle clawed his way into the gap, dragged himself through, then was suddenly tumbling down, landing hard, rolling, winded, onto his stomach.

After a long moment he managed a gasp of air, and he lifted his head – to find himself staring at the captain's boots. Bottle arched, raised a hand and saluted – briefly.

'You managed that better the last time, Bottle.'

'Captain, I'm Smiles—'

'You know, soldier, it was a good thing you assumed half the load I dumped on Smiles's back. If you hadn't done that, well, you likely wouldn't have lived this long—'

He saw her turn, heard a grunted snarl, then one boot lifted, moved out slightly to the side, hovered—

—above Bottle's rat—
—then stamped down – as his hand shot out, knocked the foot aside at the last moment. The captain stumbled, then swore. 'Have you lost your mind—'

Bottle rolled closer to the rat, collected her in both hands and held her against his chest as he settled down onto his back. 'Not this time, Captain. This is **my** rat. She saved our lives.'

'Vile, disgusting creatures.'

'Not her. Not Y'Ghatan.'

Faradan Sort stared down at him. 'She is named Y'Ghatan?'

'Aye. I just decided.'

Cuttle was clambering down. 'Gods, Captain—'

'Quiet, sapper. If you've got the strength left – and you'd better – you need to help the others out.'

'Aye, Captain.' He turned about and began climbing back up.

Still lying on his back, Bottle closed his eyes. He stroked Y'Ghatan's smooth-furred back. *My darling. You're with me, now. Ah, you're hungry – we'll take care of that. Soon you'll be waddling fat again, I promise, and you and your kits will be ... gods, there's more of you, isn't there? No problem. When it comes to your kind, there's never a shortage of food ...*

He realized Smiles was standing over him. Staring down.

He managed a faint, embarrassed smile, wondering how much she'd heard, how much she'd just put together.

'All men are scum.'

*So much for wondering.*

Coughing, crying, babbling, the soldiers were lying or sitting all around Gesler, who stood, trying to make a count – the names, the faces, exhaustion blurred them all together. He saw Shard, with his sister, Sinn, wrapped all around him like a babe, fast asleep, and there was something like shock in the corporal's staring, unseeing eyes. Tulip was nearby – his body was torn, shredded everywhere, but he'd dragged himself through without complaint and now sat on a stone, silent and bleeding.

Crump crouched near the cliff-side, using rocks to pry loose a slab of melted gold and lead, a stupid grin on his ugly, overlong face. And Smiles, surrounded by children – she looked miserable with all the attention, and Gesler saw her staring up at the night sky again and again, and that gesture he well understood.

Bottle had pulled them through. With his rat. **Y'Ghatan.** The sergeant shook his head. Well, why not? *We're all rat-worshippers right now. Oh, right, the roll call ...* Sergeant Cord, with Ebron, Limp and his broken leg. Sergeant Hellian, her jaw swollen in two places, one eye closed up, and blood matting her hair, just now coming round – under the tender ministrations of her corporal, Urb. Tarr, Koryk, Smiles and Cuttle. Tavos Pond, Balgrid, Mayfly, Flashwit, Saltlick, Hanno, Shortnose and Masan Gilani. Bellig Harn, Maybe, Brethless and Touchy. Deadsmell, Galt, Sands and Lobe. The sergeants Thorn Tissy and Balm. Widdershins, Uru Hela, Ramp, Scant and Reem. Throatslitter ... Gesler's gaze swung back to Tarr, Koryk, Smiles and Cuttle.

Hood's *breath.*

'Captain! We've lost two!'

Every head turned.

Corporal Tarr shot to his feet, then staggered like a drunk, spinning to face the cliff-wall.

Balm hissed, 'Fiddler ... and that prisoner! The bastard's killed him and he's hiding back in there! Waiting for
Corabb had dragged the dying man as far as he could, and now both he and the Malazan were done. Crammed tight in a narrowing of the tunnel, the darkness devouring them, and Corabb was not even sure he was going in the right direction. Had they been turned round? He could hear nothing ... no-one. All that dragging, and pushing ... they'd turned round, he was sure of it.

No matter, they weren't going anywhere.

Never again. Two skeletons buried beneath a dead city. No more fitting a barrow for a warrior of the Apocalypse and a Malazan soldier. That seemed just, poetic even. He would not complain, and when he stood at this sergeant's side at Hood's Gate, he would be proud for the company.

So much had changed inside him. He was no believer in causes, not any more. Certainty was an illusion, a lie. Fanaticism was poison in the soul, and the first victim in its inexorable, ever-growing list was compassion. Who could speak of freedom, when one's own soul was bound in chains?

He thought, now, finally, that he understood Toblakai.

And it was all too late. This grand revelation. Thus, I die a wise man, not a fool. Is there any difference? I still die, after all.

No, there is. I can feel it. That difference – I have cast off my chains. I have cast them off!

A low cough, then, 'Corabb?'

'I am here, Malazan.'

'Where? Where is that?'

'In our tomb, alas. I am sorry, all strength has fled. I am betrayed by my own body. I am sorry.'

Silence for a moment, then a soft laugh. 'No matter. I've been unconscious – you should have left me – where are the others?'

'I don't know. I was dragging you. We were left behind. And now, we're lost, and that's that. I am sorry—'

'Enough of that, Corabb. You dragged me? That explains all the bruises. For how long? How far?'

'I do not know. A day, maybe. There was warm air, but then it was cool – it seemed to breathe in and out, past us, but which breath was in and which was out? I do not know. And now, there is no wind.'

'A day? Are you mad? Why did you not leave me?'

'Had I done so, Malazan, your friends would have killed me.'

'Ah, there is that. But, you know, I don't believe you.'

'You are right. It is simple. I could not.'

'All right, that will do.'

Corabb closed his eyes – the effort making no difference. He was probably blind by now. He had heard that prisoners left too long without light in their dungeon cells went blind. Blind before mad, but mad, too, eventually.

And now he heard sounds, drawing nearer ... from somewhere. He'd heard them before, a half-dozen times at least, and for a short while there had been faint shouting. Maybe that had been real. The demons of panic come to take the others, one by one. 'Sergeant, are you named Strings or Fiddler?'

'Strings for when I'm lying, Fiddler for when I'm telling the truth.'
Ah, is that a Malazan trait, then? Strange—'

'No, not a trait. Mine, maybe.'

'And how should I name you?'

'Fiddler.'

'Very well.' A welcome gift. Fiddler. I was thinking. Here I am, trapped. And yet, it is only now, I think, that I have finally escaped my prison. Funny, isn't it?'

'Damned hilarious, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. What is that sound?'

'You hear it, too?' Corabb held his breath, listened. Drawing closer—

Then something touched his forehead.

Bellowing, Corabb tried to twist away.

'Wait! Damn you, I said wait!'

Fiddler called out, 'Gesler?'

'Aye, calm down your damned friend here, will you?'

Heart pounding, Corabb settled back. 'We were lost, Malazan. I am sorry—'

'Be quiet! Listen to me. You're only about seventy paces from a tunnel, leading out – we're all out, you understand me? Bottle got us out. His rat brought us through. There was a rock fall blocking you up ahead – I've dug through—'

'You crawled back in?' Fiddler demanded. 'Gesler—'

'Believe me, it was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Now I know – or I think I know – what Truth went through, running into that palace. Abyss take me, I'm still shaking.'

'Lead us on, then,' Corabb said, reaching back to grasp Fiddler's harness once more.

Gesler made to move past him. 'I can do that—'

'No. I have dragged him this far.'

'Fid?'

'For Hood's sake, Gesler, I've never been in better hands.'
Sarkanos, Ivindonos and Ganath stood looking down on the heaped corpses, the strewn pieces of flesh and
fragments of bone. A field of battle knows only lost dreams and the ghosts clutch futilely at the ground,
remembering naught but the last place of their lives, and the air is sullen now that the clangour is past, and the
last moans of the dying have dwindled into silence.

While this did not belong to them, they yet stood. Of Jaghut, one can never know their thoughts, nor even
their aspirations, but they were heard to speak, then.

'All told,' said Ganath. 'This sordid tale here has ended, and there is no-one left to heave the standard high,
and proclaim justice triumphant.'

'This is a dark plain,' said Ivindonos, 'and I am mindful of such things, the sorrow untold, unless witnessed.'

'Not mindful enough,' said Sarkanos.

'A bold accusation,' said Ivindonos, his tusks bared in anger. 'Tell me what I am blind to. Tell me what
greater sorrow exists than what we see before us.'

And Sarkanos made reply, 'Darker plains lie beyond.'

There were times, Captain Ganoes Paran reflected, when a man could believe in nothing. No path taken could
alter the future, and the future remained ever unknown, even by the gods. Sensing those currents, the tumult
that lay ahead, achieved little except the loss of restful sleep, and a growing suspicion that all his efforts to
shape that future were naught but conceit.

He had pushed the horses hard, staying well clear of villages and hamlets where the Mistress stalked, sowing
her deadly seeds, gathering to herself the power of poisoned blood and ten thousand deaths by her hand. Before
long, he knew, that toll would rise tenfold. Yet for all his caution, the stench of death was inescapable, arriving
again and again as if from nowhere, and no matter how great the distance between him and inhabited areas.

Whatever Poliel's need, it was vast, and Paran was fearful, for he could not understand the game she played
here.

Back in Darujhistan, ensconced within the Finnest House, this land known as Seven Cities had seemed so far
from the centre of things – or what he believed would soon become the centre of things. And it had been, in
part, that mystery that had set him on this path, seeking to discover how what happened here would become
enfolded into the greater scheme. Assuming, of course, that such a greater scheme existed.

Equally as likely, he allowed, this war among the gods would implode into a maelstrom of chaos. There had
been need, he had once been told, for a Master of the Deck of Dragons. There had been need, he had been told,
for him. Paran had begun to suspect that, even then, it was already too late. This web was growing too fast, too
snarled, for any single mind to fathom.

 Except maybe Kruppe, the famed Eel of Darujhistan ... gods, I wish he was here, in my place, right now. Why
wasn't he made the Master of the Deck of Dragons? Or maybe that incorrigible aplomb was naught but
bravado, behind which the real Kruppe cowered in terror.

 Imagine Raest's thoughts ... Paran smiled, recollecting. It had been early morning when that little fat man
knocked on the door of the Finnest House, flushed of face and beaming up at the undead Jaghut Tyrant who
opened it wide and stared down upon him with pitted eyes. Then, hands fluttering and proclaiming something
about a crucial meeting, Kruppe somehow slid past the Azath guardian, waddling into the main hall and sinking with a delighted sigh of contentment into the plush chair beside the fireplace.

An unexpected guest for breakfast; it seemed even Raest could do nothing about it. Or would not. The Jaghut had been typically reticent on the subject.

And so Paran had found himself seated opposite the famed Defier of Caladan Brood – this corpulent little man in his faded waistcoat who had confounded the most powerful ascendants on Genabackis – and watched him eat. And eat. While somehow, at the same time, talking nonstop.

'Kruppe knows the sad dilemma, yes indeed, of sad befuddled Master. Twice sad? Nay, thrice sad! Four times sad – ah, how usage of the dread word culminates! Cease now, Sir Kruppe, lest we find ourselves weeping without surcease! Lifting one greasy finger. 'Ah, but Master wonders, does he not, how can one man such as Kruppe know all these things? What things, you would also ask, given the chance, said chance Kruppe hastens to intercept with suitable answer. Had Kruppe such an answer, that is. But lo! He does not, and is that not the true wonder of it all?'

'For Hood's sake,' Paran cut in – and got no further.

'Yes indeed! For Hood's sake indeed, oh, you are brilliant and so worthy of the grand title of Master of the Deck of Dragons and Kruppe's most trusted friend! Hood, at the very centre of things, oh yes, and that is why you must hasten, forthwith, to Seven Cities.'

Paran stared, dumbfounded, wondering what detail in that barrage of words he had missed. 'What?'

'The gods, dear precious friend of Kruppe's! They are at war, yes? Terrible thing, war. Terrible things, gods. The two, together, ah, most terribler!'

'Terri— what? Oh, never mind.'

'Kruppe never does.'

'Why Seven Cities?'

'Even the gods cast shadows, Master of the Deck. But what do shadows cast?'

'I don't know. Gods?'

Kruppe's expression grew pained. 'Oh my, a nonsensical reply. Kruppe's faith in dubious friend lies shaking. No, shaken. Not lies, is. See how Kruppe shakes? No, not gods. How can gods be cast? Do not answer that – such is the nature and unspoken agreement regards rhetoric. Now, where was Kruppe? Oh yes. Most terrible crimes are in the offing off in Seven Cities. Eggs have been laid and schemes have hatched! One particularly large shell is about to be broken, and will have been broken by the time you arrive, which means it is as good as broken right now so what are you waiting for? In fact, foolish man, you are already too late, or will be, by then, and if not then, then soon, in the imminent sense of the word. Soon, then, you must go, despite it being too late – I suggest you leave tomorrow morning and make use of warrens and other nefarious paths of inequity to hasten your hopeless quest to arrive. On time, and in time, and in due time you will indeed arrive, and then you must walk the singular shadow – between, dare Kruppe utter such dread words – between life and death, the wavy, blurry metaphor so callously and indifferently trespassed by things that should know better. Now, you have worn out Kruppe's ears, distended Kruppe's largesse unto bursting his trouser belt, and heretofore otherwise exhausted his vast intellect.' He rose with a grunt, then patted his tummy. 'A mostly acceptable repast, although Kruppe advises that you inform your cook that the figs were veritably mummified – from the Jaghut's own store, one must assume, yes, hmm?'

There had been some sense, Paran had eventually concluded, within that quagmire of verbosity. Enough to frighten him, in any case, leading him to a more intense examination of the Deck of Dragons. Wherein the chaos was more pronounced than it ever had been before. And there, in its midst, the glimmer of a path, a way through – perhaps simply imagined, an illusion – but he would have to try, although the thought terrified him.

He was not the man for this. He was stumbling, halfblind, within a vortex of converging powers, and he
found he was struggling to maintain even the illusion of control.

Seeing Apsalar again had been an unexpected gift. A girl no longer, yet, it appeared, as deadly as ever. Nonetheless, something like humanity had revealed itself, there in her eyes every now and then. He wondered what she had gone through since Cotillion had been banished from her outside Darujhistan – beyond what she had been willing to tell him, that is, and he wondered if she would complete her journey, to come out the other end, reborn one more time.

He rose in his stirrups to stretch his legs, scanning the south for the telltale shimmer that would announce his destination. Nothing but heat-haze yet, and rugged, treeless hills rising humped on the pan. Seven Cities was a hot, blasted land, and he decided that even without plague, he didn't like it much.

One of those hills suddenly vanished in a cloud of dust and flying debris, then a thundering boom drummed through the ground, startling the horses. As he struggled to calm them – especially his own mount, which had taken this opportunity to renew its efforts to unseat him, bucking and kicking – he sensed something else rolling out from the destroyed mound.

Omtose Phellack.

Settling his horse as best he could, Paran collected the reins and rode at a slow, jumpy canter towards the ruined hill.

As he neared, he could hear crashing sounds from within the barrow – for a barrow it was – and when he was thirty paces distant, part of a desiccated body was flung from the hole, skidding in a clatter through the rubble. It came to a stop, then one arm lifted tremulously, dropping back down a moment later. A bone-helmed skull flew into view, ropes of hair twisting about, to bounce and roll in the dust.

Paran reined in, watching as a tall, gaunt figure climbed free of the barrow, slowly straightening. Grey-green skin, trailing dusty cobwebs, wearing a silver-clasped harness and baldric of iron mail from which hung knives in copper scabbards – the various metals blackened or green with verdigris. Whatever clothing had once covered the figure's body had since rotted away.

A Jaghut woman, her long black hair drawn into a single tail that reached down to the small of her back. Her tusks were silver-sheathed and thus black. She slowly looked round, her gaze finding and settling on him. Vertical pupils set in amber studied Paran from beneath a heavy brow. He watched her frown, then she asked, 'What manner of creature are you?'

'A well-mannered one,' Paran replied, attempting a smile. She had spoken in the Jaghut tongue and he had understood ... somehow. One of the many gifts granted by virtue of being the Master? Or long proximity with Raest and his endless muttering? Either way, Paran surprised himself by replying in the same language.

At which her frown deepened. 'You speak my tongue as would an Imass ... had any Imass bothered to learn it. Or a Jaghut whose tusks had been pulled.'

Paran glanced over at the partial corpse lying nearby. 'An Imass like that one?'

She drew her thin lips back in what he took to be a smile. 'A guardian left behind – it had lost its vigilance. Undead have a tendency towards boredom, and carelessness.'

'T'lan Imass.'

'If others are near, they will come now. I have little time.'

'T'lan Imass? None, Jaghut. None anywhere close.'

'You are certain?'

'I am. Reasonably. You have freed yourself ... why?'

'Freedom needs an excuse?' She brushed dust and webs from her lean body, then faced west. 'One of my
rituals has been shattered. I must needs repair it.'

Paran thought about that, then asked, 'A binding ritual? Something, or someone was imprisoned, and, like you just now, it seeks freedom?'

She looked displeased with the comparison. 'Unlike the entity I imprisoned, I have no interest in conquering the world.'

Oh. 'I am Ganoes Paran.'

'Ganath. You look pitiful, like a malnourished Imass – are you here to oppose me?'

He shook his head. 'I was but passing by, Ganath. I wish you good fortune—'

She suddenly turned, stared eastward, head cocking.

'Something?' he asked. T'lan Imass?'

She glanced at him. 'I am not certain. Perhaps ... nothing. Tell me, is there a sea south of here?'

'Was there one when you were ... not yet in your barrow?'

'Yes.'

Paran smiled. 'Ganath, there is indeed a sea just south of here, and it is where I am headed.'

'Then I shall travel with you. Why do you journey there?'

'To talk with some people. And you? I thought you were in a hurry to repair that ritual?'

'I am, yet I find a more pressing priority.'

'And that is?'

'The need for a bath.'

Too bloated to fly, the vultures scattered with outraged cries, hopping and waddling with wings crooked, leaving the once-human feast exposed in their wake. Apsalar slowed her steps, not sure whether she wanted to continue walking down this main street, although the raucous chattering and bickering of feeding vultures sounded from the side avenues as well, leading her to suspect that no alternative route was possible.

The villagers had died suffering – there was no mercy in this plague, for it had carved a long, tortured path to Hood's Gate. Swollen glands, slowly closing the throat, making it impossible to eat solid food, and narrowing the air passages, making every breath drawn agony. And, in the gut, gases distending the stomach. Blocked from any means of escape, they eventually burst the stomach lining, allowing the victim's own acids to devour them from within. These, alas, were the final stages of the disease. Before then, there was fever, so hot that brains were cooked in the skull, driving the person half-mad – a state from which, even were the disease somehow halted then and there – there was no recovery. Eyes wept mucus, ears bled, flesh grew gelatinous at the joints – this was the Mistress in all her sordid glory.

The two skeletal reptiles accompanying Apsalar had sprinted ahead, entertaining themselves by frightening the vultures and bursting through buzzing masses of flies. Now they scampered back, unmindful of the blackened, half-eaten corpses they clambered over.

'Not-Apsalar! You are too slow!'

'No, Telorast,' cried Curdle, 'not slow enough!'

'Yes, not slow enough! We like this village – we want to play!'

Leading her placid horse, Apsalar began picking her way down the street. A score of villagers had crawled
out here for some unknown reason, perhaps in some last, pathetic attempt to escape what could not be escaped. They had died clawing and fighting each other. 'You are welcome to stay as long as you like,' she said to the two creatures.

'That cannot be,' Telorast said. 'We are your guardians, after all. Your sleepless, ever-vigilant sentinels. We shall stand guard over you no matter how diseased and disgusting you become.'

'And then we'll pick out your eyes!'

'Curdle! Don't tell her that!'

'Well, we'll wait until she's sleeping, of course. Thrashing in fever.'

'Exactly. She'll want us to by then, anyway.'

'I know, but we've walked through two villages now and she still isn't sick. I don't understand. All the other mortals are dead or dying, what makes her so special?'

'Chosen by the usurpers of Shadow – that's why she can just saunter through with her nose in the air. We may have to wait before we can pick out her eyes.'

Apsalar stepped past the heap of corpses. Just ahead, the village came to an abrupt end and beyond stood the charred remnants of three outlying buildings. A crowhaunted cemetery surmounted a nearby low hill where stood a lone gulindha tree. The black birds crowded the branches in sullen silence. A few makeshift platforms attested to some early efforts at ceremony to attend the dead, but clearly that had been short-lived. A dozen white goats stood in the tree's shade, watching Apsalar as she continued on down the road, flanked by the skeletons of Telorast and Curdle.

Something had happened, far to the north and west. No, she could be more precise than that. Y'Ghatan. There had been a battle ... and the committing of a terrible crime. Y'Ghatan's lust for Malazan blood was legendary, and Apsalar feared that it had drunk deep once more.

In every land, there were places that saw battle again and again, an endless succession of slaughter, and more often than not such places held little strategic value in any greater scheme, or were ultimately indefensible. As if the very rocks and soil mocked every conqueror foolish enough to lay claim to them. Cotillion's thoughts, these. He had never been afraid to recognize futility, and the world's pleasure in defying human grandiosity.

She passed the last of the burned-out buildings, relieved to have left their stench behind – rotting bodies she was used to, but something of that charred reek slipped beneath her senses like a premonition. It was nearing dusk. Apsalar climbed back into the saddle and gathered up the reins.

She would attempt the warren of Shadow, even though she already knew it was too late – something had happened at Y'Ghatan; at the very least, she could look upon the wounds left behind and pick up the trail of the survivors. If any existed.

'She dreams of death,' Telorast said. 'And now she's angry.'

'With us?'

'Yes. No. Yes. No.'

'Ah, she's opened a warren! Shadow! Lifeless trail winding through lifeless hills, we shall perish from ennui! Wait, don't leave us!'

They climbed out of the pit to find a banquet awaiting them. A long table, four high-backed Untan-style chairs, a candelabra in the centre bearing four thick-stemmed beeswax candles, the golden light flickering down on silver plates heaped with Malazan delicacies. Oily santos fish from the shoals off Kartool, baked with butter and spices in clay; strips of marinated venison, smelling of almonds in the northern D'avorian style; grouse from the Seti plains stuffed with bull-berries and sage; baked gourds and fillets of snake from Dal Hon;
assorted braised vegetables and four bottles of wine: a Malaz Island white from the Paran Estates, warmed rice
wine from Itko Kan, a full-bodied red from Gris, and the orange-tinted belack wine from the Napan Isles.

Kalam stood staring at the bounteous apparition, as Stormy, with a grunt, walked over, boots puffing in the
dust, and sat down in one of the chairs, reaching for the Grisian red.

'Well,' Quick Ben said, dusting himself off, 'this is nice. Who's the fourth chair for, you think?'

Kalam looked up at the looming bulk of the sky keep. 'I'd rather not think about that.'

Snorting sounds from Stormy as he launched into the venison strips.

'Do you suspect,'Quick Ben ventured as he sat down, 'there is some significance to the selection provided
us?' He collected an alabaster goblet and poured himself a helping of the Paran white. 'Or is it the sheer
decadence that he wants to rub our noses in?'

'My nose is just fine,' Stormy said, tipping his head to one side and spitting out a bone. 'Gods, I could eat all
of this myself! Maybe I will at that!'

Sighing, Kalam joined them at the table. 'All right, at least this gives us time to talk about things.' He saw the
wizard glance suspiciously at Stormy. 'Relax, Quick, I doubt Stormy can hear us above his own chewing.'

'Hah!' the Falari laughed, spitting fragments across the table, one landing with a plop in the wizard's goblet.
'As if I give a Hood's toenail about all your self-important preening! You two want to talk yourselves blue, go
right ahead – I won't waste my time listening.'

Quick Ben found a silver meat-spear and delicately picked the piece of venison from the goblet. He took a
tentative sip, made a face, and poured the wine away. As he refilled the goblet, he said, 'Well, I'm not entirely
convinced Stormy here is irrelevant to our conversation.'

The red-bearded soldier looked up, small eyes narrowing with sudden unease. 'I couldn't be more irrelevant if
I tried,' he said in a growl, reaching again for the bottle of red.

Kalam watched the man's throat bob as he downed mouthful after mouthful.

'It's that sword,' said Quick Ben. 'That T'lan Imass sword. How did you come by it, Stormy?'

'Huh, santos. In Falar only poor people eat those ugly fish, and the Kartoolii call it a delicacy! Idiots.' He
collected one and began scooping the red, oily flesh from the clay shell. 'It was given to me,' he said, 'for
safekeeping.'

'By a T'lan Imass?' Kalam asked.

'Aye.'

'So it plans on coming back for it?'

'If it can, aye.'

'Why would a T'lan Imass give you its sword? They generally use them, a lot.'

'Not where it was headed, assassin. What's this? Some kind of bird?'

'Yes,' said Quick Ben. 'Grouse. So, where was the T'lan Imass headed, then?'

'Grouse. What's that, some kind of duck? It went into a big wound in the sky, to seal it.'

The wizard leaned back. 'Don't expect it any time soon, then.'

'Well, it took the head of a Tiste Andii with it, and that head was still alive – Truth was the only one who saw
that – the other T'lan Imass didn't, not even the bonecaster. Small wings – surprised the thing could fly at all.
Not very well, hah, since someone caught it!' He finished the Grisian and tossed away the bottle. It thumped in
the thick dust. Stormy then reached for the Napan belack. 'You know what's the problem with you two? I'll tell ya. I'll tell ya the problem. You both think too much, and you think that by thinking so much you get somewhere with all that thinking, only you don't. Look, it's simple. Something you don't like gets in your way you kill it, and once you kill it you can stop thinking about it and that's that.'

'Interesting philosophy, Stormy,' said Quick Ben. 'But what if that "something" is too big, or too many, or nastier than you?'

'Then you cut it down to size, wizard.'

'And if you can't?'

'Then you find someone else who can. Maybe they end up killing each other, and that's that.' He waved the half-empty bottle of belack. 'You think you can make all sortsa plans? Idiots. I squat down and shit on your plans!'

Kalam smiled at Quick Ben. 'Stormy's onto something there, maybe.'

The wizard scowled. 'What, squatting—'

'No, finding someone else to do the dirty work for us. We're old hands at that, Quick, aren't we?'

'Only, it gets harder.' Quick Ben gazed up at the sky keep. 'All right, let me think—'

'Oh we're in trouble now!'

'Stormy,' said Kalam, 'you're drunk.'

'I ain't drunk. Two bottlesa wine don't get me drunk. Not Stormy, they don't.'

'The question,' said the wizard, 'is this. Who or what defeated the K'Chain Che'Malle the first time round? And then, is that powerful force still alive? Once we work out the answers to those—'

'Like I said,' the Falari growled, 'you talk and talk and talk and you ain't getting a damned thing.'

Quick Ben settled back, rubbing at his eyes. 'Fine, then. Go on, Stormy, let's hear your brilliance.'

'First, you're assuming those lizard things are your enemy in the firs' place. Third, if the legends are true, those lizards defeated themselves, so what in Hood's soiled trousers are you panicking 'bout? Second, the Adjunct wanted to know all 'bout them and where they're going and all that. Well, the sky keeps ain't going nowhere, and we already know what's inside 'em, so we done our job. You idiots want to break into one – what for? You ain't got a clue what for. And five, you gonna finish that white wine, wizard? 'Cause I ain't touching that rice piss.'

Quick Ben slowly sat forward and slid the bottle towards Stormy.

No better gesture of defeat was possible, Kalam decided. 'Finish up, everyone,' he said, 'so we can get outa this damned warren and back to the Fourteenth.'

'Something else,' said Quick Ben, 'I wanted to talk about.'

'So go ahead,' Stormy said expansively, waving a grouse leg. 'Stormy's got your answers, yes he does.'

'I've heard stories ... a Malazan escort, clashing with a fleet of strange ships off the Geni coast. From the descriptions of the foe, they sound like Tiste Edur. Stormy, that ship of yours, what was it called?'

'The Silanda. Dead grey-skinned folk, all cut down on the deck, and the ship's captain, speared right through, pinned to his Hood-damned chair in his cabin – gods below, the arm that threw that ...'

'And Tiste Andii ... heads.'

'Bodies were below, manning the sweeps.'
"Those grey-skinned folk were Tiste Edur," Quick Ben said. 'I don't know, maybe I shouldn't put the two together, but something about them makes me nervous. Where did that Tiste Edur fleet come from?"

Kalam grunted, then said, 'It's a big world, Quick. They could've come from anywhere, blown off course by some storm, or on an exploratory mission of some kind.'

'More like raiding,' Stormy said. 'If they attacked right off' like they did. Anyway, where we found the Silanda in the first place – there'd been a battle there, too. Against Tiste Andii. Messy.'

Quick Ben sighed and rubbed his eyes again. 'Near Coral, during the Pannion War, the body of a Tiste Edur was found. It had come up from deep water.' He shook his head. 'I've a feeling we haven't seen the last of them.'

'The Shadow Realm,' Kalam said. 'It was theirs, once, and now they want it back.'

The wizard's gaze narrowed on the assassin. 'Cotillion told you this?'

Kalam shrugged.

'It keeps coming back to Shadowthrone, doesn't it? No wonder I'm nervous. That slimy, slippery bastard—'

'Oh Hood's balls,' Stormy groaned, 'give me that rice piss, if you're gonna go on and on. Shadowthrone ain't scary. Shadowthrone's just Ammanas, and Ammanas is just Kellanved. Just like Cotillion's Dancer. Hood knows, we knew the Emperor well enough. And Dancer. They up to something? No surprise. They were always up to something, from the very start. I tell you both right now,' he paused for a swig of rice wine, made a face, then continued, 'when all the dust's settled, they'll be shining like pearls atop a dungheap. Gods, Elder Gods, dragons, undead, spirits and the scary empty face of the Abyss itself – they won't none a them stand a chance. You want to worry about Tiste Edur, wizard? Go ahead. Maybe they ruled Shadow once, but Shadowthrone'll take 'em down. Him and Dancer.' He belched. 'An' you know why? I'll tell you why. They never fight fair. That's why.'

Kalam looked over at the empty chair, and his eyes slowly narrowed.

Stumbling, crawling, or dragging themselves along through the bed of white ash, they all came to where Bottle sat, the sky a swirl of stars overhead. Saying nothing, not one of those soldiers, but each in turn managing one gentle gesture – reaching out and with one finger, touching the head of Y'Ghatan the rat.

Tender, with great reverence – until she bit that finger, and the hand would be snatched back with a hissed curse.

One after another, Y'Ghatan bit them all.

She was hungry, Bottle explained, and pregnant. So he explained. Or tried to, but no-one was really listening. It seemed that they didn't even care, that her bite was part of the ritual, now, a price of blood, the payment of sacrifice.

He told those who would listen that she had bitten him too.

But she hadn't. Not her. Not him. Their souls were inextricably bound, now. And things like that were complicated, profound even. He studied the creature where it was settled in his lap. Profound, yes, that was the word.

He stroked her head. *My dear rat. My sweet— ow! Damn you! Bitch!*  

Black, glittering eyes looked up at him, whiskered nose twitching.

*Vile, disgusting creatures.*

He set the creature down and it could wander over a precipice for all he cared. Instead, the rat snuggled up against his right foot and curled into sleep. Bottle looked over at the makeshift camp, at the array of dim faces he could see here and there. No-one had lit a fire. Funny, that, in a sick way.
They had come through it. Bottle still found it difficult to believe. And Gesler had gone back in, only to return a while later. Followed by Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, the warrior dragging Strings into view, then himself collapsing. Bottle could hear the man's snores that had been going on uninterrupted half the night.

The sergeant was alive. The honey smeared into his wounds seemed to have delivered healing to match High Denul, making it obvious that it had been anything but ordinary honey – as if the strange visions weren't proof enough of that. Still, even that was unable to replace the blood Strings had lost, and that blood loss should have killed him. Yet now the sergeant slept, too weak to manage much else, but alive.

Bottle wished he was as tired ... in that way, at least, the kind that beckoned warm and welcoming. Instead of this spiritual exhaustion that left his nerves frayed, images returning again and again of their nightmare journey among the buried bones of Y'Ghatan. And with them, the bitter taste of those moments when all seemed lost, hopeless.

Captain Faradan Sort and Sinn had stashed away a supply of water-casks and food-packs, which they had since retrieved, but for Bottle no amount of water could wash the taste of smoke and ashes from his mouth. And there was something else that burned still within him. The Adjunct had abandoned them, forcing the captain and Sinn to desert. True enough, it was only reasonable to assume no-one had been left alive. He knew his feeling was irrational, yet it gnawed at him nonetheless.

The captain had talked about the plague, sweeping towards them from the east, and the need to keep the army well ahead of it. The Adjunct had waited as long as she could. Bottle knew all that. Still ...

'We're dead, you know.'

He looked over at Koryk, who sat cross-legged nearby, a child sleeping beside him. 'If we're dead,' Bottle said, 'why do we feel so awful?'

'As far as the Adjunct's concerned. We're dead. We can just ... leave.'

'And go where, Koryk? Poliel stalks Seven Cities—'

'Ain't no plague gonna kill us. Not now.'

'You think we're immortal or something?' Bottle asked. He shook his head. 'We survived this, sure, but that doesn't mean a damned thing. It sure as Hood doesn't mean that the next thing to come along won't kill us right and quick. Maybe you're feeling immune – to anything and everything the world can throw at us, now. But, believe me, we're not.'

'Better that than anything else,' Koryk muttered.

Bottle thought about the soldier's words. 'You think some god decided to use us? Pulled us out for a reason?'

'Either that, Bottle, or your rat's a genius.'

'The rat was four legs and a good nose, Koryk. Her soul was bound. By me. I was looking through her eyes, sensing everything she sensed—'

'And did she dream when you dreamed?'

'Well, I don't know—'

'Did she run away, then?'

'No, but—'

'So she waited around. For you to wake back up. So you could imprison her soul again.'

Bottle said nothing.

'Any god tries to use me,' Koryk said in a low voice, 'it'll regret it.'
'With all those fetishes you wear,' Bottle noted, 'I'd have thought you'd be delighted at the attention.'

'You're wrong. What I wear ain't for seeking blessings.'

'Then what are they?'

'Wards.'

'All of them?'

Koryk nodded. 'They make me invisible. To gods, spirits, demons ...'
Bottle studied the soldier through the gloom. 'Well, maybe they don't work.'

'Depends,' he replied.

'On what?'

'Whether we're dead or not.'

Smiles laughed from nearby. 'Koryk's lost his mind. No surprise, it being so small, and things being so dark in there ...'

'Not like ghosts and all that,' Koryk said in a sneering tone. 'You think like a ten-year-old, Smiles.'

Bottle winced.

Something skittered off a rock close to Koryk and the soldier started. 'What in Hood's name?'

'That was a knife,' Bottle said, having felt it whip past him. 'Amazing, she saved one for you.'

'More than one,' Smiles said. 'And Koryk, I wasn't aiming for your leg.'

'I told you you weren't immune,' Bottle said.

'I'm – never mind.'

*I'm still alive, you were going to say. Then, wisely, decided not to.*

Gesler crouched down in front of the captain. 'We're a hairless bunch,' he said, 'but otherwise pretty well mending. Captain, I don't know what made you believe in Sinn, enough to run from the army, but I'm damned glad you did.'

'You were all under my command,' she said. 'Then you got too far ahead of me. I did my best to find you, but the smoke, the flames – all too much.' She looked away. 'I didn't want to leave it at that.'

'How many did the legion lose?' Gesler asked.

She shrugged. 'Maybe two thousand. Soldiers were still dying. We were trapped, Fist Keneb and Baralta and about eight hundred, on the wrong side of the breach – until Sinn pushed the fire back – don't ask me how. They say she's a High Mage of some kind. There was nothing addled about her that night, Sergeant, and I didn't think she was addled when she tried getting back into the city.'

Nodding, Gesler was silent for a moment, then he rose. 'I wish I could sleep ... and it looks like I'm not alone in that. I wonder why that is ...'

'The stars, Sergeant,' said Faradan Sort. 'They're glittering down.'

'Aye, might be that and nothing more.'

'Nothing more? I would think, more than enough.'
'Aye.' He looked down at the small bite on his right index finger. 'All for a damned rat, too.'

'All of you fools are probably infected with plague, now.'

He started, then smiled. 'Let the bitch try.'

Balm rubbed the last crusted mud from his face, then scowled over at his corporal. 'You, Deadsmell, you think I didn't hear you praying and gibbering down there? You ain't fooled me about nothing worth fooling about.'

The man, leaning against a rock, kept his eyes closed as he replied, 'Sergeant, you keep trying, but we know. We all know.'

'You all know what?'

'Why you're talking and talking and still talking.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You're glad to be alive, Sergeant. And you're glad your squad's made it through in one piece, the only one barring Fid's, and maybe Hellian's, as far as I can tell. We were charmed and that's all there was to it. Damned charmed, and you still can't believe it. Well, neither can we, all right?'

Balm spat into the dust. 'Listen to you mewling on and on. Sentimental tripe, all of it. I'm wondering who cursed me so that I'm still stuck with all of you. Fiddler I can understand. He's a Bridgeburner. And gods run when they see a Bridgeburner. But you, you ain't nobody, and that's what I don't get. In fact, if I did get it ...'

Urb. He's as bad as the priest who disappeared. The once-priest, what was his name again? What did he look like? Nothing like Urb, that's for sure. But just as treacherous, treasonous, just as rotten and vile as whatever his name was.

He ain't my corporal no more, that's for sure. I want to kill him ... oh gods, my head aches. My jaw ... my teeth all loose.

Captain says she needs more sergeants. Well, she can have him, and whatever squad he ends up with has my prayers and pity. That's for sure. Said there were spiders and maybe there were and maybe I wasn't conscious so's I couldn't go crazy, which maybe I woulda done, but that don't change one truth, and that's for sure as sure can be that they crawled on me. All over me – I can still feel where their little sticky pointy legs dug into my skin. All over. Everywhere. And he just let 'em do it.

Maybe captain's got a bottle of something. Maybe if I call her over and talk real sweet, real sane and reasonable, maybe then they'd untie me. I won't kill Urb. I promise. You can have him, Captain. That's what I'll say. And she'll hesitate – I would – but then nod – the idiot – and cut these ropes. And hand me a bottle and I'll finish it. Finish it and everybody'll say, hey, it's all right, then. She's back to normal.

And that's when I'll go for his throat. With my teeth – no, they're loose, can't use 'em for that. Find a knife, that's what I have to do. Or a sword. I could trade the bottle for a sword. I did it the other way round, didn't I? Half the bottle. I'll drink the other half. Half a bottle, half a sword. A knife. Half a bottle for a knife. Which I'll stick in his throat, then trade back, for the other half of the bottle – if I'm quick that should work fine. I get the knife and the whole bottle.

But first, she should untie me. That's only fair.

I'm fine, as everyone can see. Peaceful, thoughtful—

'Sergeant?'

'What is it, Urb?'

'I think you still want to kill me.'
'What makes you say that?'

'The way you growl and gnash your teeth, I guess.'

_Not me, that's for sure._

_Oh, that's why my teeth still hurt so. I've made them even looser with all that gnashing. Gods, I used to dream stuff like this, my teeth all coming loose. The bastard punched me. No different from that man who disappeared, what was his name again?_

Flashwit levered her bulk further down in the soft bed her weight had impressed in the sand. 'I wish,' she said.

Mayfly pursed her lips, then adjusted the nose she'd had broken more times than she could count. Moving it around made clicking sounds that she found, for some reason, vaguely satisfying. 'You wish what?'

'I wish I knew things, I guess.'

'What things?'

'Well, listen to Bottle there. And Gesler, and Deadsmell. They're smart. They talk about things and all that other stuff. That's what I wish.'

'Yeah, well, all those brains are goin' t'waste though, ain't they?'

'What do you mean?'

Mayfly snorted. 'You and me, Flashwit, we're heavy infantry, right? We plant our feet and we make the stand, and it don't matter what it's for. None a that don't matter.'

'But Bottle—'

'Waste, Flashwit. They're soldiers, for Treach's sake. _Soldiers._ So who needs brains to soldier? They just get in the way of soldierin' and it's no good things gettin' in the way. They figure things out and that gives 'em opinions and then maybe they don't want t'fight as much no more.'

'Why wouldn't they want to fight no more 'cause of 'pinions?'

'It's simple, Flashwit. Trust me. If soldiers thought too much about what they're doin', they wouldn't fight no more.'

'So how come I'm so tired, anyway, only I can't sleep?'

'That's simple, too.'

'It is?'

'Yeah, an' it ain't the stars neither. We're waitin' for the sun to come up. We all want to see that sun, because it was looking like we'd never see it no more.'

'Yeah.' A long contemplative silence, then, 'I wish.'

'Now what do you wish?'

'Only, that I was smart as you, Mayfly. You're so smart you got no 'pinions and that's pretty smart an' it makes me wonder if you ain't goin' t'waste being a heavy an' that. A soljer.'

'I ain't smart, Flashwit. Trust me on that, an' you know how I know?'

'No, how?'

'Cause ... down there ... you an' me, an' Saltlick an' Shortnose an' Uru Hela an' Hanno, us heavies. We didn't
get scared, not one of us, and that's how I know.'

'It wasn't scary. Jus' dark, an' it seemed t'go on for ever an' waitin' for Bottle to get us through, well that got boring sometimes, you know.'

'Right, and did the fire get you scared?'

'Well, burnin' hurt, didn't it?'

'Sure did.'

'I didn't like that.'

'Me neither.'

'So, what do you think we're all gonna do now?'

'The Fourteenth? Don't know, save the world, maybe.'

'Yeah. Maybe. I'd like that.'

'Me too.'

'Hey, is that the sun comin' up?'

'Well, it's east where it's getting brighter, so I guess, yeah, it must be.'

'Great. I bin waiting for this. I think.'

Cuttle found sergeants Thorn Tissy, Cord and Gesler gathered near the base of the slope leading up to the west road. It seemed they weren't much interested in the rising sun. 'You're all looking serious,' the sapper said.

'We got a walk ahead of us,' Gesler said, 'that's all.'

'The Adjunct had no choice,' Cuttle said. 'That was a firestorm – there was no way she could have known there'd be survivors – digging under it all that way.'

Gesler glanced at the other two sergeants, then nodded. 'It's all right, Cuttle. We know. We're not contemplating murder or anything.'

Cuttle turned to face the camp. 'Some of the soldiers are thinking wrong on all of this.'

'Aye,' said Cord, 'but we'll put 'em straight on it before this day's out.'

'Good. Thing is,' he hesitated, turning back to the sergeants, 'I've been thinking on that. Who in Hood's name is going to believe us? More like we did our own deal with the Queen of Dreams. After all, we got one of Leoman's officers with us. And now, with the captain and Sinn going and getting themselves outlawed, well, it could be seen we're all traitors or something.'

'We made no deal with the Queen of Dreams,' Cord said.

'Are you sure about that?'

All three sergeants looked at him then.

Cuttle shrugged. 'Bottle, he's a strange one. Maybe he did make some deal, with somebody. Maybe the Queen of Dreams, maybe some other god.'

'He'd have told us, wouldn't he?' Gesler asked.

'Hard to say. He's a sneaky bastard. I'm getting nervous about that damned rat biting every one of us, like it
knew what it was doing and we didn't.'

'Just a wild rat,' said Thorn Tissy. 'Ain't nobody's pet, so why wouldn't it bite?'

Gesler said, 'Listen, Cuttle, sounds like you're just finding new things to worry about. What's the point of doing that? What we've got ahead of us right now is a long walk, and us with no armour, no weapons and virtually no clothing – the sun's gonna bake people crisp.'

'We need to find a village,' Cord said, 'and hope to Hood plague ain't found it first.'

'There you go, Cuttle,' Gesler said, grinning. 'Now you got another thing to worry about.'

Paran began to suspect that his horse knew what was coming: nostrils flaring, tossing its head as it shied and stamped, fighting the reins all the way down the trail. The freshwater sea was choppy, silty waves in the bay rolling up to batter at sun-bleached limestone crags. Dead desert bushes poked skeletal limbs out of the muddy shallows and insects swarmed everywhere.

'This is not the ancient sea,' Ganath said as she approached the shoreline.

'No,' Paran admitted. 'Half a year ago Raraku was a desert, and had been for thousands of years. Then, there was a ... rebirth of sorts.'

'It will not last. Nothing lasts.'

He eyed the Jaghut woman for a moment. She stood looking out on the ochre waves, motionless for a dozen heartbeats, then she made her way down into the shallows. Paran dismounted and hobbled the horses, narrowly evading an attempted bite from the gelding he had been riding. He unpacked his camp kit and set about building a hearth. Plenty of driftwood about, including entire uprooted trees, and it was not long before he had a cookfire lit.

Finished her bathing, Ganath joined him and stood nearby, water streaming down her oddly coloured, smooth skin. 'The spirits of the deep springs have awakened,' she said. 'It feels as if this place is young once again. Young, and raw. I do not understand.'

Paran nodded. 'Young, aye. And vulnerable.'

'Yes. Why are you here?'

'Ganath, it might be safer for you if you left.'

'When do you begin the ritual?'

'It's already begun.'

She glanced away. 'You are a strange god. Riding a miserable creature that dreams of killing you. Building a fire with which to cook food. Tell me, in this new world, are all gods such as you?'

'I'm not a god,' Paran said. 'In place of the ancient Tiles of the Holds – and I'll grant you I'm not sure that's what they were called – in any case, there is now the Deck of Dragons, a fatid containing the High Houses. I am the Master of that Deck——'

'A Master, in the same manner as the Errant?'

'Who?'

'The Master of the Holds in my time,' she replied.

'I suppose so, then.'

'He was an ascendant, Ganoes Paran. Worshipped as a god by enclaves of Imass, Barghast and Trell. They
kept his mouth filled with blood. He never knew thirst. Nor peace. I wonder how he fell.’

'I think I'd like to know that detail myself,' Paran said, shaken by the Jaghut's words. 'No-one worships me, Ganath.'

'They will. You are newly ascended. Even in this world of yours, I am certain that there is no shortage of followers, of those who are desperate to believe. And they will hunt down others and make of them victims. They will cut them and fill bowls with their innocent blood, in your name, Ganoes Paran, and so beseech your intercession, your adherence to whatever cause they righteously fashion. The Errant thought to defeat them, as you might well seek to do, and so he became the god of change. He walked the path of neutrality, yet flavoured it with a pleasure taken in impermanence. The Errant's enemy was ennui, stagnation. This is why the Forkrul Assail sought to annihilate him. And all his mortal followers.' She paused, then added, 'Perhaps they succeeded. The Assail were never easily diverted from their chosen course.'

Paran said nothing. There were truths in her words that even he recognized, and they now weighed upon him, settling heavy and imponderable upon his spirit. Burdens were born from the loss of innocence. Naïveté. While the innocent yearned to lose their innocence, those who had already done so in turn envied the innocent, and knew grief in what they had lost. Between the two, no exchange of truths was possible. He sensed the completion of an internal journey, and Paran found he did not appreciate recognizing that fact, nor the place where he now found himself. It did not suit him that ignorance remained inextricably bound to innocence, and the loss of one meant the loss of the other.

'I have troubled your mind, Ganoes Paran.'

He glanced up, then shrugged. 'You have been ... timely. Much to my regret, yet still,' he shrugged again, 'perhaps all for the best.'

She faced the sea again and he followed her gaze. A sudden calm upon the modest bay before them, whilst white-caps continued to chop the waters beyond. 'What is happening?' she asked.

'They're coming.'

Some distant clamour, now, rising as if from a deep cavern, and the sunset seemed to have grown sickly, its very fires slave to a chaotic tumult, as if the shades of a hundred thousand sunsets and sunrises now waged celestial war.

 Whilst the horizons closed in, flickering with darkness, smoke and racing storms of sand and dust.

A stirring upon the pellucid waters of the bay, silt clouds rising from beneath, and the calm was spreading outward now, south, stilling the sea's wildness.

Ganath stepped back. 'What have you done?'

Muted but growing, the scuffle and rumble, the clangour and throat-hum, the sound of marching armies, the echoing of locked shields, the tympanous beat of iron and bronze weapons upon battered rims, of wagons creaking and churning rutted roads, and now the susurrating, thrumming collisions, walls of horseflesh hammering into rows of raised pikes, the animal screams filling the air, then fading, only for the collision to repeat, louder this time, closer, and there was a violent patter cutting a swath across the bay, leaving a pale, muddy red road in its wake that bled outward, edges tearing, even as it sank down into the depths. Voices, now, crying out, bellowing, piteous and enraged, a cacophony of enmeshed lives, each one seeking to separate itself, seeking to claim its own existence, unique, a thing with eyes and voice. Fraught minds clutching at memories that tore away like shredded banners, with every gush of lost blood, with every crushing failure — soldiers, dying, ever dying—

Paran and Ganath watched, as colourless, sodden standards pierced the surface of the water, the spears lifting into the air, streaming mud — standards, banners, pikes bearing grisly, rotting trophies, rising along the entire shoreline now.

Raraku Sea had given up its dead.
In answer to the call of one man.

White, like slashes of absence, bone hands gripping shafts of black wood, forearms beneath tattered leather and corroded vambraces, and then, lifting clear of the water, rotted helms and flesh-stripped faces. Human, Trell, Barghast, Imass, Jaghut. The races, and all their race-wars. Oh, could I drag every mortal historian down here, to this shore, so that they could look upon our true roll, our progression of hatred and annihilation.

How many would seek, desperate in whatever zealotry gripped them, to hunt reasons and justifications? Causes, crimes and justices – Paran's thoughts stuttered to a halt, as he realized that, like Ganath, he had been backing up, step by step, pushed back, in the face of revelation. Oh, these messengers would earn so much ... displeasure. And vilification. And these dead, oh how they'd laugh, understanding so well the defensive tactic of all-out attack. The dead mock us, mock us all, and need say nothing ...

All those enemies of reason – yet not reason as a force, or a god, not reason in the cold, critical sense. Reason only in its purest armour, when it strides forward into the midst of those haters of tolerance, oh gods below, I am lost, lost in all of this. You cannot fight unreason, and as these dead multitudes will tell you – are telling you even now – certitude is the enemy.

'These,' Ganath whispered, 'these dead have no blood to give you, Ganoes Paran. They will not worship. They will not follow. They will not dream of glory in your eyes. They are done with that, with all of that. What do you see, Ganoes Paran, in these staring holes that once were eyes? What do you see?'

'Answers,' he replied.

'Answers?' Her voice was harsh with rage. 'To what?'

Not replying, Paran forced himself forward, one step, then another.

The first ranks stood upon the shore's verge, foam swirling round their skeletal feet, behind them thousands upon thousands of kin. Clutching weapons of wood, bone, horn, flint, copper, bronze and iron. Arrayed in fragments of armour, fur, hide. Silent, now, motionless.

The sky overhead was dark, lowering and yet still, as if a storm had drawn its first breath ... only to hold it.

Paran looked upon that ghastly rank facing him. He was not sure how to do this – he had not even known if his summoning would succeed. And now ... there are so many. He cleared his throat, then began calling out names.

'Shank! Aimless! Runter! Detoran! Bucklund, Hedge, Mulch, Toes, Trotts!' And still more names, as he scoured his memory, his recollection, for every Bridgeburner he knew had died. At Coral, beneath Pale, in Blackdog Forest and Mott Wood, north of Genabar is and northeast of Nathilog – names he had once fixed in his mind as he researched – for Adjunct Lorn – the turgid, grim history of the Bridgeburners. He drew upon names of the deserters, although he knew not if they lived still or, if indeed dead, whether or not they had returned to the fold. The ones that had vanished in Blackdog's great marshes, that had disappeared after the taking of Mott City.

And when he was done, when he could remember no more names, he began his list again.

Then saw one figure in the front row dissolving, melting into sludge that pooled in the shallow water, slowly seeping away. And in its place arose a man he recognized, the firescorched, blasted face grinning – Paran belatedly realized that the brutal smile held no amusement, only the memory of a death-grimace. That and the terrible damage left behind by a weapon.

'Runter,' Paran whispered. 'Black Coral—'

'Captain,' cut in the dead sapper, 'what are you doing here?'

'I wish people would stop asking me that.' I need your help.'

More Bridgeburners were forming in the front ranks. Detoran. Sergeant Bucklund. Hedge, who now stepped
from the water's edge. 'Captain. I always wondered why you were so hard to kill. Now I know.'

'You do?'

'Aye, you're doomed to haunt us! Hah! Hah hah!' Behind him, the others began laughing.

Hundreds of thousands of ghosts, all joined in laughter, was a sound Ganoes Paran never, ever wanted to hear again. Mercifully, it was shortlived, as if all at once the army of dead forgot the reason for their amusement.

'Now,' Hedge finally said, 'as you can see, we're busy. Hah!

Paran shot out a hand. 'No, please, don't start again, Hedge.'

'Typical. People need to be dead to develop a real sense of humour. You know, Captain, from this side the world seems a whole lot funnier. Funny in a stupid, pointless way, I'll grant you—'

'Enough of that, Hedge. You think I don't sense the desperation here? You're all in trouble – even worse, you need us. The living, that is, and that's the part you don't want to admit—'

'I admitted it clear enough,' Hedge said. 'To Fid.'

'Fiddler?'

'Aye. He's not too far away from here, you know. With the Fourteenth.'

'He's with the Fourteenth? What, has he lost his mind?'

Hedge smirked. 'Damn near, but, thanks to me, he's all right. For now. This ain't the first time we've walked among the living, Captain. Gods below, you shoulda seen us twist Korbolo's hair – him and his damned Dogslayers – that was a night, let me tell you—'

'No, don't bother. I need your help.'

'Fine, be that way. With what?'

Paran hesitated. He'd needed to get to this point, yet now that he'd arrived, this was suddenly the last place he wanted to be. 'You, here,' he said, 'in Raraku – this sea, it's a damned gate. Between whatever nightmare world you're from, and mine. I need you, Hedge, to summon ... something. From the other side.'

The mass of ghosts collectively recoiled, the motion snatching a tug of air seaward.

The dead Bridgeburner mage Shank asked, 'Who you got in mind, Captain, and what do you want it to do?'

Paran glanced back over a shoulder at Ganath, then back again. 'Something's escaped, Shank. Here, in Seven Cities. It needs to be hunted down. Destroyed.' He hesitated. 'I don't know, maybe there are entities out there that could do it, but there's no time to go looking for them. You see, this ... thing ... it feeds on blood, and the more blood it feeds on, the more powerful it gets. The First Emperor's gravest mistake, attempting to create his own version of an Elder God – you know, don't you? What – who – I am talking about. You know ... it's out there, loose, unchained and hunting—'

'Oh it hunted all right,' Hedge said. 'They set it free, under a geas, then gave their own blood to it – the blood of six High Mages, priests and priestesses of the Nameless Ones – the fools sacrificed themselves.'

'Why? Why set Dejim Nebrahl free? What geas did they set upon it?'

'Just another path. Maybe it'll lead where they wanted it to, maybe not, but Dejim Nebrahl is now free of its geas. And now it just ... hunts.'

Shank asked, in a tone filled with suspicion, 'So, Captain, who is it you want? To take the damned thing down?'
'I could only think of one ... entity. The same entity that did it the first time. Shank, I need you to find the Deragoth.'
CHAPTER NINE

If thunder could be caught, trapped in stone, and all its violent concatenation stolen from time, and tens of thousands of years were freed to gnaw and scrape this racked visage, so would this first witnessing unveil all its terrible meaning. Such were my thoughts, then, and such they are now, although decades have passed in the interval, when I last set eyes upon that tragic ruin, so fierce was its ancient claim to greatness.

The Lost City of the Path'Apur
Prince I'farah of Bakun, 987–1032 Burn's Sleep

He had washed most of the dried blood away and then had watched, as time passed, the bruises fade. Blows to the head were, of course, more problematic, and so there had been fever, and with fever in the mind demons were legion, the battles endless, and there had been no rest then. Just the heat of war with the self, but, finally, that too had passed, and shortly before noon on the second day, he watched the eyes open.

Incomprehension should have quickly vanished, yet it did not, and this, Taralack Veed decided, was as he had expected. He poured out some herbal tea as Icarium slowly sat up. 'Here, my friend. You have been gone from me a long time.'

The Jhag reached for the tin cup, drank deep, then held it out for more.

'Yes, thirst,' the Gral outlaw said, refilling the cup. 'Not surprising. Blood loss. Fever.'

'We fought?'

'Aye. A sudden, inexplicable attack. D'ivers. My horse was killed and I was thrown. When I awoke, it was clear that you had driven off our assailant, yet a blow to your head had dragged you into unconsciousness.' He paused, then added, 'We were lucky, friend.'

'Fighting. Yes, I recall that much.' Icarium's unhuman gaze sought out Taralack Veed's eyes, searching, quizzical.

The Gral sighed. 'This has been happening often of late. You do not remember me, do you, Icarium?'

'I – I am not sure. A companion ...'

'Yes. For many years now. Your companion. Taralack Veed, once of the Gral Tribe, yet now sworn to a much higher cause.'

'And that is?'

'To walk at your side, Icarium.'

The Jhag stared down at the cup in his hands. 'For many years now, you say,' he whispered. 'A higher cause ... that I do not understand. I am ... nothing. No-one. I am lost—' He looked up. 'I am lost,' he repeated. 'I know nothing of a higher cause, such that would make you abandon your people. To walk at my side, Taralack Veed. Why?'

The Gral spat on his palms, rubbed them together, then slicked his hair back. 'You are the greatest warrior this world has ever seen. Yet cursed. To be, as you say, forever lost. And that is why you must have a companion, to recall to you the great task that awaits you.'

'And what task is this?'

Taralack Veed rose. 'You will know when the time comes. This task shall be made plain, so plain to you, and so perfect, you will know that you have been fashioned – from the very start – to give answer. Would that I
could be more helpful, Icarium.'

The Jhag's gaze scanned their small encampment. 'Ah, I see you have retrieved my bow and sword.'

'I have. Are you mended enough to travel?'

'Yes, I think so. Although ... hungry.'

'I have smoked meat in my pack. The very hare you killed three days ago. We can eat as we walk.'

Icarium climbed to his feet. 'Yes. I do feel some urgency. As if, as if I have been looking for something.' He smiled at the Gral. 'Perhaps my own past ...'

'When you discover what you seek, my friend, all knowledge of your past will return to you. So it is prophesied.'

'Ah. Well then, friend Veed, have we a direction in mind?'

Taralack gathered his gear. 'North, and west. We are seeking the wild coast, opposite the island of Sepik.'

'Do you recall why?'

'Instinct, you said. A sense that you are ... compelled. Trust those instincts, Icarium, as you have in the past. They will guide us through, no matter who or what stands in our way.'

'Why should anyone stand in our way?' The Jhag strapped on his sword, then retrieved the cup and downed the last of the herbal tea.

'You have enemies, Icarium. Even now, we are being hunted, and that is why we can delay here no longer.'

Collecting his bow, then stepping close to hand the Gral the empty tin cup, Icarium paused, then said, 'You stood guard over me, Taralack Veed. I feel ... I feel I do not deserve such loyalty.'

'It is no great burden, Icarium. True, I miss my wife, my children. My tribe. But there can be no stepping aside from this responsibility. I do what I must. You are chosen by all the gods, Icarium, to free the world of a great evil, and I know in my heart that you will not fail.'

The Jhag warrior sighed. 'Would that I shared your faith in my abilities, Taralack Veed.'

'E'napatha N'apur – does that name stir your memories?'

Frowning, Icarium shook his head.

'A city of evil,' Taralack explained. 'Four thousand years ago – with one like me standing at your side – you drew your fearsome sword and walked towards its barred gates. Five days, Icarium. Five days. That is what it took you to slaughter the tyrant and every soldier in that city.'

A look of horror on the Jhag's face. 'I – I did what?'

'You understood the necessity, Icarium, as you always do when faced with such evil. You understood, too, that none could be permitted to carry with them the memory of that city. And why it was necessary to then slay every man, woman and child in E'napatha N'apur. To leave none breathing.'

'No. I would not have. Taralack, no, please – there is no necessity so terrible that could compel me to commit such slaughter—'

'Ah, dear companion,' said Taralack Veed, with great sorrow. 'This is the battle you must always wage, and this is why one such as myself must be at your side. To hold you to the truth of the world, the truth of your own soul. You are the Slayer, Icarium. You walk the Blood Road, but it is a straight and true road. The coldest justice, yet a pure one. So pure even you recoil from it.' He settled a hand on the Jhag's shoulder. 'Come, we can speak more of it as we travel. I have spoken these words many, many times, my friend, and each time you are
the same, wishing with all your heart that you could flee from yourself, from who and what you are. Alas, you cannot, and so you must, once more, learn to harden yourself.

'The enemy is evil, Icarium. The face of the world is evil. And so, friend, your enemy is ...'

The warrior looked away, and Taralack Veed barely heard his whispered reply, 'The world.'

'Yes. Would that I could hide such truth from you, but I could not claim to be your friend if I did such a thing.'

'No, that is true. Very well, Taralack Veed, let us as you say speak more of this whilst we journey north and west. To the coast opposite the island of Sepik. Yes, I feel ... there is something there. Awaiting us.'

'You must needs be ready for it,' the Gral said.

Icarium nodded. 'And so I shall, my friend.'

Each time, the return journey was harder, more fraught, and far, far less certain. There were things that would have made it easier. Knowing where he had been, for one, and knowing where he must return to, for another. Returning to ... sanity? Perhaps. But Heboric Ghost Hands had no firm grasp of what sanity was, what it looked like, felt like, smelled like. It might be that he had never known.

Rock was bone. Dust was flesh. Water was blood. Residues settled in multitudes, becoming layers, and upon those layers yet more, and on and on until a world was made, until all that death could hold up one's feet where one stood, and rise to meet every step one took. A solid bed to lie on. So much for the world. Death holds us up. And then there were the breaths that filled, that made the air, the heaving assertions measuring the passing of time, like notches marking the arc of a life, of every life. How many of those breaths were last ones? The final expellation of a beast, an insect, a plant, a human with film covering his or her fading eyes? And so how, how could one draw such air into the lungs? Knowing how filled with death it was, how saturated it was with failure and surrender?

Such air choked him, burned down his throat, tasting of the bitterest acid. Dissolving and devouring, until he was naught but ... residue.

They were so young, his companions. There was no way they could understand the filth they walked on, walked in, walked through. And took into themselves, only to fling some of it back out again, now flavoured by their own sordid additions. And when they slept, each night, they were as empty things. While Heboric fought on against the knowledge that the world did not breathe, not any more. No, now, the world drowned.

And I drown with it. Here in this cursed wasteland. In the sand and heat and dust. I am drowning. Every night. Drowning.

What could Treach give him? This savage god with its overwhelming hungers, desires, needs. Its mindless ferocity, as if it could pull back and reclaim every breath it drew into its bestial lungs, and so defy the world, the ageing world and its deluge of death. He was wrongly chosen, so every ghost told him, perhaps not in words, but in their constant crowding him, rising up, overwhelming him with their silent, accusatory regard. And there was more. The whisperings in his dreams, voices emerging from a sea of jade, beseeching. He was the stranger who had come among them; he had done what none other had done: he had reached through the green prison. And they prayed to him, begging for his return. Why? What did they want?

No, he did not want answers to such questions. He would return this cursed gift of jade, this alien power. He would cast it back into the void and be done with it.

Holding to that, clinging to that, was keeping him sane. If this torment of living could be called sane. Drowning, I am drowning, and yet ... these damned feline gifts, this welter of senses, so sweet, so rich, I can feel them, seeking to seduce me. Back into this momentary world.

In the east the sun was clawing its way back into the sky, the edge of some vast iron blade, just pulled from
the forge. He watched the red glow cutting the darkness, and wondered at this strange sense of imminence that so stilled the dawn air.

A groan from the bundle of blankets where Scillara slept, then: ‘So much for the blissful poison.’

Heboric flinched, then drew a deep breath, released a slow sigh. ‘Which blissful poison would that be, Scillara?’

Another groan, as she worked her way into a sitting position. ‘I ache, old man. My back, my hips, everywhere. And I get no sleep – no position is comfortable and I have to pee all the time. This, this is awful. Gods, why do women do it? Again and again and again – are they all mad?’

‘You’d know better than I,’ Heboric said. ‘But I tell you, men are no less inexplicable. In what they think. In what they do.’

‘The sooner I get this beast out the better,’ she said, hands on her swollen belly. ‘Look at me, I’m sagging. Everywhere. Sagging.’

The others had woken, Felisin staring wide-eyed at Scillara – with the discovery that the older woman was pregnant, there had been a time of worship for young Felisin. It seemed that the disillusionment had begun. Cutter had thrown back his blankets and was already resurrecting last night’s fire. The demon, Greyfrog, was nowhere to be seen. Off hunting, Heboric supposed.

‘Your hands,’ Scillara noted, ‘are looking particularly green this morning, old man.’

He did not bother confirming this observation. He could feel that alien pressure well enough. ‘Naught but ghosts,’ he said, ‘the ones from beyond the veil, from the very depths of the Abyss. Oh how they cry out. I was blind once. Would that I were now deaf.’

They looked at him strangely, as they often did after he’d spoken. Truths. His truths, the ones they couldn’t see, nor understand. It didn’t matter. He knew what he knew. ‘There is a vast dead city awaiting us this day,’ he said. ‘Its residents were slain. All of them. By Icarium, long ago. There was a sister city to the north – when they heard what had happened, they journeyed here to see for themselves. And then, my young companions, they chose to bury E’napatha N’apur. The entire city. They buried it intact. Thousands of years have passed, and now the winds and rains have rotted away that solid face. Now, the old truths are revealed once more.’

Cutter poured water into a tin pot and set it on the hook slung beneath an iron tripod. ‘Icarium,’ he said. ‘I travelled with him for a time. With Mappo, and Fiddler.’ He then made a face. ‘And Iskaral Pust, that insane little stoat of a man. Said he was a High Priest of Shadow. A High Priest! Well, if that’s the best Shadowthrone can do ...’ He shook his head. ‘Icarium ... was a ... well, he was tragic, I guess. Yet, he would not have attacked that city without a reason, I think.’

‘Aye, no shortage of reasons in this world. The King barred the gates, would not permit him to enter. Too many dark tales surrounding the name of Icarium. A soldier on the battlements fired a warning arrow. It ricocheted off a rock and grazed Icarium’s left leg, then sank deep into the throat of his companion – the poor bastard drowned in his own blood – and so Icarium’s rage was unleashed.’

‘If there were no survivors,’ Scillara said, ‘how do you know all this?’

‘The ghosts wander the region,’ Heboric replied. He gestured. ‘Farms once stood here, before the desert arrived. He smiled at the others. ‘Indeed, today is market day, and the roads – which none but I can see – are crowded with push-carts, oxen, men and women. And children and dogs. On either side, drovers whistle and tap their staves to keep the sheep and goats moving. From the poor farms this close to the city, old women come out with baskets to collect the dung for their fields.’

Felisin whispered, ‘You see all this?’

‘Aye.’

‘Right now?’
'Only fools think the past is invisible.'

'Do those ghosts,' Felisin asked, 'do they see you?'

'Perhaps. Those that do, well, they know they are dead. The others do not know, and do not see me. The realization of one's own death is a terrifying thing; they flee from it, returning to their illusion — and so I appear, then vanish, and I am naught but a mirage.' He rose. 'Soon, we will approach the city itself, and there will be soldiers, and these ghosts see me, oh yes, and call out to me. But how can I answer, when I don't understand what they want of me? They cry out, as if in recognition—'

'You are the Destriant of Treach, the Tiger of Summer,' Cutter said.

'Treach was a First Hero,' Heboric replied. 'A Soletaken who escaped the Slaughter. Like Ryllandaras and Rikkter, Tholen and Denesmet. Don't you see? These ghost soldiers — they did not worship Treach! No, their god of war belonged to the Seven, who would one day become the Holies. A single visage of Dessimbelackis — that and nothing more. I am nothing to them, Cutter, yet they will not leave me alone!'

Both Cutter and Felisin had recoiled at his outburst, but Scillara was grinning.

'You find all this amusing?' he demanded, glaring at her.

'I do. Look at you. You were a priest of Fener, and now you're a priest of Treach. Both gods of war. Heboric, how many faces do you think the god of war has? Thousands. And in ages long past? Tens of thousands? Every damned tribe, old man. All different, but all the same.' She lit her pipe, smoke wreathing her face, then said, 'Wouldn't surprise me if all the gods are just aspects of one god, and all this fighting is just proof that that one god is insane.'

'Insane?' Heboric was trembling. He could feel his heart hammering away like some ghastly demon at the door to his soul.

'Or maybe just confused. All those bickering worshippers, each one convinced their version is the right one. Imagine getting prayers from ten million believers, not one of them believing the same thing as the one kneeling beside him or her. Imagine all those Holy Books, not one of them agreeing on anything, yet all of them purporting to be the word of that one god. Imagine two armies annihilating each other, both in that god's name. Who wouldn't be driven mad by all that?'

'Well,' Cutter said into the silence that followed Scillara's diatribe, 'the tea's ready.'

Greyfrog squatted atop a flat rock, looking down on the unhappy group. The demon's belly was full, although the wild goat still kicked on occasion. Morose. They are not getting along. Tragic list, listlessly reiterated. Child-swollen beauty is miserable with aches and discomfort. Younger beauty feels shocked, frightened and alone. Yet likely to reject soft comfort given by adoring Greyfrog. Troubled assassin beset by impatience, for what, I know not. And terrible priest. Ah, shivering haunt! So much displeasure! Dismay! Perhaps I could regurgitate the goat, and we could share said fine repast. Fine, still kicking repast. Aai, worst kind of indigestion!

'Greyfrog!' Cutter called up. 'What are you doing up there?'

'Friend Cutter. Discomfort. Regretting the horns.'

Thus far, Samar Dev reflected, the positions on the map had proved accurate. From dry scrubland to plains, and now, finally, patches of deciduous forest, arrayed amidst marshy glades and stubborn remnants of true grassland. Two, perhaps three days of travel northward and they would reach boreal forest.

Bhederin-hunters, travelling in small bands, shared this wild, unbroken land. They had seen such bands from a distance and had come upon signs of camps, but it was clear that these nomadic savages had no interest in contacting them. Hardly surprising — the sight of Karsa Orlong was frightening enough, astride his Jhag horse, weapons bristling, bloodstained white fur riding his broad shoulders.
The bhederin herds had broken up and scattered into smaller groups upon reaching the aspen parkland. There seemed little sense, as far as Samar Dev could determine, to the migration of these huge beasts. True, the dry, hot season was nearing its end, and the nights were growing cool, sufficient to turn rust-coloured the leaves of the trees, but there was nothing fierce in a Seven Cities winter. More rain, perhaps, although that rarely reached far inland – the Jhag Odhan to the south was unchanging, after all.

'I think,' she said, 'this is some kind of ancient memory.'

Karsa grunted, then said, 'Looks like forest to me, woman.'

'No, these bhederin – those big hulking shapes beneath the trees over there. I think it's some old instinct that brings them north into these forests. From a time when winter brought snow and wind to the Odhan.'

'The rains will make the grass lush, Samar Dev,' the Teblor said. 'They come up here to get fat.'

'All right, that sounds reasonable enough. I suppose. Good for the hunters, though.' A few days earlier they had passed a place of great slaughter. Part of a herd had been separated and driven off a cliff. Four or five dozen hunters had gathered and were butchering the meat, women among them tending smoke-fires and pinning strips of meat to racks. Half-wild dogs – more wolf than dog, in truth – had challenged Samar Dev and Karsa when they rode too close, and she had seen that the beasts had no canines, likely cut off when they were young, although they presented sufficient threat that the travellers elected to draw no closer to the kill-site.

She was fascinated by these fringe tribes living out here in the wastes, suspecting that nothing had changed for them in thousands of years; oh, iron weapons and tools, evincing some form of trade with the more civilized peoples to the east, but they used no horses, which she found odd. Instead, their dogs were harnessed to travois. And mostly basketry instead of fired-clay pots, which made sense given that the bands travelled on foot.

Here and there, lone trees stood tall on the grasslands, and these seemed to be a focal point for some kind of spirit worship, given the fetishes tied to branches, and the antlers and bhederin skulls set in notches and forks, some so old that the wood had grown round them. Invariably, near such sentinel trees there would be a cemetery, signified by raised platforms housing hide-wrapped corpses, and, of course, the crows squabbling over every perch.

Karsa and Samar had avoided trespass on such sites. Though Samar suspected that the Teblor would have welcomed a succession of running battles and skirmishes, if only to ease the boredom of the journey. Yet for all his ferocity, Karsa Orlong had proved an easy man to travel with, albeit somewhat taciturn and inclined to brooding – but whatever haunted him had nothing to do with her, nor was he inclined to take it out on her – a true virtue rare among men.

'I am thinking,' he said, startling her.

'What about, Karsa Orlong?'

'The bhederin and those hunters at the base of the cliff. Two hundred dead bhederin, at least, and they were stripping them down to the bone, then boiling the bones themselves. Whilst we eat nothing but rabbits and the occasional deer. I think, Samar Dev, we should kill ourselves one of these bhederin.'

'Don't be fooled by them, Karsa Orlong. They are a lot faster than they look. And agile.'

'Yes, but they are herd animals.'

'What of it?'

'The bulls care more about protecting ten females and their calves than one female separated out from the others.'

'Probably true. So, how do you plan on separating one out? And don't forget, that female won't be a docile thing – it could knock you and your horse down given the chance. Then trample you.'

'I am not the one to worry about that. It is you who must worry, Samar Dev.'
'Why me?'
'Because you will be the bait, the lure. And so you must be sure to be quick and alert.'
'Bait? Now hold on—'
'Quick and alert. I will take care of the rest.'
'I can't say I like this idea, Karsa Orlong. I am in fact quite content with rabbits and deer.'
'Well, I'm not. And I want a hide.'
'What for? How many hides do you plan to wear?'
'Find us a small clump of the beasts – they are not frightened by your horse as much as they are by mine.'
'That's because Jhag horses will take calves on occasion. So I read ... somewhere.'
The Teblor bared his teeth, as if he found the image amusing.
Samar Dev sighed, then said, 'There's a small herd just ahead and to the left – they moved out of this glade as we approached.'
'Good. When we reach the next clearing I want you to begin a canter towards them.'
'That will draw out the bull, Karsa – how close do you expect me to get?'
'Close enough to be chased.'
'I will not. That will achieve nothing—'
'The females will bolt, woman. And from them I shall make my kill – how far do you think the bull will chase you? He will turn about, to rejoin his harem—'
'And so become your problem.'
'Enough talk.' They were picking their way through a stand of poplar and aspen, the horses pushing through chest-high dogwood. Just beyond was another glade, this one long, the way the green grasses were clumped suggesting wet ground. On the far side, perhaps forty paces distant, a score of hulking dark shapes loomed beneath the branches of more trees.
'This is swamp,' Samar Dev noted. 'We should find another—'
'Ride, Samar Dev.'
She halted her horse. 'And if I don't?'
'Stubborn child. I shall leave you here, of course – you are slowing me down as it is.'
'Was that supposed to hurt my feelings, Karsa Orlong? You want to kill a bhederin just to prove to yourself that you can best the hunters. So, no cliff, no blinds or corrals, no pack of wolf-dogs to flank and drive the bhederin. No, you want to leap off your horse and wrestle one to the ground, then choke it to death, or maybe throw it against a tree, or maybe just lift it up and spin it round until it dies of dizziness. And you dare to call me a child?' She laughed. Because, as she well knew, laughter would sting.
Yet no sudden rage darkened his face, and his eyes were calm as they studied her. Then he smiled. 'Witness.'
And with that he rode out into the clearing. Inky water spraying from the Jhag horse's hoofs, the beast voicing something like a snarl as it galloped towards the herd. The bhederin scattered in a thunderous crash of bushes and snapping branches. Two shot out directly towards Karsa.
A mistake, Samar Dev realized in that moment, to assume there was but one male. One was clearly younger
than the other, yet both were huge, eyes red-rimmed with rage, water exploding round them as they charged
their attacker.

The Jhag horse, Havok, swerved suddenly, legs gathering beneath him, then the young stallion launched
himself over the back of the larger bull. But the bhederin was quicker, twisting and heaving its massive head
upward, horns seeking the horse’s exposed underbelly.

That upward lunge killed the bull, for the beast’s head met the point of Karsa’s stone sword, which slid into
the brain beneath the base of the skull, severing most of its spine in the process.

Havok landed in a splash and spray of muck on the far side of the collapsing bull, well beyond the range of
the second male – which now pivoted, stunningly fast, and set off in pursuit of Karsa.

The warrior swung his horse to the left, hoofs pounding as Havok ran parallel to the edge of trees, chasing
after the half-dozen females and calves that had lumbered out into the clearing. The second bull closed fast
behind them.

The cows and calves scattered once more, one bolting in a direction different from the others. Havok
swerved into its wake, and a heartbeat later was galloping alongside the beast. Behind them, the second male
had drawn up to flank the other females – and one and all, this group then crashed back into the thicket.

Samar Dev watched Karsa Orlong lean far to one side, then slash down with his sword, taking the beast in
the spine just above its hips.

The cow’s back legs collapsed under the blow, sluicing through the muck as the creature struggled to drag
them forward.

Wheeling round in front of the bhederin, Karsa held his sword poised until he reached the cow’s left side,
then he lunged down, the sword’s point driving into the animal’s heart.

Front legs buckled, and the cow sagged to one side, then was still.

Halting his horse, Karsa slid off and approached the dead cow. ‘Make us a camp,’ he said to Samar Dev.

She stared at him, then said, ‘Fine, you have shown me that I am, in fact, unnecessary. As far as you’re
concerned. Now what? You expect me to set up camp, and then, I presume, help you butcher that thing. Shall I
lie beneath you tonight just to round things out?’

He had drawn a knife and now knelt in the pooling water beside the cow. ‘If you like,’ he said.

*Barbarian bastard... well, I should not have expected anything else, should I? ‘All right, I have been
thinking, we will need this meat – the land of rocks and lakes north of here no doubt has game, but far less
plentiful and far more elusive.’*

‘I shall take the bull’s skin,’ Karsa said, slicing open the bhederin’s belly. Entrails tumbled out to splash in the
swampy water. Already, hundreds of insects swarmed the kill-site. ‘Do you wish this cow’s skin, Samar Dev?’

‘Why not? If a glacier lands on us we won't freeze, and that's something.’

He glanced over at her. ‘Woman, glaciers don’t jump. They crawl.’

‘That depends on who made them in the first place, Karsa Orlong.’

He bared his teeth. ‘Legends of the Jaghut do not impress me. Ice is ever a slow-moving river.’

‘If you believe that, Karsa Orlong, you know far less than you think you do.’

‘Do you plan on sitting on that horse all day, woman?’

‘Until I find high ground to make a camp, yes.’ And she gathered the reins.
Witness, he said. He's said that before, hasn't he? Some kind of tribal thing, I suppose. Well, I witnessed all right. As did that savage hiding in the shadows at the far end of the glade. I pray the locals do not feel proprietary towards these bhederin. Or we will find excitement unending, which Karsa might well enjoy. As for me, I'll just likely end up dead.

Well, too late to worry much about that.

She then wondered how many of Karsa Orlong's past companions had had similar thoughts. In those times just before the Teblor barbarian found himself, once again, travelling alone.

The rough crags of the ridge cast a maze of shadows along the ledge just beneath, and in these shadows five sets of serpentine eyes stared down at the winding wall of dust on the plain below. A trader's caravan, seven wagons, two carriages, twenty guards on horses. And three war-dogs.

There had been six, but three had caught Dejim Nebrahl's scent and, stupid creatures that they were, had set off to hunt the T'rolbarahl down. They had succeeded in finding the D'ivers, and their blood now filled the bellies of the five remaining beasts.

The Trell had stunned Dejim Nebrahl. To snap one of his necks – not even a Tartheno could manage such a thing – and one had tried, long ago. Then, to drag the other down, over the cliff's edge, to plunge to its death among the jagged rocks below. This audacity was ... unforgivable. Weak and wounded, Dejim Nebrahl had fled the scene of ambush, wandering half-crazed with anger and pain until stumbling upon the trail of this caravan. How many days and nights had passed, the T'rolbarahl had no idea. There was hunger, the need to heal, and these demands filled the mind of the D'ivers.

Before Dejim Nebrahl, now, waited his salvation. Enough blood to spawn replacements for those he had lost in the ambush; perhaps enough blood to fashion yet another, an eighth.

He would strike at dusk, the moment the caravan halted for the day. Slaughter the guards first, then the remaining dogs, and finally the fat weaklings riding in their puny carriages. The merchant with his harem of silent children, each one chained to the next and trailing behind the carriage. A trader in mortal flesh.

The notion sickened Dejim Nebrahl. There had been such detestable creatures in the time of the First Empire, and depravity never went extinct. When the T'rolbarahl ruled this land, a new justice would descend upon the despoilers of flesh. Dejim would feed upon them first, and then all other criminals, the murderers, the beaters of the helpless, the stone-throwers, the torturers of the spirit.

His creator had meant him and his kind to be guardians of the First Empire. Thus the conjoining of bloods, making the sense of perfection strong, god-like. Too strong, of course. The T'rolbarahl would not be ruled by an imperfect master. No, they would rule, for only then could true justice be delivered.

Justice. And ... of course ... natural hunger. Necessity carved out its own laws, and these could not be denied. When he ruled, Dejim Nebrahl would fashion a true balance between the two dominant forces in his D'ivers soul, and if the mortal fools suffered beneath the weight of his justice, then so be it. They deserved the truth of their own beliefs. Deserved the talon-sharp edges of their own vaunted virtues, for virtues were more than just words, they were weapons, and it was only right that such weapons be turned upon their wielders.

The shadows had descended the cliff-face here in the lee of the setting sun's light. Dejim Nebrahl followed those shadows downward to the plain, five sets of eyes, but one mind. The focus of all absolute and unwavering.

Delicious slaughter. Splashing red to celebrate the sun's lurid fire.

As he flowed out onto the plain, he heard the dogs begin barking.

A moment of pity for them. Stupid as they were, they knew about necessity.

Something of a struggle, but he managed to unfold himself and descend, groaning with stiffness, from the
mule's broad back. And, despite the awkward effort, he spilled not a single drop from his cherished bucket. Humming beneath his breath some chant or other – he'd forgotten where in the vast tome of Holy Songs it had come from, and really, did it actually matter? – he waddled with his burden to the simpering waves of Raraku Sea, then walked out amidst the softly swirling sands and eagerly trembling reeds.

Pausing suddenly.

A desperate scan of the area, sniffing the humid, sultry, dusky air. Another scan, eyes darting, seeking out every nearby shadow, every wayward rustle of reed and straggly bush. Then he ducked lower, soaking his frayed robes as he knelt in the shallows.

Sweet, sun-warmed waters.

A final, suspicious look round, all sides – could never be too careful – then, with solemn delight, he lowered the bucket into the sea.

The first fish of Raraku Sea.

Iskaral Pust left the shallows then, flinging the bucket to one side. 'Tense thy back, mule! I shall now leap astride, oh yes, and won't you be surprised, to find yourself suddenly galloping – oh believe me, mule, you know how to gallop, no more of that stupid fast trot that rattles loose my poor teeth! Oh no, we shall be as the wind! Not a fitful, gusting wind, but a steady, roaring wind, a stentorian wind that races across the entire world, the very wake of our extraordinary speed, oh, how your hoofs shall blur to all eyes!'

Reaching the mule, the High Priest of Shadow leapt into the air.

Shying in alarm, the mule sidestepped.

A squeal from Iskaral Pust, then a grunt and muted oof as he struck and rolled in the dust and stones, wet robes flapping heavily and spraying sand about, while the mule trotted a safe distance away then turned to regard its master, long-lashed eyes blinking.

'You disgust me, beast! And I bet you think it's mutual, too! Yet even if you thought that, why, then I'd agree with you! Out of spite! How would you like that, horrid creature? The High Priest of Shadow picked himself up and brushed sand from his robes. 'He thinks I will hit him. Strike him, with a large stick. Foolish mule. Oh no, I am much more cunning. I will surprise him with kindness ... until he grows calm and dispenses with all watchfulness, and then ... ha! I shall punch him in the nose! Won't he be surprised! No mule can match wits with me. Oh yes, many have tried, and almost all have failed!'

He worked a kindly smile on to his sun-wizened face, then slowly approached the mule. 'We must ride,' he murmured, 'you and I. Fraught with haste, my friend, lest we arrive too late and too late will never do.' He came within reach of the reins where they dangled beneath the mule's head. Paused as he met the creature's eyes. 'Oh ho, sweet servant, I see malice in that so-placid gaze, yes? You want to bite me. Too bad. I'm the only one who bites around here.' He snatched up the reins, narrowly avoiding the snapping teeth, then clambered onto the mule's broad, sloped back.

Twenty paces from the shoreline and the world shifted around them, a miasmic swirl of shadows closing on all sides. Iskaral Pust cocked his head, looked round, then, satisfied, settled back as the mule plodded on.

A hundred heartbeats after the High Priest of Shadow vanished into his warren, a squat, wild-haired Dal Honese woman crept out of some nearby bushes, dragging a large ale cask behind her. It held water, not ale, and the lid had been pried off.

Grunting and gasping with the effort, Mogora struggled to bring the cask down into the shallows. She tipped it to one side and – a mostly toothless grin on her wrinkled features – watched a half-dozen young freshwater
sharks slide like snakes into Raraku Sea.

Then she kicked the cask over and scrambled out of the water, a cackle escaping her as, with a flurry of gestures, she opened a warren and plunged into it.

Folding one shadow upon another, Iskaral Pust swiftly traversed a score of leagues. He could half-see, half-sense the desert, buttes and chaotic folds of arroyo and canyon he passed through, but none of it interested him much, until, after almost a full day's travel, he caught sight of five sleek shapes crossing the floor of a valley ahead and to his left.

He halted the mule on the ridge and, eyes narrowing, studied the distant shapes. In the midst of attacking a caravan. 'Arrogant pups,' he muttered, then drove his heels into the mule's flanks. 'Charge, I say! Charge, you fat, waddling bastard!'

The mule trotted down the slope, braying loudly.

The five shapes caught the sound and their heads turned. As one, the T'rolbarahl shifted direction and now raced towards Iskaral Pust.

The mule's cries rose in pitch.

Spreading out, the D'ivers flowed noiselessly over the ground. Rage and hunger rushed ahead of them in an almost visible bow wave, the power crackling, coruscating between the Shadow warren and the world beyond.

The beasts to either side wheeled out to come in from a flanking position, while the three in the centre staggered their timing, intending to arrive in quick succession.

Iskaral Pust was having trouble focusing on them, so jolted and tossed about was he on the mule's back. When the T'rolbarahl had closed to within thirty paces, the mule suddenly skidded to a halt. And the High Priest of Shadow was thrown forward, lunging over the animal's head. Head ducking, somersaulting over, then thumping down hard on his back in a spray of gravel and dust.

The first creature reached him, forearms lifting, talons unsheathed as it sailed through the air, then landing on the spot where Iskaral Pust had fallen – only to find him not there. The second and third beasts experienced a moment of confusion as the quarry vanished, then they sensed a presence at their side. Their heads snapped round, but too late, as a wave of sorcery hammered into them. Shadowwrought power cracked like lightning, and the creatures were batted into the air, leaving in their wakes misty clouds of blood. Writhing, they both struck the ground fifteen paces away, skidding then rolling.

The two flanking D'ivers attacked. And, as Iskaral Pust vanished, they collided, chests reverberating like heavy thunder, teeth and talons raking through hide. Hissing and snarling, they scrambled away from each other.

Reappearing twenty paces behind the T'rolbarahl, Iskaral Pust unleashed another wave of sorcery, watched it strike each of the five beasts in turn, watched blood spray and the bodies tumble away, kicking frenziedly as the magic wove flickering nets about them. Stones popped and exploded on the ground beneath them, sand shot upward in spear-like geysers, and everywhere there was blood, whipping out in ragged threads.

The T'rolbarahl vanished, fleeing the warren of Shadow – out into the world, where they scattered, all thoughts of the caravan gone as panic closed on their throats with invisible hands.

The High Priest of Shadow brushed dust from his clothes, then walked over to where stood the mule. 'Some help you were! We could be hunting each one down right now, but oh no, you're tired of running. Whoever thought mules deserved four legs was an idiot! You are most useless! Bah!' He paused, then, and lifted a gnarled finger to his wrinkled lips. 'But wait, what if they got really angry? What if they decided to make a fight to the finish? What then? Messy, oh, very messy. No, best leave them for someone else to deal with. I must not get distracted. Imagine, though! Challenging the High Priest of Shadow of all Seven Cities! Dumber than cats, that T'rolbarahl. I am entirely without sympathy.'
He climbed back onto the mule. 'Well, that was fun, wasn't it? Stupid mule. I think we'll have mule for supper tonight, what do you think of that? The ultimate sacrifice is called for, as far as you're concerned, don't you think? Well, who cares what you think? Where to now? Thank the gods at least one of us knows where we're going. That way, mule, and quickly now. Trot, damn you, trot!'

Skirting the caravan, where dogs still barked, Iskaral Pust began shifting shadows once more.

Dusk had arrived in the world beyond when he reached his destination, reining in the plodding mule at the foot of a cliff.

Vultures clambered amongst the tumbled rocks, crowding a fissure but unable or, as yet, unwilling to climb down into it. One edge of that crevasse was stained with dried blood, and among rocks to one side were the remains of a dead beast – devoured to bones and ragged strips by the scavengers, it was nonetheless easy to identify. One of the T'rolbarahl.

The vultures voiced a chorus of indignation as the High Priest of Shadow dismounted and approached. Spitting curses, he chased away the ugly, Mogora-like creatures, then eased himself down into the fissure. Deep, the close air smelling of blood and rotting meat.

The crevasse narrowed a little more than a man's height down, and into this was wedged a body. Iskaral Pust settled down beside it. He laid a hand on the figure's broad shoulder, well away from the obvious breaks in that arm. 'How many days, friend? Ah, only a Trell would survive this. First, we shall have to get you out of here, and for that I have a stalwart, loyal mule. Then, well, then, we shall see, won't we?'

Neither stalwart nor particularly loyal, the mule's disinclination towards cooperation slowed down the task of extracting Mappo Runt considerably, and it was full dark by the time the Trell was pulled from the fissure and dragged onto a flat patch of wind-blown sand.

The two compound fractures in the left arm were the least of the huge Trell's injuries. Both legs had broken, and one edge of the fissure had torn a large flap of skin and flesh from Mappo's back – the exposed meat was swarming with maggots, and the mostly hanging flap of tissue was clearly unsalvageable, grey in the centre and blackening round the edges, smelling of rot. Iskaral Pust cut that away and tossed it back into the fissure.

He then leaned close and listened to the Trell's breathing. Shallow, yet slow – another day without attention and he would have died. As it was, the possibility remained distinct. 'Herbs, my friend,' the High Priest said as he set to cleaning the visible wounds. 'And High Denul ointments, elixirs, tinctures, salves, poultices ... have I forgotten any? No, I think not. Internal injuries, oh yes, crushed ribs, that whole side. So, much bleeding inside, yet, obviously, not enough to kill you outright. Remarkable. You are almost as stubborn as my servant here—'

He looked up. 'You, beast, set up the tent and start us a fire! Do that and then maybe I'll feed you and not, hee hee, feed on you—'

'You are an idiot!' This cry came from the darkness off to one side, and a moment later Mogora appeared from the gloom.

'The gloom, yes, that explains everything. What are you doing here, hag?'

'Saving Mappo, of course.'

'What? I have saved him already!'

'Saving him from you, I meant!' She scrabbled closer. 'What's that vial in your hand? That's venom of paralt! You damned idiot, you were going to kill him! After all he's been through!'

'Paralt? That's right, wife, it's paralt. You arrived, so I was about to drink it.'

'I saw you deal with that T'rolbarahl, Iskaral Pust.'

'You did?' He paused, ducked his head. 'Now her adoration is complete! How could she not adore me? It
must be near worship by now. That's why she followed me all the way. She can't get enough of me. It's the same with everyone — they just can't get enough of me—'

'The most powerful High Priest of Shadow,' cut in Mogora as she removed various healing unguents from her pack, 'cannot survive without a good woman at his side. Failing that, you have me, so get used to it, warlock. Now, get out of my way so I can tend to this poor, hapless Trell.'

Iskaral Pust backed away. 'So what do I do now? You've made me useless, woman!'

'That's not hard, husband. Make us camp.'

'I already told my mule to do that.'

'It's a mule, you idiot ...' Her words trailed away as she noted the flicker of firelight off to one side. Turning, she studied the large canvas tent, expertly erected, and the stone-ringed hearth where a pot of water already steamed beneath a tripod. Nearby stood the mule, eating from its bag of oats. Mogora frowned, then shook her head and returned to her work. 'Tend to the tea, then. Be useful.'

'I was being useful! Until you arrived and messed everything up! The most powerful High Priest in Seven Cities does not need a woman! In fact, that's the very last thing he needs!'

'You couldn't heal a hangnail, Iskaral Pust. This Trell has the black poison in his veins, the glittering vein-snake. We shall need more than High Denul for this—'

'Oh here we go! All your witchy rubbish. High Denul will conquer the black poison—'

'Perhaps, but the dead flesh will remain dead. He will be crippled, half-mad, his hearts will weaken.' She paused and glared over at him. 'Shadowthrone sent you to find him, didn't he? Why?'

Iskaral Pust smiled sweetly. 'Oh, she's suspicious now, isn't she? But I won't tell her anything. Except the hint, the modest hint, of my vast knowledge. Yes indeed, I know my dear god's mind — and a twisted, chaotic, weaselly mind it is. In fact, I know so much I am speechless — hah, look at her, those beetle eyes narrowing suspiciously, as if she dares grow aware of my profound ignorance in all matters pertaining to my cherished, idiotic god. Dares, and would challenge me openly. I would crumble before that onslaught, of course.' He paused, reworked his smile, then spread his hands and said, 'Sweet Mogora, the High Priest of Shadow must have his secrets, kept even from his wife, alas. And so I beg you not to press me on this, else you suffer Shadowthrone's random wrath—'

'You are a complete fool, Iskaral Pust.'

'Let her think that,' he said, then added a chuckle. 'Now she'll wonder why I have laughed — no, not laughed, but chuckled, which, all things considered, is far more alarming. I mean, it sounded like a chuckle so it must have been one, though it's the first I've ever tried, or heard, for that matter. Whereas a chortle, well, that's different. I'm not fat enough to chortle, alas. Sometimes I wish—'

'Go sit by your mule's fire,' Mogora said. 'I must prepare my ritual.'

'See how that chuckle has discomfited her! Of course, my darling, you go and play with your little ritual, that's a dear. Whilst I make tea for myself and my mule.'

Warmed by the flames and his tralb tea, Iskaral Pust watched — as best as he was able in the darkness — Mogora at work. First, she assembled large chunks of stone, each one broken, cracked or otherwise rough-edged, and set them down in the sand, creating an ellipse that encompassed the Trell. She then urinated over these rocks, achieving this with an extraordinary half-crab half-chicken wide-legged waddle, straddling the stones and proceeding widdershins until returning to the place she had started. Iskaral marvelled at the superior muscle control, not to mention the sheer volume, that Mogora obviously possessed. In the last few years his own efforts at urination had met with mixed success, until even starting and stopping now seemed the highest of visceral challenges.
Satisfied with her piddle, Mogora then started pulling hairs from her head. She didn't have that many up there, and those she selected seemed so deeply rooted that Iskaral feared she would deflate her skull with every successful yank. His anticipation of seeing such a thing yielded only disappointment, as, with seven long wiry grey hairs in one hand, Mogora stepped into the ellipse, one foot planted to either side of the Trell's torso. Then, muttering some witchly thing, she flung the hairs into the inky blackness overhead.

Instinct guided Iskaral's gaze upward after those silvery threads, and he was somewhat alarmed to see that the stars had vanished overhead. Whereas, out on the horizons, they remained sharp and bright. 'Gods, woman! What have you done?'

Ignoring him, she stepped back out of the ellipse and began singing in the Woman's Language, which was, of course, unintelligible to Iskaral's ears. Just as the Man's Language – which Mogora called gibberish – was beyond her ability to understand. The reason for that, Iskaral Pust knew, was that the Man's Language was gibberish, designed specifically to confound women. It's a fact that men don't need words, but women do. We have penises, after all. Who needs words when you have a penis? Whereas with women there are two breasts, which invites conversation, just as a good behind presents perfect punctuation, something every man knows.

What's wrong with the world? You ask a man and he says, 'Don't ask.' Ask a woman and you'll be dead of old age before she's finished. Hah. Hah ha.

Strange streams of gossamer began descending through the reflected light of the fire, settling upon the Trell's body.

'What are those?' Iskaral asked. Then started as one brushed his forearm and he saw that it was a spider's silk, and there was the spider at one end, tiny as a mite. He looked skyward in alarm. 'There are spiders up there? What madness is this? What are they doing up there?'

'Be quiet.'

'Answer me!'

'The sky is filled with spiders, husband. They float on the winds. Now I've answered you, so close that mouth of yours lest I send a few thousand of my sisters into it.'

His teeth clacked and he edged closer to the hearth. **Burn, you horrid things. Burn!**

The strands of web covered the Trell now. Thousands, tens, hundreds of thousands – the spiders were wrapping about Mappo Runt's entire body.

'And now,' Mogora said, 'time for the moon.'

The blackness overhead vanished in a sudden bloom of silver, incandescent light. Squealing, Iskaral Pust fell onto his back, so alarming was the transformation, and he found himself staring straight up at a massive, full moon, hanging so low it seemed within reach. If he but dared. Which he did not. 'You've brought the moon down! Are you mad? It's going to crash on us!'

'Oh, stop it. It only seems that way – well, maybe I nudged it a bit – but I told you this was a serious ritual, didn't I?'

**What have you done with the moon?**

She crowed with manic laughter. 'It's just my little ritual, darling. How do you like it?'

'Make it go away!'

'Frightened? You should be! I'm a woman! A witch! So why don't you just drag that scrawny behind of yours into that tent and cower, dear husband. This is real power, here, real magic!'

'No it isn't! I mean, it's not witch magic, not Dal Honese – I don't know what this is—'

'You're right, you don't. Now be a good little boy and go to sleep, Iskaral Pust, while I set about saving this
Trell's miserable life.'

Iskaral thought to argue, then decided against it. He crawled into the tent.

From outside, 'Is that you gibbering, Iskaral?'

_Oh be quiet._

Lostara Yil opened her eyes, then slowly sat up.

A grey-cloaked figure was standing near a stone-arched portal, his back to her. Rough-hewn walls to either side, forming a circular chamber with Lostara – who had been lying on an altar – in the centre. Moonlight was flooding in from in front of the figure, yet it seemed to be sliding in visible motion. As if the moon beyond was plunging from the sky.

'What—?' she asked, then began to cough uncontrollably, sharp pain biting in her lungs. Finally recovering, she blinked tears from her eyes, looked up once again.

He was facing her now.

_The Shadow Dancer. The god. Cotillion._ Seemingly in answer to her initial question, he said, 'I am not sure. Some untoward sorcery is at work, somewhere in the desert. The moon's light has been ... stolen. I admit I have never seen anything like it before.'

Even as he was speaking, Lostara's memories returned in a rush. Y'Ghatan. Flames, everywhere. Blistering heat. Savage burns – oh how her flesh screamed its pain – 'What – what happened to me?'

'Oh, that was what you meant. My apologies, Lostara Yil. Well, in short, I pulled you out of the fire. Granted, it's very rare for a god to intervene, but T'riss kicked open the door—'

'T'riss?'

'The Queen of Dreams. Set the precedent, as it were. Most of your clothes had burned – I apologize if you find the new ones not to your liking.'

She glanced down at the rough-woven shift covering her.

'A neophyte's tunic,' Cotillion said. 'You are in a Temple of Rashan, a secret one. Abandoned with the rebellion, I believe. We are a league and a half from what used to be Y'Ghatan, forty or so paces north of the Sotka Road. The temple is well concealed.' He gestured with one gloved hand at the archway. 'This is the only means of ingress and egress.'

'Why – why did you save me?'

He hesitated. 'There will come a time, Lostara Yil, when you will be faced with a choice. A dire one.'

'What kind of choice?'

He studied her for a moment, then asked, 'How deep are your feelings for Pearl?'

She started, then shrugged. 'A momentary infatuation. Thankfully passed. Besides, he's unpleasant company these days.'

'I can understand that,' Cotillion said, somewhat enigmatically. 'You will have to choose, Lostara Yil, between your loyalty to the Adjunct ... and all that Pearl represents.'

'Between the Adjunct and the Empress? That makes no sense—'

He stayed her with a raised hand. 'You need not decide immediately, Lostara. In fact, I would counsel against it. All I ask is that you consider the question, for now.'
'What is going on? What do you know, Cotillion? Are you planning vengeance against Laseen?'

His brows lifted. 'No, nothing like that. In fact, I am not directly involved in this ... uh, matter. At the moment, anyway. Indeed, the truth is, I am but anticipating certain things, some of which may come to pass, some of which may not.' He faced the portalway again. 'There is food near the altar. Wait until dawn, then leave here. Down to the road. Where you will find ... welcome company. Your story is this: you found a way out of the city, then, blinded by smoke, you stumbled, struck your head and lost consciousness. When you awoke, the Fourteenth was gone. Your memory is patchy, of course.'

'Yes, it is, Cotillion.'

He turned at her tone, half-smiled. 'You fear that you are now in my debt, Lostara Yil. And that I will one day return to you, demanding payment.'

'It's how gods work, isn't it?'

'Some of them, yes. But you see, Lostara Yil, what I did for you in Y'Ghatan four days ago was my repayment, of a debt that I owed you.'

'What debt?'

Shadows were gathering about Cotillion now, and she barely heard his reply, 'You forget, I once watched you dance ...' And then he was gone.

Moonlight streamed into his wake like quicksilver. And she sat for a time, bathed in its light, considering his words.

Snoring from the tent. Mogora sat on a flat stone five paces from the dying fire. Had he been awake, Iskaral Pust would be relieved. The moon was back where it belonged, after all. Not that she'd actually moved it. That would have been very hard indeed, and would have attracted far too much attention besides. But she'd drawn away its power, somewhat, briefly, enough to effect the more thorough healing the Trell had required.

Someone stepped from the shadows. Walked a slow circle round the recumbent, motionless form of Mappo Trell, then halted and looked over at Mogora.

She scowled, then jerked a nod towards the tent. 'Iskaral Pust, he's the Magi of High House Shadow, isn't he?'

'Impressive healing, Mogora,' Cotillion observed. 'You do understand, of course, that the gift may in truth be a curse.'

'You sent Pust here to find him!'

'Shadowthrone, actually, not me. For that reason, I cannot say if mercy counted for anything in his decision.'

Mogora glanced again at the tent. 'Magi ... that blathering idiot.'

Cotillion was gazing steadily at her, then he said, 'You're one of Ardata's, aren't you?'

She veered into a mass of spiders.

The god watched as they fled into every crack and, moments later, were gone. He sighed, took one last look round, momentarily meeting the placid eyes of the mule, then vanished in a flowing swirl of shadows.
CHAPTER TEN

When the day knew only darkness,
the wind a mute beggar stirring ashes and stars
in the discarded pools beneath the old
retaining wall, down where the white rivers
of sand slip grain by grain into the unseen,
and every foundation is but a moment
from a horizon's stagger, I found myself
among friends and so was made at ease
with my modest list of farewells.

Soldier Dying
Fisher kel Tath

They emerged from the warren into the stench of smoke and ashes, and before them, in the growing light of
dawn, reared a destroyed city. The three stood unmoving for a time, silent, each seeking to comprehend this
vista.

Stormy was the first to speak. 'Looks like the Imperial Warren's spilled out here.'

Ash and dead air, the light seeming listless – Kalam was not surprised by the marine's observation. They had
just left a place of death and desolation, only to find themselves in another. 'I still recognize it,' the assassin
said. 'Y'Ghatan.'

Stormy coughed, then spat. 'Some siege.'

'The army's moved on,' Quick Ben observed, studying the tracks and rubbish where the main encampment
had been. 'West.'

Stormy grunted, then said, 'Look at that gap in the wall. Moranth munitions, a whole damned wagon of 'em, I'd
say.'

A viscous river had flowed out through that gap, and, motionless now, it glittered in the morning light. Fused
glass and metals. There had been a firestorm, Kalam realized. Yet another one to afflict poor Y'Ghatan. Had the
sappers set that off?

'Olive oil,' said Quick Ben suddenly. 'The oil harvest must have been in the city.' He paused, then added,
'Makes me wonder if it was an accident.'

Kalam glanced over at the wizard. 'Seems a little extreme, Quick. Besides, from what I've heard of Leoman,
he's not the kind to throw his own life away.'

'Assuming he stayed around long enough.'

'We took losses here,' Stormy said. 'There's a grave mound there, under that ash.' He pointed. 'Scary big,
unless they included rebel dead.'

'We make separate holes for them,' Kalam said, knowing that Stormy knew that as well. None of this looked
good, and they were reluctant to admit that. Not out loud. 'The tracks look a few days old, at least. I suppose we
should catch up with the Fourteenth.'

'Let's circle this first,' Quick Ben said, squinting at the ruined city. 'There's something ... some residue ... I
don't know. Only ...'
'Sound argument from the High Mage,' Stormy said. 'I'm convinced.'

Kalam glanced over at the mass burial mound, and wondered how many of his friends were lying trapped in that earth, unmov ing in the eternal dark, the maggots and worms already at work to take away all that had made each of them unique. It wasn't something he enjoyed thinking about, but if he did not stand here and gift them a few more moments of thought, then who would?

Charred rubbish lay strewn on the road and in the flats to either side. Tent stakes still in place gripped burnt fragments of canvas, and in a trench beyond the road's bend as it made its way towards what used to be the city's gate, a dozen bloated horse carcasses had been dumped, legs upthrust like bony tree-stumps in a flyblown swamp. The stench of burnt things hung in the motionless air.

Apsalar reined in on the road as her slow scan of the devastation before her caught movement a hundred paces ahead and to her left. She settled back in the saddle, seeing familiarity in the gaits and demeanours of two of the three figures now walking towards what remained of Y'Ghatan. Telorast and Curdle scampered back to flank her horse.

'Terrible news, Not-Apsalar!' Telorast cried. 'Three terrible men await us, should we continue this course. If you seek to destroy them, well then, that is fine. We wish you well. Otherwise, I suggest we escape. Now.'

'I agree,' Curdle added, small skeletal head bobbing as the creature paced, grovelled, then paced again, tail spiking the air.

Her horse lifted a front hoof and the demonic skeletons scattered, having learned that near proximity to the beast was a treacherous thing.

'I know two of them,' Apsalar said. 'Besides, they have seen us.' She nudged her mount forward, walking it slowly towards the mage, his assassin companion, and the Malazan soldier, all of whom had now shifted direction and approached with a measured pace.

'They will annihilate us!' Telorast hissed. 'I can tell – oh, that mage, he's not nice, not at all—'

The two small creatures raced for cover.

Annihilation. The possibility existed, Apsalar allowed, given the history she shared with Quick Ben and Kalam Mekhar. Then again, they had known of the possession, and she had since travelled with Kalam for months, first across the Seeker's Deep, from Darujhistan all the way to Ehrlitan, during which nothing untoward had occurred. This eased her mind somewhat as she waited for them to arrive.

Kalam was the first to speak. 'Few things in the world make sense, Apsalar.'

She shrugged. 'We have each had our journeys, Kalam Mekhar. I, for one, am not particularly surprised to find our paths converging once more.'

'Now that,' said Quick Ben, 'is an alarming statement. Unless you're here to satisfy Shadowthrone's desire for vengeance, there is no possible reason at all that our paths should converge. Not here. Not now. I certainly haven't been pushed and pulled by any conniving god—'

'You have the aura of Hood about you, Quick Ben,' Apsalar said, an observation that clearly startled Kalam and the soldier. 'Such residue comes only from long conversations with the Lord of Death, and so, while you might claim freedom for yourself, perhaps your motives for what you do and where you choose to go are less purely your own than you would have others believe. Or, for that matter, than what you yourself would like to believe.' Her gaze slid across to Kalam. 'Whilst the assassin has known the presence of Cotillion, only a short while ago. And as for this Falarl soldier here, his spirit is bound to a T'lan Imass, and to the Fire of Life that passes for worship among the T'lan Imass. Thus, fire, shadow and death, drawn together even as the forces and gods of such forces find alignment against a single foe. Yet, I feel I should warn you all – that foe is no longer singular and, perhaps, never was. And present alliances may not last.'

'What is it about all this,' Quick Ben said, 'that I'm not enjoying?'
Kalam rounded on the wizard. 'Maybe, Quick, you're sensing something of my desire – which I am barely restraining – to plant my fist in your face. The Lord of Death? What in the name of the Abyss happened at Black Coral?'

'Expedience,' the wizard snapped, eyes still on Apsalar. 'That's what happened. In that whole damned war against the Pannion Domin. That should have been obvious from the outset – Dujek joining forces with Caladan Brood was simply the first and most egregious breaking of the rules.'

'So now you're working for Hood?'

'Not even close, Kalam. To stretch a pun, Hood knows, he was working for me.'

'Was? And now?'

'And now,' he nodded towards Apsalar, 'as she says, the gods are at war.' He shrugged, but it was an uneasy shrug. 'I need to get a sense of the two sides, Kalam. I need to ask questions. I need answers.'

'And is Hood providing them?'

The glance he shot the assassin was skittish, almost diffident. 'Slowly.'

'And what is Hood getting from you?'

The wizard bridled. 'Ever try twisting a dead man's arm? It doesn't work!' His glare switched between Kalam and Apsalar. 'Listen. Remember those games Hedge and Fid played? With the Deck of Dragons? Idiots, but never mind that. The point is, they made up the rules as they went along, and that's what I'm doing, all right? Gods, even a genius like me has limits!'

A snort from the Falari soldier, and Apsalar saw him bare his teeth.

The wizard stepped towards him. 'Enough of that, Stormy! You and your damned stone sword!' He waved wildly at the city of Y'Ghatan. 'Does this smell sweet to you?'

'What would smell even sweeter is the Adjunct's High Mage all chopped up and served in a stew to Hood himself.' He reached for the Immass sword, his grin broadening. 'And I'm just the man to do—'

'Settle down, you two,' Kalam said. 'All right, Apsalar, we're all here and that's passing strange but not as strange maybe as it should be. Doesn't matter.' He made a gesture that encompassed himself, Quick Ben and Stormy. 'We're returning to the Fourteenth Army. Or, we will be, once we've circled the city and Quick's satisfied it's as dead as it looks—'

'Oh,' the wizard cut in, 'it's dead all right. Still, we're circling the ruin.' He pointed a finger at Apsalar. 'As for you, woman, you're not travelling alone, are you? Where are they hiding? And what are they? Familiars?'

'You could call them that,' she replied.

'Where are they hiding?' Quick Ben demanded again.

'Not sure. Close by, I suspect. They're ... shy.' And she added nothing more, for now, satisfied as she was by the wizard's answering scowl.

'Where,' Kalam asked, 'are you going, Apsalar?'

Her brows rose. 'Why, with you, of course.'

She could see that this did not please them much, yet they voiced no further objections. As far as she was concerned, this was a perfect conclusion to this part of her journey. For it coincided with her most pressing task – the final target for assassination. The only one that could not be ignored.

She'd always known Cotillion for a most subtle bastard.
'All right, then,' Sergeant Hellian said, 'which one of you wants to be my new corporal?'

Touchy and Brethless exchanged glances.

'What?' Touchy asked. 'Us? But you got Balgrid and Tavos Pond, now. Or even—'

'It's my new squad and I decide these things,' She squinted over at the other soldiers. 'Balgrid's a mage. So's Tavos Pond.' She scowled at the two men. 'I don't like mages, they're always disappearing, right when you want to ask them something.' Her gaze slid across to the last two soldiers. 'Maybe's a sapper and enough said about that, and Lutes is our healer. That leaves ...' Hellian returned her attention to the twins, 'you two.'

'Fine,' said Touchy. 'I'll be corporal.'

'Hold on,' Brethless said. 'I want to be corporal! I ain't taking no orders from him, Sergeant. Not a chance. I got the brains, you know—'

'Touchy snorted. 'Then, since you didn't know what to do with them, you threw them away.'

'You're a big fat liar, Touchy—'

'Quiet!' Hellian reached for her sword. But then remembered and drew a knife instead. 'Another word either of you and I'll cut myself.'

The squad stared at her.

'I'm a woman, see, and with women, it's how we deal with men. You're all men. Give me trouble and I'll stick this knife in my arm. Or leg. Or maybe I'll slice a nipple off. And you bastards will have to live with that. For the rest of your days, you'll have to live with the fact that you were being such assholes that Hellian went and disfigured herself.'

No-one spoke.

Smiling, Hellian resheathed the knife. 'Good. Now, Touchy and Brethless, I've decided. You're both corporals. There.'

'But what if I want to order Brethless—'

'Well you can't.'

Brethless raised a finger. 'Wait, what if we give different orders to the others?'

'Don't worry 'bout that,' Maybe said, 'we ain't gonna listen to you anyways. You're both idiots, but if the sergeant wants to make you corporals, that's fine. We don't care. Idiots make good corporals.'

'All right,' Hellian said, rising, 'it's settled. Now, nobody wander off, since the captain wants us ready to march.' She walked away, up towards the ridge. Thinking.

The captain had dragged off Urb and made him a sergeant. Madness. That old rule about idiots making good corporals obviously extended to sergeants, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. Besides, she might go and kill him and then there'd be trouble. Urb was big, after all, and there wasn't much in the way of places to hide his body. Not around here, anyway, she concluded, scanning the broken rocks, bricks and potsherds strewn on the slope.

They needed to find a village. She could trade her knife – no, that wouldn't work, since it would mess up her threat and the squad might mutiny. Unless, next time, she added nails to the possible weapons – scratch her own eyes out, something like that. She glanced down at her nails – oh, mostly gone. What a mess ...

'Look at her,' Maybe said. 'Tells us not to wander off then what does she do? Wanders off. Finds a ridge to do what? Why, check out her nails. Ooh, they're chipped! Gods, we've got a real woman for our Hood-damned sergeant—'
'She ain't a real woman,' Touchy said. 'You don't know her at all, sapper. Now, me and Brethless, we were two of the poor fools who came first to the temple in Kartool, where this whole nightmare started.'

'What are you talking about?' Balgrid demanded.

'Someone went and butchered all the priests in the D'rek temple, and we was the first ones on the scene. Anyway, you know how this goes. That was our quarter, right? Not that we could patrol inside temples, of course, so we weren't to blame. But since when does common sense count for anything in the empire? So, they had to send us away. Hopefully to get killed, so none of it gets out—'

'It just did,' Tavos Pond said, scratching beneath the rough, crusted bandages swathing one side of his face.

'What are you talking about?' Balgrid demanded again. 'And what's the sergeant doing over there?'

Maybe glared at Lutes. 'He's still deaf. Do something!'

'It'll come back,' the healer replied, shrugging. 'Mostly. It takes time, that's all."

'Anyway,' Touchy resumed, 'she ain't a real woman. She drinks—'

'Right,' Brethless cut in, 'and why does she drink? Why, she's scared of spiders!'

'That don't matter,' his brother retorted. 'And now she's stuck sober and that's bad. Listen, all of you—'

'What?' Balgrid asked.

'Listen, the rest of you, we just keep her drunk and everything'll be fine—'

'Idiot,' Maybe said. 'Probably you didn't catch whoever killed all those priests because your sergeant was drunk. She did good in Y'Ghatan, or have you forgotten? You're alive 'cause of her.'

'That'll wear off, sapper. Just you wait. I mean, look at her – she's fussing over her nails!'

Adopting heavies into a squad was never easy, Gesler knew. They didn't think normally; in fact, the sergeant wasn't even sure they were human. Somewhere between a flesh-and-blood Imass and a Barghast, maybe. And now he had four of them. Shortnose, Flashwit, Uru Hela and Mayfly. Flashwit could probably out-pull an ox, and she was Napan besides, though those stunning green eyes came from somewhere else; and Shortnose seemed in the habit of losing body parts, and there was no telling how far that had gone beyond the missing nose and ear. Uru was a damned Korelri who'd probably been destined for the Stormwall before stowing aboard a Jakatakan merchanter, meaning she felt she didn't owe anybody anything. Mayfly was just easily confused, but clearly as tough as they came.

And Heavies came tough. He'd have to adjust his thinking on how to work the squad. But if he ever shows up, Stormy will love these ones.

Maybe in one way it made sense to reorganize the squads, but Gesler wasn't sure of the captain's timing. It was Fist Keneb's responsibility, anyway, and he'd likely prefer splitting up soldiers who were, one and all now, veterans. Well, that was for the damned officers to chew over. What concerned him the most at the moment, was the fact that they were mostly unarmed and unarmoured. A score of raiders or even bandits happening upon them and there'd be more Malazan bones bleaching in the sun. They needed to get moving, catch up with the damned army.

He fixed his gaze on the west road, up on the ridge. Hellian was there already, he saw. Lit up by the rising sun. Odd woman, but she must have done something right, to have led her soldiers through that mess. Gesler would not look back at Y'Ghatan. Every time he had done that before, the images returned: Truth shouldering the munitions packs, running into the smoke and flames. Fiddler and Cuttle racing back, away from what was coming. No, it wasn't worth any last looks back at that cursed city.

What could you take from it that was worth a damned thing, anyway? Leoman had drawn them right in,
made the city a web from which there was no escape — only ... we made it, didn’t we? But, how many didn’t? The captain had told them. Upwards of two thousand, wasn’t it? All to kill a few hundred fanatics who would probably have been just as satisfied killing themselves and no-one else, to make whatever mad, futile point they felt worth dying for. It was how fanatics thought, after all. Killing Malazans simply sweetened an already sweet final meal. All to make some god’s eyes shine.

Mind you, polish anything long enough and it’ll start to shine.

The sun lifted its blistered eye above the horizon, and it was almost time to begin the march.

Ten, maybe more pups, all pink, wrinkled and squirming inside an old martin’s nest that had dislodged from an exploding wall. Bottle peered down at them, the nest in his hands. Their mother clung to his left shoulder, nose twitching as if she was contemplating a sudden leap — either towards her helpless brood or towards Bottle’s neck.

‘Relax, my dear,’ he whispered. ‘They’re as much mine as they are yours.’

A half-choking sound nearby, then a burst of laughter.

Bottle glared over at Smiles. ‘You don’t understand a thing, you miserable cow.’

‘I can’t believe you want to take that filthy thing with you. All right, it got us out, so now leave it be. Besides, there’s no way you can keep them alive — she’s got to feed ’em, right, meaning she has to scrounge. When’s she gonna be able to do that? We’re about to march, you fool.’

‘We can manage,’ he replied. ‘They’re tribal creatures, rats. Besides, we’ve already scrounged enough food — it’s only Y’Ghatan who needs to eat lots, for now. The pups just suckle.’

‘Stop, you’re making me sick. There’s enough rats in the world already, Bottle. Take the big one, sure, but leave the others for the birds.’

‘She’d never forgive me.’

Sitting nearby, Koryk studied the two bickering soldiers a moment longer, then he rose.

‘Don’t go far,’ Strings said.

The half-Seti grunted a wordless reply, then headed towards the far, northern end of the flats, where broad, deep pits pockmarked the ground. He arrived at the edge of one and looked down. Long ago, these pits had yielded clay for the potters, back when there had been water close to the surface. When that had dried up, they had proved useful for the disposal of refuse, including the bodies of paupers.

The pits nearest the city’s walls held only bones, bleached heaps, sun-cracked amidst tattered strips of burial cloth.

He stood above the remains for a moment longer, then descended the crumbling side.

The soldiers had lost most of the bones affixed to their armour and uniforms. It seemed only fitting, Koryk thought, that these long-dead citizens of Y’Ghatan offer up their own. After all, we crawled through the city’s own bones. And we can’t even measure what we left behind.

Knee-deep in bones, he looked round. No shortage of fetishes here. Satisfied, he began collecting.

‘You look damn near naked without all that armour.’

Corporal Tarr grimaced. ‘I am damn near naked without all my armour, Sergeant.’

Smiling, Strings looked away, searching until he found Koryk, who was in the process of climbing into the
ground. At least, it looked that way from here. Strange, secretive man. Then again, if he wanted to crawl into
the earth, that was his business. So long as he showed up for the call to march.

Cuttle was near the fire, pouring out the last of the tea, a brew concocted from a half-dozen local plants
Bottle had identified as palatable, although he’d been a little cagey on toxicity.

After a moment surveying his squad, the sergeant returned to shaving off his beard, hacking at the
foulsmelling, singed hair with his camp knife – the only weapon left to him.

One of the foundling children had attached herself to him and sat opposite, watching with wide eyes, her
round face smeared with ash and two wet, dirty streaks running down from her nose. She had licked her lips
raw.

Strings paused, squinted at her, then raised one eyebrow. 'You need a bath, lass. We'll have to toss you into
the first stream we run across.'

She made a face.

'Can't be helped,' he went on. 'Malazan soldiers in the Fourteenth are required to maintain a certain level of
cleanliness. So far, the captain's been easy about it, but trust me, that won't last ...' He trailed off when he saw
that she wasn't listening any more. Nor was she looking at him, but at something beyond his left shoulder.
Strings twisted round to follow her gaze.

And saw a rider, and three figures on foot. Coming down from the road that encircled Y'Ghatan. Coming
towards them.

From a short distance to the sergeant's right, he heard Gesler say, 'That's Stormy – I'd recognize that
bludgeon walk anywhere. And Kalam and Quick. Don't know the woman on the horse, though ...'

But I do. Strings rose. Walked up the slope to meet them. He heard Gesler behind him, following.

'Hood take us,' Strings said, studying first Apsalar, then Kalam and Quick Ben, 'half the old squad. All here.'

Quick Ben was squinting at Fiddler. 'You shaved,' he said. 'Reminds me just how young you are – that beard
turned you into an old man.'

He paused, then added, 'Be nice to have Mallet here with us.'

'Forget it,' Strings said, 'he's getting fat in Darujhistan and the last thing he'd want to do is see our ugly faces
again.' He coughed. 'And I suppose Paran's there, too, feet up and sipping chilled Saltoan wine.'

'Turned out to be a good captain,' the wizard said after a moment. 'Who'd have thought it, huh?'

Strings nodded up at the woman on the horse. 'Apsalar. So where's Crokus Younghand?'

She shrugged. 'He goes by the name of Cutter, now, Fiddler.'

Oh.

'In any case,' she continued, 'we parted ways some time ago.'

Stormy stepped closer to Gesler. 'We lost him?' he asked.

Gesler looked away, then nodded.

'What happened?'

Strings spoke in answer: 'Truth saved all our skins, Stormy. He did what we couldn't do, when it needed to
be done. And not a word of complaint. Anyway, he gave up his life for us. I wish it could have been otherwise
...' He shook his head. 'I know, it's hard when they're so young.'

There were tears now, running down the huge man's sunburnt face. Saying nothing, he walked past them all,
down onto the slope towards the encamped Malazans. Gesler watched, then followed.

No-one spoke.

'I had a feeling,' Quick Ben said after a time. 'You made it out of Y'Ghatan – but the Fourteenth's marched already.'

Fiddler nodded. 'They had to. Plague's coming from the east. Besides, it must've seemed impossible – anyone trapped in the city surviving the firestorm.'

'How did you pull it off?' Kalam demanded.

'We're about to march,' Fiddler said as Faradan Sort appeared, clambering onto the road. 'I'll tell you along the way. And Quick, I've got a mage in my squad I want you to meet – he saved us all.'

'What do you want me to do?' the wizard asked. 'Shake his hand?'

'Not unless you want to get bit.' Hah, look at his face. That was worth it.

The bridge was made of black stones, each one roughly carved yet perfectly fitted. Wide enough to accommodate two wagons side by side, although there were no barriers flanking the span and the edges looked worn, crumbly, enough to make Paran uneasy. Especially since there was nothing beneath the bridge. Nothing at all. Grey mists in a depthless sea below. Grey mists swallowing the bridge itself twenty paces distant; grey mists refuting the sky overhead.

A realm half-born, dead in still-birth, the air was cold, clammy, smelling of tidal pools. Paran drew his cloak tighter about his shoulders. 'Well,' he muttered, 'it's pretty much how I saw it.'

The ghostly form of Hedge, standing at the very edge of the massive bridge, slowly turned. 'You've been here before, Captain?'

'Visions,' he replied. 'That's all. We need to cross this—'

'Aye,' the sapper said. 'Into a long forgotten world. Does it belong to Hood? Hard to say.' The ghost's hooded eyes seemed to shift, fixing on Ganath. 'You should've changed your mind, Jaghut.'

Paran glanced over at her. Impossible to read her expression, but there was a stiffness to her stance, a certain febrility to the hands she lifted to draw up the hood of the cape she had conjured.

'Yes,' she said. 'I should have.'

'This is older than the Holds, isn't it?' Paran asked her. 'And you recognize it, don't you, Ganath?'

'Yes, in answer to both your questions. This place belongs to the Jaghut – to our own myths. This is our vision of the underworld, Master of the Deck. Verdith'anath, the Bridge of Death. You must find another path, Ganoes Paran, to find those whom you seek.'

He shook his head. 'No, this is the one, I'm afraid.'

'It cannot be.'

'Why?'

She did not reply.

Paran hesitated, then said, 'This is the place in my visions. Where I have to begin. But ... well, those dreams never proceeded from here – I could not see what lay ahead, on this bridge. So, I had this, what you see before us, and the knowledge that only a ghost could guide me across.' He studied the mists engulfing the stone path. 'There's two ways of seeing it, I eventually concluded.'
'Of seeing what?' Ganath asked.

'Well, the paucity of those visions, and my hunches on how to proceed. I could discard all else and attempt to appease them with precision, never once straying – for fear that it would prove disastrous. Or, I could see all those uncertainties as opportunities, and so allow my imagination fullest rein.'

Hedge made a motion something like spitting, although nothing left his mouth. 'I take it you chose the latter, Captain.'

Paran nodded, then faced the Jaghut again. 'In your myths, Ganath, who or what guards this bridge?'

She shook her head. 'This place lies beneath the ground beneath Hood's feet. He may well know of this realm, but would not presume to claim dominance over it ... or its inhabitants. This is a primal place, Master of the Deck, as are those forces that call it home. It is a conceit to believe that death has but a single manifestation. As with all things, layer settles upon layer, and in time the deepest, darkest ones become forgotten – yet they have shaped all that lies above.' She seemed to study Paran for a moment, then said, 'You carry an otatalar sword.'

'Reluctantly,' he admitted. 'Most of the time I keep it buried by the back wall of Coil's estate, in Darujhistan. I am surprised you sensed it – the scabbard is made of iron and bronze and that negates its effect.'

The Jaghut shrugged. 'The barrier is imperfect. The denizens in this realm – if the myths hold truth and they always do – prefer brute force over sorcery. The sword will be just a sword.'

'Well, I wasn't planning on using it, anyway.'

'So,' Hedge said, 'we just start on our way, across this bridge, and see what comes for us? Captain, I may be a sapper, and a dead one at that, but even I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Of course not,' Paran said. 'I have planned for something else.' He drew out from his pack a small object, spoked and circular, which he then tossed on the ground. 'Shouldn't be long,' he said. 'They were told to stay close.'

A moment later sounds came through the mists behind them, the thunder of hoofs, the heavy clatter of massive wheels. A train of horses appeared, heads tossing, frothflecked and wild-eyed, and behind them a six-wheeled carriage. Guards were clinging to various ornate projections on the carriage's flanks, some of them strapped in place by leather harnesses. Their weapons were out, and they glared fiercely into the mists on all sides.

The driver leaned back on the reins, voicing a weird cry. Hoofs stamping, the train reared back, slewing the huge carriage round to a stone-snapping, skidding halt.

The guards unhitched themselves and swarmed off, establishing a perimeter with crossbows out and cocked. On the bench the driver set the brake, looped the reins about the handle, then pulled out a flask and downed its contents in seven successive swallows. Belched, restopped the flask, pocketed it, then clambered down the carriage side. He unlatched the side door even as Paran caught movement through its barred window.

The man pushing his way through was huge, dressed in sodden silks, his pudgy hands and round face sheathed in sweat.

Paran spoke: 'You must be Karpolan Demesand. I am Ganoes Paran. Thank you for arriving so quickly. Knowing the reputation of the Trygalle Trade Guild, of course, I am not at all surprised.'

'Nor should you be!' the huge man replied with a broad smile that revealed gold-capped, diamond-studded teeth. The smile slowly faded as his gaze found the bridge. 'Oh dear.' He gestured to two of the nearest guards, both Pardu women, both badly scarred. 'Nisstar, Artara, to the edge of the mists on that bridge, if you please. Examine the edges carefully – without a retaining wall we face a treacherous path indeed.' The small, bright eyes fixed on Paran once more. 'Master of the Deck, forgive me, I am fraught with exhaustion! Oh, how this dread land taxes poor old Karpolan Demesand! After this, we shall hasten our return to our most cherished native continent of Genabackis! Naught but tragedy haunts Seven Cities – see how I have lost weight! The
stress! The misery! The bad food!’ He snapped his fingers and a servant emerged from the carriage behind him, somehow managing to balance a tray crowded with goblets and a crystal decanter in one hand while navigating his egress with the other. ‘Gather, my friends! Not you, damned shareholders! Keep a watch out, fools! There are things out there and you know what happens when things arrive! Nay, I spoke to my guests! Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck, his ghostly companion and the Jaghut sorceress – join me, fretful three, in this one peaceable toast ... before the mayhem begins!’

‘Thanks for the invitation,’ Hedge said, ‘but since I’m a ghost—’

‘Not at all,’ Karpolan Demesand cut in, ‘know that in close proximity to my contrivance here, you are not cursed insubstantial – not at all! So,’ he passed a goblet to the sapper, ‘drink, my friend! And revel once more in the delicious sensation of taste, not to mention alcohol!’

‘If you say so,’ Hedge said, accepting the goblet. He swallowed a mouthful, and his hazy expression somehow brightened. ‘Gods below! You’ve done it now, merchant! I think I’ll end up haunting this carriage for all time!’

‘Alas, my friend, the effect wears off, eventually. Else we face an impossible burden, as you might imagine! Now you, Jaghut, please, the significance of the myriad flavours in this wine shall not be lost on you, I’m sure.’ Beaming, he handed her a goblet.

She drank, then bared her tusks in what Paran took to be a smile. ‘Bik’trara – ice flowers – you must have crossed a Jaghut glacier some time in the past, to have harvested such rare plants.’

‘Indeed, my dear! Jaghut glaciers, and much more besides, I assure you! To explain, the Trygalle Trade Guild travels the warrens – a claim no other merchants in this world dare make. Accordingly, we are very expensive.’ He gave Paran a broad wink. ‘Very, as the Master of the Deck well knows. Speaking of which, I trust you have your payment with you?’

Paran nodded.

Karpolan proffered the third goblet to Paran. ‘I note you have brought your horse, Master of the Deck. Do you intend to ride alongside us, then?’

‘I think so. Is that a problem?’

‘Hard to say – we do not yet know what we shall encounter on this fell bridge. In any case, you must ride close, unless you mean to assert your own protection – in which case, why hire us at all?’

‘No, your protection I shall need, I’m sure,’ Paran said. ‘And yes, that is why I contracted with your guild in Darujhistan.’ He sipped at the wine, and found his head swimming. ‘Although,’ he added, eyeing the golden liquid, ‘if I drink any more of this, I might have trouble staying in the saddle.’

‘You must strap yourself tightly, Ganoes Paran. In the stirrups, and to the saddle. Trust me in this, such a journey is best managed drunk – or filled with the fumes of durhang. Or both. Now, I must begin preparations – although I have never before visited this warren, I am beginning to suspect we will be sorely tested on this dread bridge.’

‘If you are amenable,’ Ganath said, ‘I would ride with you within.’

‘Delightful, and I suggest you ready yourself to access your warren, Jaghut, should the need arise.’

Paran watched as the two climbed back into the carriage, then he turned to regard Hedge.

The sapper finished the wine in his goblet and set it back down on the tray, which was being held still by the servant – an old man with red-rimmed eyes and grey hair that looked singed at its ends. ‘How many of these journeys have you made?’ Hedge asked him.

‘More’n I can count, sir.’
'I take it Karpolan Demesand is a High Mage.'

'That he be, sir. An' for that, us shareholders bless 'im every day.'

'No doubt,' Hedge said, then turned to Paran. 'If you ain't gonna drink that, Captain, put it down. You and me need to talk.'

Paran risked another mouthful then replaced the goblet, following as, with a gesture, Hedge set off towards the foot of the bridge.

'Something on your ghostly mind, sapper?'

'Plenty, Captain, but first things first. You know, when I tossed that cusser back in Coral, I figured that was it. Hood knows, I didn't have a choice, so I'd do the same thing if I had to do it over again. Anyway — he paused, then said, 'for a time there was, well, just darkness. The occasional flicker of something like light, something like awareness.' He shook his head. 'It was like, well,' he met Paran's eyes, 'like I had nowhere to go. My soul, I mean. Nowhere at all. And trust me on this, that ain't a good feeling.'

'But then you did,' Paran said. 'Have somewhere to go, I mean.'

Hedge nodded, eyes once more on the mists engulfing the way ahead. 'Heard voices, at first. Then ... old friends, coming outa the dark. Faces I knew, and sure, like I said, friends. But some who weren't. You got to understand, Captain, before your time, a lot of Bridgeburners were plain bastards. When a soldier goes through what we went through, in Raraku, at Black Dog, you come out one of two kinds of people. Either you're damned humbled, or you start believing the Empress worships what slides outa your ass, and not just the Empress, but everyone else besides. Now, I never had time for those bastards when I was alive — now I'm looking at spending an eternity with 'em.'

Paran was silent for a moment, thoughtful, then he said, 'Go on.'

'Us Bridgeburners, we got work ahead of us, and some of us don't like it. I mean, we're dead, right? And sure, it's good helping friends who are still alive, and maybe helping all of humanity if it comes to that and I'm sorry to say, it will come to that. Still, you end up with questions, questions that can't be answered.'

'Such as?'

The sapper's expression twisted. 'Damn, sounds awful, but ... what's in it for us? We find ourselves in an army of the dead in a damned sea where there used to be desert. We're all done with our wars, the fighting's over, and now it looks like we're having to march — and it's a long march, longer than you'd think possible. But it's our road, now, isn't it?'

'And where does it lead, Hedge?'

He shook his head again. 'What's it mean to die? What's it mean to ascend? It's not like we're gonna gather ten thousand worshippers among the living, is it? I mean, the only thing us dead soldiers got in common is that none of us was good enough or lucky enough to survive the fight. We're a host of failures.' He barked a laugh. 'I better remember that one for the bastards. Just to get under their skins.'

Paran glanced back at the carriage. Still no activity there, although the servant had disappeared back inside. He sighed. 'Ascendants, Hedge. Not an easy role to explain — in fact, I've yet to find a worthwhile explanation for what ascendancy is — among all the scholarly tracts I've pored through in Darujhistan's libraries and archives. So, I've had to come up with my own theory.'

'Let's hear it, Captain.'

'All right, we'll start with this. Ascendants who find worshippers become gods, and that binding goes both ways. Ascendants without worshippers are, in a sense, unchained. Unaligned, in the language of the Deck of Dragons. Now, gods who once had worshippers but don't have them any more are still ascendant, but effectively emasculated, and they remain so unless the worship is somehow renewed. For the Elder Gods, that means the spilling of blood on hallowed or once-hallowed ground. For the more primitive spirits and the like, it
could be as simple as the recollection or rediscovery of their name, or some other form of awakening. Mind you, none of that matters if the ascendant in question has been well and truly annihilated.

'So, to backtrack slightly, ascendants, whether gods or not, seem to possess some form of power. Maybe sorcery, maybe personality, maybe something else. And what that seems to mean is, they possess an unusual degree of efficacy—'

'Of what?'

'They're trouble if you mess with them, is what I'm saying. A mortal man punches someone and maybe breaks the victim's nose. An ascendant punches someone and they go through a wall. Now, I don't mean that literally – although that's sometimes the case. Not necessarily physical strength, but strength of will. When an ascendant acts, ripples run through ... everything. And that's what makes them so dangerous. For example, before Fener's expulsion, Treach was a First Hero, an old name for an ascendant, and that's all he was. Spent most of his time either battling other First Heroes, or, towards the end, wandering around in his Soletaken form. If nothing untoward had happened to Treach in that form, his ascendancy would have eventually vanished, lost in the primitive bestial mind of an oversized tiger. But something untoward did happen – actually, two things. Fener's expulsion, and Treach's unusual death. And with those two events, everything changed.'

'All right,' Hedge said, 'that's all just fine. When are you getting to your theory, Captain?'

'Every mountain has a peak, Hedge, and throughout history there have been mountains and mountains – more than we could imagine, I suspect – mountains of humanity, of Jaghut, of T'lan Imass, of Eres'al, Barghast, Trell, and so on. Not just mountains, but whole ranges. I believe ascendancy is a natural phenomenon, an inevitable law of probability. Take a mass of people, anywhere, any kind, and eventually enough pressure will build and a mountain will rise, and it will have a peak. Which is why so many ascendants become gods – after the passing of generations, the great hero's name becomes sacred, representative of some long-lost golden age, and so it goes.'

'So if I understand you, Captain – and I admit, it's not easy and it's never been easy – there's too much pressure these days and because of that there's too many ascendants, and things are getting hairy.'

Paran shrugged. 'It might feel that way. It probably always does. But these things shake themselves out, eventually. Mountains collide, peaks fall, are forgotten, crumble to dust.'

'Captain, are you planning to make a new card in the Deck of Dragons?'

Paran studied the ghost for a long time, then he said, 'In many of the Houses, the role of Soldier already exists—'

'But not unaligned soldiers, Captain. Not ... us.'

'You say you have a long road ahead, sapper. How do you know that? Who is guiding you?'

'I got no answer to that one, Captain. That's why we figured – our payment for this bargain – that you constructing a card for us would, well, be like shaking a handful of wheat flour over an invisible web.'

'Part of the bargain? You might have mentioned that at the start, Hedge.'

'No, better when it's too late.'

'For you, yes. All right, I'll think on it. I admit, you've made me curious, especially since I don't think you and your ghostly army are being directly manipulated. I suspect that what calls to you is something far more ephemeral, more primal. A force of nature, as if some long lost law was being reasserted, and you're the ones who will deliver it. Eventually.'

'An interesting thought, Captain. I always knew you had brains, now I'm finally getting a hint of what they're good for.'

'Now let me ask you a question, Hedge.'
'If you must.'

'That long road ahead of you. Your march – it's to war, isn't it? Against whom?'

'More like what—'

Commotion behind them, the shareholders rushing back to the carriage, the snap of leather and the clunk of buckles as the dozen or so men and women began strapping themselves in place. The horses, suddenly agitated, tossed their heads and stamped, nostrils flaring. The driver had the traces in his hands once more.

'You two!' he said in a growl. 'It's time.'

'Think I'll sit beside the driver,' Hedge said. 'Captain, like the High Mage said, be sure you ride close. I knew how to get us here, but I ain't got a clue what's coming.'

Nodding, Paran headed towards his horse, whilst Hedge clambered up the side of the carriage. The two Pardu women returned from their stations on the bridge and climbed up to take flanking positions on the roof, both checking their heavy crossbows and supply of broad-headed quarrels.

Paran swung himself into the saddle.

A shutter in the side door was opened and the captain could make out Karpolan's round, shiny face. 'We travel perilously fast, Ganoes Paran. If some transformation occurs on the horse you ride, consider abandoning it.'

'And if some transformation besets me?'

'Well, we shall do our best not to abandon you.'

'That's reassuring, Karpolan Demesand.'

A brief smile, then the shutter snapped shut once more.

Another weird cry from the driver and a snap of the traces. The horses lunged forward, carriage slewing straight behind them. Rolling forward. Onto the stone bridge.

Paran rode up alongside it, opposite one of the shareholders. The man threw him a wild, half-mad grin, gloved hands gripping a massive Malazan-made crossbow.

Climbing the slope, then into the mists.

That closed like soft walls round them.

A dozen heartbeats, then chaos. Ochre-skinned creatures swarmed in from both sides, as if they had been clinging beneath the bridge. Long arms, clawed at the ends, short, ape-like legs, small heads that seemed filled with fangs. They flung themselves at the carriage, seeking to drag off the shareholders.

Screams, the thud of quarrels striking bodies, hissing pain from the creatures. Paran's horse reared, forelegs kicking at a beast scrambling beneath it. Sword out, Paran slashed the blade into the back of the creature clinging and biting fierce chunks of meat from the nearest shareholder's left thigh. He saw the flesh and muscle part, revealing ribs. Then blood sluiced out. Squealing, the beast fell away.

More had reached the carriage, and Paran saw one shareholder torn from her perch, swearing as she was dragged down onto the stones, then vanishing beneath seething, smooth-skinned bodies.

The captain swung his horse round and closed on the writhing mass.

No skill involved – it was simply lean down and hack and slash, until the last bleeding body fell away.

The woman lying on the bloody stones looked as though she had been chewed by a shark, then spat out. Yet she lived. Paran sheathed his sword, dismounted and threw the dazed, bleeding woman over a shoulder.
Heavier than she'd looked. He managed to settle her down over the back of his horse, then vaulted once more into the saddle.

The carriage already vanishing into the mists, ochre bodies tumbling from it. The back wheels both rose and thumped as they rolled over flopping corpses.

And between Paran and the carriage, half a hundred or more of the creatures, now wheeling towards him, claws raised and clicking. He drew out his sword again, and drove his heels into the horse's flanks. The animal voiced an indignant grunt, then charged forward. Legs and chest battering bodies aside, Paran slashing right and left, seeing limbs lopped off, skulls opened wide. Hands closed on the shareholder and sought to pull her off. Twisting round, Paran cut at them until they fell away.

A beast landed in his lap.

Hot breath, smelling distinctly of over-ripe peaches. Hinged fangs spreading wide – the damned thing was moments from biting off Paran's face.

He head-butted it, the rim of his helm smashing nose and teeth, blood gushing into Paran's eyes, nose and mouth.

The creature reeled back.

Paran swung his weapon from above, hammering the sword's pomme into the top of the creature's skull. Punching through with twin sprays of blood from its tiny ears. Tugging his weapon free, he shoved the dead beast to the side.

His horse was still pushing forward, squealing as talons and fangs slashed its neck and chest. Paran leant over his mount's neck, flailing with his sword in its defence.

Then they were through, the horse lunging into a canter, then a gallop. All at once, the carriage's battered, swaying and pitching back reared up before them. Free of attackers. Paran dragged on his reins until the horse slowed, and came up alongside. He gestured at the nearest shareholder. 'She's still alive – take her—'

'Is she now?' the man replied, then turned his head and spat out a gleaming red stream.

Paran now saw that blood was spurting from the ragged holes in the man's left leg, and those spurts were slowing down. 'You need a healer and fast—'

'Too late,' the man replied, leaning out to drag the unconscious woman from the back of Paran's horse. More hands reached down from above and took her weight, then pulled her upwards. The dying shareholder sagged back against the carriage, then gave Paran a red-stained smile. 'The spike,' he said. 'Doubles my worth – hope the damned wife's grateful.' As he spoke he fumbled with the harness buckle, then finally pulled it loose. With a final nod at Paran, he let go, and fell.

A tumble and a roll, then ... nothing.

Paran looked back, stared at the motionless body on the bridge. Beasts were swarming towards it. Gods, these people have all lost their minds.

'Stebar's earned the spike!' someone said from the carriage roof. 'Who's got one of his chips?'

Another voice said, 'Here, down the slot – how bad is Thyrss?'

'She'll make it, poor girl, ain't gonna be pretty no more.'

'Knowing her, she'd have been happier with the spike——'

'Not a chance, got no kin, Ephras. What's the point of a spike with no kin?'

'Funny man, Yorad, and I bet you don't even know it.'
'What did I say now?'

The carriage's wild careening had slowed as more and more detritus appeared on the bridge's road. Pieces of corroding armour, broken weapons, bundles of nondescript clothing.

Looking down, Paran saw a slab of wood that looked to have once been a Troughs game-board, now splintered and gnawed down one side as if some creature had tried to eat it. So, here in this deathly underworld, there are things that still need food. Meaning, they're alive. Meaning, I suppose, they don't belong. Intruders, like us. He wondered at all those other visitors to this realm, those who'd fallen to the horde of ochre-hued beast-men. How had they come to be here? An accident, or, like Paran, seeking to cross this damned bridge for a reason?

'Hedge!'

The ghost, perched beside the driver, leaned forward. 'Captain?'

'This realm – how did you know of it?'

'Well, you came to us, didn't you? Figured you was the one who knew about it.'

'That makes no sense. You led, I followed, remember?'

'You wanted to go where the ancient things went, so here we are.'

'But where is here?'

Shrugging, the sapper leaned back.

It was the one bad thing about following gut-feelings, Paran reflected. Where they came from and what fed them was anybody's guess.

After perhaps a third of a league, the slope still perceptibly climbing, the road's surface cleared, and although the mists remained thick, they seemed to have lightened around them, as if some hidden sun of white fire had lifted clear of the horizon. Assuming there was such a horizon. Not every warren played by the same rules, Paran knew.

The driver cursed suddenly and sawed back on the traces, one foot pushing the brake lever. Paran reined in alongside as the train lurched to a halt.

Wreckage ahead, a single, large heap surrounded by scattered pieces.

A carriage.

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Karpolan Demesand's voice emerged from a speak-tube near the roof. 'Nisstar, Artara, if you will, examine yon barricade.'

Paran dismounted, his sword still out, and joined the two Pardu women as they crept cautiously towards the destroyed carriage.

'That's Trygalle Trade Guild,' Paran said in low tones, 'isn't it?'

'Shhh.'

They reached the scene. Paran held back as the shareholders, exchanging gestures, each went to one side, crossbows held at the ready. In moments, they moved out of his line of sight.

The carriage was lying on its side, the roof facing Paran. One back wheel was missing. The copper sheets of the roof looked battered, peeled away in places, cut and gouged in others. On two of the visible iron attachment loops, strips of leather remained.

One of the Pardu women appeared on top, perching on the frame of the side door, then crouching to look
straight down, inside the carriage. A moment later, she disappeared inside. The other shareholder came from around the wreck. Paran studied her. Her nose had been shattered, not long ago, he judged, as the remnant of bruises marred the area beneath her eyes with faint crescents. The eyes above those bruises were now filled with fear.

Behind them, Karpolan Demesand emerged and, the Jaghut at his side and Hedge trailing, they slowly approached.

Paran turned, studied the pale, expressionless visage of the High Mage. 'Do you recognize this particular carriage, Karpolan?'

A nod. 'Trade Mistress Darpareth Vayd. Missing, with all her shareholders, for two years. Ganoes Paran, I must think on this, for she was my superior in the sorcerous arts. I am deeply saddened by this discovery, for she was my friend. Saddened, and alarmed.'

'Do you recall the details of her last mission?'

'Ah, a prescient question. Generally,' he paused, folding his hands on his lap, 'such details remain the property of the Trygalle Trade Guild, for as you must realize, confidentiality is a quality our clients pay for, in fullest trust that we reveal nothing. In this instance, however, two things are clear that mitigate such secrecy. One: it seems, if we continue on, we shall face what Darpareth faced. Two: in this, her last mission, she failed. And presumably, we do not wish to share her fate. Accordingly, we shall here and now pool our talents, first, to determine what destroyed her mission, and secondly, to effect a reasonable defence against the enemy responsible.'

The other Pardu clambered once more into view. Seeing Karpolan she paused, then shook her head.

'No bodies,' Paran said. 'Of course, those hungry beasts we ran into may well have cleaned up afterwards—'

'I think not,' said Ganath. 'I suspect they too fear what lies ahead, and would not venture this far along the bridge. In any case, the damage on that carriage came from something far larger, stronger. If this bridge has a true guardian, then I suspect these poor travellers met it.'

Paran frowned. 'Guardian. Why would there be a guardian? That kind of stuff belongs to fairy tales. How often does someone or something try to cross this bridge? It's got to be rare, meaning there's some guardian with a lot of spare time on its hands. Why not just wander off? Unless the thing has no brain at all, such a geas would drive it mad—'

'Mad enough to tear apart whatever shows up,' Hedge said.

'More like desperate for a scratch behind the ear,' Paran retorted. 'It doesn't make sense. Creatures need to eat, need company—'

'And if the guardian has a master?' Ganath asked.

'This isn't a Hold,' Paran said. 'It has no ruler, no master.'

Karpolan grunted, then said, 'You are sure of this, Ganoes Paran?'

'I am. More or less. This realm is buried, forgotten.'

'It may be, then,' Karpolan mused, 'that someone needs to inform the guardian that such is the case – that its task is no longer relevant. In other words, we must release it from its geas.'

'Assuming such a guardian exists,' Paran said, 'rather than some chance meeting of two forces, both heading the same way.'

The Trygalle master's small eyes narrowed. 'You know more of this, Ganoes Paran?'

'What was Darpareth Vayd's mission here?"
'Ah, we are to exchange secrets, then. Very well. As I recall, the client was from Darujhistan. Specifically, the House of Orr. The contact was a woman, niece of the late Turban Orr. Lady Sedara.'

'And the mission?'

'It seems this realm is home to numerous entities, powers long forgotten, buried in antiquity. The mission involved an assay of such creatures. Since Lady Sedara was accompanying the mission, no other details were available. Presumably, she knew what she was looking for. Now, Ganoes Paran, it is your turn.'

His frown deepening, Paran walked closer to the destroyed carriage. He studied the tears and gouges in the copper sheathing on the roof. 'I'd always wondered where they went,' he said, 'and, eventually, I realized where they were going.' He faced Karpolan Demesand. 'I don't think there's a guardian here. I think the travellers met on this bridge, all headed the same way, and the misfortune was with Darpareth and Sedara Orr. This carriage was destroyed by two Hounds of Shadow.'

'You are certain?'

'I am. I can smell them. My ... kin. 'We'll need to get this moved to one side, over the edge, I suppose.'

'One question,' Karpolan Demesand said. 'What happened to the bodies?'

'Hounds are in the habit of dragging and throwing their victims. Occasionally, they feed, but for the most part they take pleasure in the killing – and they would, at that time, have been both enraged and exuberant. For they had just been freed from Dragnipur, the sword of Anomander Rake.'

'Impossible,' the High Mage snapped.

'No, just exceedingly difficult.'

'How do you know all this?' Karpolan demanded.

'Because I freed them.'

'Then ... you are responsible for this.'

Paran faced the huge man, his now hard, dangerous eyes. 'Much to my regret. You see, they should never have been there in the first place. In Dragnipur. I shouldn't have been, either. And, at the time, I didn't know where they would escape to, or even that they would escape at all. It looked, in fact, as though I'd sent them to oblivion – to the Abyss itself. As it turned out,' he added as he faced the wreckage once more, 'I needed them to do precisely this – I needed them to blaze the trail. Of course, it would have been better if they'd met no-one on the way. It's easy to forget just how nasty they are ...

Karpolan Demesand turned to his shareholders. 'Down, all of you! We must clear the road!'

'Captain,' Hedge muttered, 'you're really starting to make me nervous.'

The wreckage groaned, then slid over the edge, vanishing into the mists. The shareholders, gathered at the side of the bridge, all waited for a sound from below, but there was none. At a command from Karpolan, they returned to their positions on the Trygalle carriage.

It seemed the High Mage was in no mood to conduct idle conversation with Paran, and he caught the Jaghut sorceress eyeing him sidelong a moment before she climbed into the carriage. He sighed. Delivering unpleasant news usually did this – he suspected if trouble arrived there wouldn't be many helping hands reaching down for him. He climbed into the saddle once more and gathered the reins.

They resumed their journey. Eventually, they began on the downslope – the bridge was at least a league long. There was no way to tell, unless one sought to climb beneath the span, whether pillars or buttressing held up this massive edifice; or if it simply hung, suspended and unanchored, above a vast expanse of nothing.

Ahead, something took shape in the mists, and as they drew closer, they could make out a vast gateway that
marked the bridge's end, the flanking uprights thick at the base and tapering as they angled inward to take – precariously, it seemed – the weight of a huge lintel stone. The entire structure was covered with moss.

Karpolan halted the carriage in front of it and, as was his custom, sent the two Pardu shareholders through that gateway. When nothing untoward happened to them and they returned to report that the way beyond was clear – as much as they could make out, anyway – the carriage was driven through.

Only to halt just beyond, as the lead horses splashed into the silty water of a lake or sea.

Paran rode his horse down to the water's edge. Frowning, he looked right, then left, eyes tracking the shoreline.

From the carriage, Hedge spoke: 'Something wrong, Captain?'

'Yes. This lake is what's wrong.'

'Why?'

'It's not supposed to be here.'

'How do you know?'

Dismounting, Paran crouched by the water. No waves – perfect calm. He cupped his hand and dipped it into the cool, silty liquid. Raised it up, sniffed. 'Smells like rot. This is flood water—'

He was interrupted by an eerie, wailing cry, coming from somewhere downshore.

'Hood's breath!' Hedge hissed. 'The lungs that punched that out are huge.'

Straightening, Paran squinted into the vague mists where it seemed the sound had come from. Then he pulled himself into the saddle once more. 'I think I was wrong about there being no guardian,' he said.

Dull thunder, rising up from the ground beneath them. Whatever it was was on its way. 'Let's get going,' Paran said. 'Up the shoreline, and fast.'
CHAPTER ELEVEN

My faith in the gods is this: they are indifferent to my suffering.

Tomlos, Destriant of Fener
7827 Burn's Sleep

His hands reached into another world. In, then out, in, then out again. Taking, giving – Heboric could not tell which, if either. Perhaps nothing more than the way a tongue worried a loose tooth, the unceasing probing that triggered stabs of confirmation that things still weren't quite right. He reached in, and touched something, the impulsive gesture bitter as benediction, as if he could not help but repeat, endlessly, a mocking healer's touch.

To the souls lost in the shattered pieces of jade giants, Heboric offered only lies. Oh, his touch told them of his presence, his attention, and they in turn were reminded of the true lives they once possessed, but what sort of gift could such knowledge provide? He voiced no promises, yet they believed in him nonetheless, and this was worse than torture, for both him and them.

The dead city was two days behind them now, yet its ignorant complacency haunted him still, the ghosts and their insensate, repetitive lives measured out stride by stride again and again. Too many truths were revealed in that travail, and when it came to futility Heboric needed no reminders.

Unseasonal clouds painted silver the sky, behind which the sun slid in its rut virtually unseen. Biting insects swarmed in the cooler air, danced in the muted light on the old traders' road on which Heboric and his comrades travelled, rising up in clouds before them.

The horses snorted to clear their nostrils, rippled the skin of their necks and flanks. Scillara worked through her impressive list of curses, fending off the insects with clouds of rustleaf smoke swirling about her head. Felisin Younger did much the same, but without the blue tirade. Cutter rode ahead, and so, Heboric realized, was both responsible for stirring the hordes and blessed by quickly passing through them.

It seemed that Scillara too had noticed the same thing.

'Why isn't he back here? Then the bloodflies and chigger fleas would be chasing all of us, instead of this – this nightmare!'

Heboric said nothing. Greyfrog was bounding along on the south side of the road, keeping pace. Unbroken scrubland stretched out beyond the demon, whilst to the north ran a ridge of hills – the tail end of the ancient mountain range that held the long-dead city.

Icarium's legacy. Like a god loosed and walking the land, Icarium left bloody footprints. Such creatures should be killed. Such creatures are an abomination. Whereas Fener – Fener had simply disappeared. Dragged as the Boar God had been into this realm, most of its power had been stripped away. To reveal itself would be to invite annihilation. There were hunters out there. I need to find a way, a way to send Fener back. And if Treach didn't like it, too bad. The Boar and the Wolf could share the Throne of War. In fact, it made sense. There were always two sides in a war. Us and them, and neither can rightly be denied their faith. Yes, there was symmetry in such a notion. 'It's true,' he said, 'I have never believed in single answers, never believed in this ... this divisive clash of singularity. Power may have ten thousand faces, but the look in the eyes of every one of them is the same.' He glanced over to see Scillara and Felisin staring at him. 'There's no difference,' he said, 'between speaking aloud or in one's own head – either way, no-one listens.'

'Hard to listen,' Scillara said, 'when what you say makes no sense.'

'Sense takes effort.'

'Oh, I'll tell you what makes sense, old man. Children are a woman's curse. They start with weighing you
down from the inside, then they weigh you down from the outside. For how long? No, not days, not months, not even years. Decades. Babies, better they were born with tails and four legs and eager to run away and crawl into some hole in the ground. Better they could fend for themselves the moment they scuttle free. Now, that would make sense.'

'If that was the way it was,' Felisin said, 'then there'd be no need for families, for villages, for towns and cities. We'd all be living in the wilderness.'

'Instead,' Scillara said, 'we live in a prison. Us women, anyway.'

'It can't be as bad as that,' Felisin insisted.

'Nothing can be done,' Heboric said. 'We each fall into our lives and that's that. Some choices we make, but most are made for us.'

'Well,' Scillara retorted, 'you would think that, wouldn't you? But look at this stupid journey here, Heboric. True, at first we were just fleeing Raraku, that damned sea rising up out of the sands. Then it was that idiot priest of Shadow, and Cutter there, and suddenly we were following you – where? The island of Otataral. Why? Who knows, but it has something to do with those ghost hands of yours, something to do with you righting a wrong. And now I'm pregnant.'

'How does that last detail fit?' Felisin demanded, clearly exasperated.

'It just does, and no, I'm not interested in explaining Gods below, I'm choking on these damned bugs! Cutter! Get back here, you brainless oaf!'

Heboric was amused by the stunned surprise in the young man's face as he turned round at the shout.

The Daru reined in and waited.

By the time the others arrived, he was cursing and slapping at insects.

'Now you know how we feel,' Scillara snapped.

'Then we should pick up our pace,' Cutter said. 'Is everyone all right with that? It'd be good for the horses, besides. They need some stretching out.'

*I think we all need that.* 'Set the pace, Cutter. I'm sure Greyfrog can keep up.'

'He jumps with his mouth open,' Scillara said.

'Maybe we should all try that,' Felisin suggested.

'Hah! I'm full up enough as it is!'

No god truly deserved its acolytes. It was an unequal relationship in every sense, Heboric told himself. Mortals could sacrifice their entire adult life in the pursuit of communion with their chosen god, and what was paid in return for such devotion? Not much at best; often, nothing at all. Was the faint touch from something, someone, far greater in power – was that enough?

*When I touched Fener*...

The Boar God would have been better served, he realized, with Heboric's indifference. The thought cut into him like a saw-bladed, blunt knife – nothing smooth, nothing precise – and, as Cutter led them into a canter down the track, Heboric could only bare his teeth in a hard grimace against the spiritual pain.

From which rose a susurration of voices, all begging him, pleading with him. For what he could not give. Was this how gods felt? Inundated with countless prayers, the seeking of blessing, the gift of redemption sought by myriad lost souls. So many that the god could only reel back, pummelled and stunned, and so answer every beseeching voice with nothing but silence.
But redemption was not a gift. Redemption had to be earned.

*And so on we ride ...*

Scillara drew up alongside Cutter. She studied him until he became aware of the attention and swung his head round.

'What is it? What's wrong?'

'Who said anything was wrong?'

'Well, it's been a rather long list of complaints from you of late, Scillara.'

'No, it's been a short list. I just like repeating myself.'

She watched him sigh, then he shrugged and said, 'We're maybe a week from the coast. I'm beginning to wonder if it was a good thing to take this overland route ... through completely unpopulated areas. We're always rationing our food and we're all suffering from that, excepting maybe you and Greyfrog. And we're growing increasingly paranoid, fleeing from every dust-trail and journey-house.' He shook his head. 'Nothing's after us. We're not being hunted. Nobody gives a damn what we're up to or where we're going.'

'What if you're wrong?' Scillara asked. She looped the reins over the saddle horn and began repacking her pipe. His horse misstepped, momentarily jolting her. She winced. 'Some advice for you, Cutter. If you ever get pregnant, don't ride a horse.'

'I'll try to remember that,' he said. 'Anyway, you're right. I might be wrong. But I don't think I am. It's not like we've set a torrid pace, so if hunters were after us, they'd have caught up long ago.'

She had an obvious reply to that, but let it go. 'Have you been looking around, Cutter? As we've travelled? All these weeks in this seeming wasteland?'

'Only as much as I need to, why?'

'Heboric's chosen this path, but it's not by accident. Sure, it's a wasteland now, but it wasn't always one. I've started noticing things, and not just the obvious ones like that ruined city we passed near. We've been on old roads – roads that were once bigger, level, often raised. Roads from a civilization that's all gone now. And look at that stretch of ground over there,' she pointed southward. 'See the ripples? That's furrowing, old, almost worn away, but when the light lengthens you can start to make it out. It was all once tilled. Fertile. I've been seeing this for weeks, Cutter. Heboric's track is taking us through the bones of a dead age. Why?'

'Why don't you ask him?'

'I don't care. I was asking you.'

'Well, since he's right behind us, he's probably listening right now, Scillara.'

'I don't care. I was asking you.'

'Well, I don't know why.'

'I do,' she said.

'Oh. All right, then, why?'

'Heboric likes his nightmares. That's why.'

Cutter met her eyes, then the Daru twisted in his saddle and looked back at Heboric.

Who said nothing.

'Death and dying,' Scillara continued. 'The way we suck the land dry. The way we squeeze all colour from
every scene, even when that scene shows us paradise. And what we do to the land, we also do to each other.
We cut each other down. Even Sha'ik's camp had its tiers, its hierarchy, keeping people in their place.'

'You don't have to tell me about that,' Cutter said. 'I lived under something similar, in Darujhistan.'

'I wasn't finished. It's why Bidithal found followers for his cult. What gave it its strength was the injustice,
the unfairness, and the way bastards always seemed to win. You see, Bidithal had been one of those bastards,
one. Luxuriating in his power – then the Malazans arrived, and they tore it all apart, and Bidithal found
himself on the run, just one more hare fleeing the wolves. For him, well, he wanted it back, all that power,
and this new cult he created was for that purpose. The problem was, either he was lucky or a genius, because the
idea behind his cult – not the vicious rituals he imposed, but the idea – it struck a nerve. It reached the
dispossessed, and that was its brilliance—'

'It wasn't his idea,' Heboric said behind them.

'Then whose was it?' Cutter asked.

'It belongs to the Crippled God. The Chained One. A broken creature, betrayed, wounded, imperfect in the
way of street beggars, abandoned urchins, the physically and the morally damaged. And the promise of
something better, beyond death itself – the very paradise Scillara spoke of, but one we could not deface. In
other words, the dream of a place immune to our natural excesses, to our own depravity, and accordingly, to
exist within it is to divest oneself of all those excesses, all those depravities. You just have to die first.'

'Do you feel fear, Heboric?' Scillara asked. 'You describe a very seductive faith.'

'Yes, to both. If, however, its heart is in fact a lie, then we must make the truth a weapon, a weapon that, in
the end, must reach for the Crippled God himself. To shy from that final act would be to leave unchallenged the
greatest injustice of all, the most profound unfairness, and the deepest betrayal imaginable.'

'If it's a lie,' Scillara said. 'Is it? How do you know?'

'Woman, if absolution is free, then all that we do here and now is meaningless.'

'Well, maybe it is.'

'Then it would not even be a question of justifying anything – justification itself would be irrelevant. You
invite anarchy – you invite chaos itself.'

She shook her head. 'No, because there's one force more powerful than all of that.'

'Oh?' Cutter asked. 'What?'

Scillara laughed. 'What I was talking about earlier.' She gestured once more at the ancient signs of tillage.
'Look around, Cutter, look around.'

Iskaral Pust plucked at the thick strands of web covering Mappo Runt's massive chest. 'Get rid of this! Before
he wakes up, you damned hag. You and your damned moon – look, it's going to rain. This is a desert – what's it
doing raining? It's all your fault.' He glanced up, smiling evilly. 'She suspects nothing, the miserable cow. Oh I
can't wait.' Straightening, he scurried back to the long bamboo stick he'd found – bamboo, for god's sake – and
resumed drilling the tiny fixing holes in the base.

Twisted wire eyelets, bound at intervals with wet gut right up to the finely tapered end. A carved and
polished wooden spool and half a league's worth of Mogora hair, spun together and felted or something similar,
strong enough to reel in anything, including a miserable cow flopping about in the shallows. True, he'd have to
wait a year or two, until the little wriggling ones grew to a decent size. Maybe he'd add a few bigger ones –
there were those giant catfish he'd seen in that flooded realm, the one with all the monsters padding the
shorelines. Iskaral Pust shivered at the recollection, but a true lover of fishing would understand the lengths an
aficionado would go to in the hunt for worthy spawn. Even the extreme necessity of killing demons and such.
Granted, that particular sojourn had been a little hairy. But he'd come back with a string of beauties.
As a child he'd wanted to learn the art of angling, but the women and elders in the tribe weren't interested in that, no, just weirs and collecting pools and nets. That was harvesting, not fishing, but young Iskaral Pust, who'd once run away with a caravan and had seen the sights of Li Heng – for a day and a half, until his great-grandmother had come to retrieve him and drag him screaming like a gutted piglet back to the tribe – well, Iskaral Pust had discovered the perfect expression of creative predation, an expression which was – as everyone knew – the ideal manly endeavour.

Soon, then, and he and his mule would have the ultimate excuse to leave the hoary temple of home. Going fishing, dear. Ah, how he longed to say those words.

'You are an idiot,' Mogora said.

'A clever idiot, woman, and that's a lot more cleverer than you.' He paused, eyeing her, then said, 'Now all I need to do is wait until she's asleep, so I can cut off all her hair – she won't notice, it's not like we have silver mirrors hanging about, is it? I'll mix it all up, the hair from her head, from her ears, from under her arms, from —'

'You think I don't know what you're up to?' Mogora asked, then cackled as only an old woman begotten of hyenas could. 'You are not just an idiot. You're also a fool. And deluded, and immature, and obsessive, and petty, spiteful, patronizing, condescending, defensive, aggressive, ignorant, wilful, inconsistent, contradictory, and you're ugly as well.'

'So what of it?'

She gaped at him like a toothless spider. 'You have a brain like pumice stone – throw stuff at it and it just sinks in! Disappears. Vanishes. Even when I piss on it, the piss just poofs! Gone! Oh how I hate you, husband. With all your obnoxious, smelly habits – gods, picking your nose for breakfast – I still get sick thinking about it – a sight I am cursed never to forget—'

'Oh be quiet. There's nutritious pollen entombed in snot, as everyone well knows—'

A heavy sigh interrupted him, and both Dal Honese looked down at Mappo. Mogora scrabbled over and began stripping away the webs from the Trell's seamed face.

Iskaral Pust leaned closer. 'What's happened to his skin? It's all lined and creased – what did you do to him, woman?'

'The mark of spiders, Magi,' she replied. 'The price for healing.'

'Every strand's left a line!'

'Well, he was no beauty to begin with.'

A groan, then Mappo half-lifted a hand. It fell back and he groaned again.

'He's now got a spider's brain, too,' Iskaral predicted. 'He'll start spitting on his food – like you do, and you dare call picking my nose disgusting.'

'No self-respecting creature does what you did this morning, Iskaral Pust. You won't get no spiders picking their noses, will you? Ha, you know I'm right.'

'No I don't. I was just picturing a spider with eight legs up its nose, and that reminded me of you. You need a haircut, Mogora, and I'm just the man to do it.'

'Come near me with intentions other than amorous and I'll stick you.'

'Amorous. What a horrible thought—'

'What if I told you I was pregnant?'

'I'd kill the mule.'
She leapt at him.

Squealing, then spitting and scratching, they rolled in the dust.

The mule watched them with placid eyes.

Crushed and scattered, the tiles that had once made the mosaic of Mappo Runt's life were little more than faint glimmers, as if dispersed at the bottom of a deep well. Disparate fragments he could only observe, his awareness of their significance remote, and for a seemingly long time they had been retreating from him, as if he was slowly, inexorably floating towards some unknown surface.

Until the silver threads arrived, descending like rain, sleeting through the thick, murky substance surrounding him. And he felt their touch, and then their weight, halting his upward progress, and, after a time of motionlessness, Mappo began sinking back down. Towards those broken pieces far below.

Where pain awaited him. Not of the flesh – there was no flesh, not yet – this was a searing of the soul, the manifold wounds of betrayal, of failure, of self-recrimination, the very fists that had shattered all that he had been ... before the fall.

Yet still the threads drew the pieces together, unmindful of agony, ignoring his every screamed protest.

He found himself standing amidst tall pillars of stone that had been antler-chiselled into tapering columns. Heavy wrought-iron clouds scudded over one half of the sky, a high wind spinning strands across the other half, filling a void – as if something had punched through from the heavens and the hole was slow in healing. The pillars, Mappo saw, rose on all sides, scores of them, forming some pattern indefinable from where he stood in their midst. They cast faint shadows across the battered ground, and his gaze was drawn to those shadows, blankly at first, then with growing realization. Shadows cast in impossible directions, forming a faint array, a web, reaching out on all sides.

And, Mappo now understood, he stood at its very centre.

A young woman stepped into view from behind one of the pillars. Long hair the colours of dying flames, eyes the hue of beaten gold, dressed in flowing black silks. 'This,' she said in the language of the Trell, 'is long ago. Some memories are better left alone.'

'I have not chosen it,' Mappo said. 'I do not know this place.'

'Jacuruku, Mappo Runt. Four or five years since the Fall. Yet one more abject lesson in the dangers that come with pride.' She lifted her arms, watched as the silks slid free, revealing unblemished skin, smooth hands. 'Ah, look at me. I am young again. Extraordinary, that I once believed myself fat. Does it afflict us all, I wonder, the way one's sense of self changes over time? Or, do most people contend, wilfully or otherwise, a changeless persistence in their staid lives? When you have lived as long as I have, of course, no such delusions survive.' She looked up, met his eyes. 'But you know this, Trell, don't you? The gift of the Nameless Ones shrouds you, the longevity haunts your eyes like scratched gemstones, worn far past beauty, far past even the shimmer of conceit.'

'Who are you?' Mappo asked.

'A queen about to be driven from her throne, banished from her empire. My vanity is about to suffer an ignominious defeat.'

'Are you an Elder Goddess? I believe I know you ...' He gestured. 'This vast web, the unseen pattern amidst seeming chaos. Shall I name you?'

'Best you did not. I have since learned the art of hiding.

Nor am I inclined to grant favours. Mogora, that old witch, will rue this day. Mind you, perhaps she is not to blame. There is a whisper in the shadows about you, Mappo. Tell me, what possible interest would Shadowthrone have in you? Or in Icarium, for that matter?'
He started. *Icarium. I failed him – Abyss below, what has happened? 'Does he yet live?*

’He does, and the Nameless Ones have gifted him with a new companion.’ She half-smiled. ’You have been ... discarded. Why, I wonder? Perhaps some failing of purpose, a faltering – you have lost the purity of your vow, haven’t you?*

He looked away. ’Why have they not killed him, then?’

She shrugged. ’Presumably, they foresee a use for his talents. Ah, the notion terrifies you, doesn’t it? Can it be true that you have, until this moment, retained your faith in the Nameless Ones?’

’No. I am distressed by the notion of what they will release. Icarium is not a weapon—’

’Oh you fool, of course he is. They made him, and now they will use him ... ah, now I understand Shadowthrone. Clever bastard. Of course, I am offended that he would so blithely assume my allegiance. And even more offended to realize that, in this matter, his assumption was correct.’ She paused, then sighed. ’It is time to send you back.’

’Wait – you said something – the Nameless Ones, that they made Icarium. I thought—’

’Forged by their own hands, and then, through the succession of guardians like you, Mappo, honed again and yet again. Was he as deadly when he first crawled from the wreckage they’d made of his young life? As deadly as he is now? I would imagine not.’ She studied him. ’My words wound you. You know, I dislike Shadowthrone more and more, as my every act and every word here complies with his nefarious expectation. I wound you, then realize that he needs you wounded. How is it he knows us so well?’

’Send me back.’

’Icarium’s trail grows cold.’

’Now.’

’Oh, Mappo, you incite me unto weeping. I did that, on occasion, when I was young. Although, granted, most of my tears were inspired by self-pity. And so, we are transformed. Leave now, Mappo Runt. Do what you must.’

He found himself lying on the ground, bright sun overhead. Two beasts were fighting nearby – no, he saw as he turned his head, two people. Slathered in dusty spit, dark streaks of gritty sweat, tugging handfuls of hair, kicking and gouging.

’Gods below,’ Mappo breathed. ’Dal Honese.’

They ceased scrapping, looked over.

’Don’t mind us,’ Iskaral Pust said with a blood-smeared smile, ’we’re married.’

There was no outrunning it. Scaled and bear-like, the beast massed as much as the Trygalle carriage, and its long, loping run covered more ground than the terrified horses could manage, exhausted as they now were. The red and black, ridged scales covering the animal were each the size of bucklers, and mostly impervious to missile fire, as had been proved by the countless quarrels that had skidded from its hide as it drew ever closer. It possessed a single, overlarge eye, faceted like an insect’s and surrounded by a projecting ridge of protective bone. Its massive jaws held double rows of sabre teeth, each one as long as a man’s forearm. Old battle-scars had marred the symmetry of the beast’s wide, flat head.

The distance between the pursuer and the pursued had closed to less than two hundred paces. Paran abandoned his over-the-shoulder study of the beast and urged his horse ahead. They were pounding along a rocky shoreline. Twice they had clattered over the bones of some large creature, whale-like although many of the bones had been split and crushed. Up ahead and slightly inland, the land rose into something like a hill – as
much as could be found in this realm. Paran waved towards it. 'That way!' he shouted to the driver.

'What?' the man shrieked. 'Are you mad?'

'One last push! Then halt and leave the rest to me!'

The old man shook his head, yet steered the horses up onto the slope, then drove them hard as, hoofs churning in the mud, they strained to pull the huge carriage uphill.

Paran slowed his horse once more, caught a glimpse of shareholders gathered round the back of the carriage, all staring at him as he reined in, directly in the beast's path.

One hundred paces.

Paran fought to control his panicking horse, even as he drew a wooden card from his saddlebag. On which he scored a half-dozen lines with his thumbnail. A moment to glance up – fifty paces, head lowering, jaws opening wide. Oh, a little close—

Two more deeper scores into the wood, then he flung the card out, into the path of the charging creature.

Four soft words under his breath—

The card did not fall, but hung, motionless.

The scaled bear reached it, voicing a bellowing roar – and vanished.

Paran's horse reared, throwing him backward, his boots leaving the stirrups as he slid onto its rump, then off, landing hard to skid in the mud. He picked himself up, rubbing at his behind.

Shareholders rushed down to gather round him.

'How'd you do that?'

'Where'd it go?'

'Hey, if you coulda done that any time what was we runnin' for?'

Paran shrugged. 'Where – who knows? And as for the "how", well, I am Master of the Deck of Dragons. Might as well make the grand title meaningful.'

Gloved hands slapped his shoulders – harder than necessary, but he noted their relieved expressions, the terror draining from their eyes.

Hedge arrived. 'Nice one, Captain. I didn't think any of you'd make it. From what I saw, though, you left things nearly too late – too close. Saw your mouth moving – some kind of spell or something? Didn't know you were a mage—'

'I'm not. I was saying "I hope this works"!'

Once again, everyone stared at him.

Paran walked over to his horse.

Hedge said, 'Anyway, from that hilltop you can see our destination. The High Mage thought you should know.'

From the top of the hill, five huge black statues were visible in the distance, the intervening ground broken by small lakes and marsh grasses. Paran studied the rearing edifices for a time. Bestial hounds, seated on their haunches, perfectly rendered yet enormous in scale, carved entirely of black stone.

'About what you had expected?' Hedge asked, clambering back aboard the carriage.
'Wasn't sure,' Paran replied. 'Five ... or seven. Well, now I know. The two shadow hounds from Dragnipur found their ... counterparts, and so were reunited. Then, it seems, someone freed them.'

'Something paid us a visit,' Hedge said, 'the night us ghosts annihilated the Dogslayers. Into Sha'ik's camp.'

Paran turned to regard the ghost. 'You haven't mentioned this before, sapper.'

'Well, they didn't last long anyway.'

'What in Hood's name do you mean, they didn't last long?'

'I mean, someone killed them.'

'Killed them? Who? Did a god visit that night? One of the First Heroes? Or some other ascendant?'

Hedge was scowling. 'This is all second-hand, mind you, but from what I gathered, it was Toblakai. One of Sha'ik's bodyguards, a friend of Leoman's. Afraid I don't know much about him, just the name, or, I suppose, title, since it's not a real name—'

'A bodyguard named Toblakai killed two Deragoth Hounds?'

The ghost shrugged, then nodded. 'Aye, that's about right, Captain.'

Paran drew off his helm and ran a hand through his hair — gods below, do I need a bath — then returned his attention to the distant statues and the intervening lowlands. 'Those lakes look shallow — we should have no trouble getting there.'

The carriage door opened and the Jaghut sorceress Ganath emerged. She eyed the black stone monuments. 'Dessimbelackis. One soul made seven — he believed that would make him immortal. An ascendant eager to become a god—'

'The Deragoth are far older than Dessimbelackis,' Paran said.

'Convenient vessels,' she said. 'Their kind were nearly extinct. He found the few last survivors and made use of them.'

Paran grunted, then said, 'That was a mistake. The Deragoth had their own history, their own story and it was not told in isolation.'

'Yes,' Ganath agreed, 'the Eres'al, who were led unto domestication by the Hounds that adopted them. The Eres'al, who would one day give rise to the Imass, who would one day give rise to humans.'

'As simple as that?' Hedge asked.

'No, far more complicated,' the Jaghut replied, 'but for our purposes, it will suffice.'

Paran returned to his horse. 'Almost there — I don't want any more interruptions — so let's get going, shall we?'

The water they crossed stank with decay, the lake bottom thick with black mud and, it turned out, starfish-shaped leeches. The train of horses struggled hard to drag the carriage through the sludge, although it was clear to Paran that Karpolan Demesand was using sorcery to lighten the vehicle in some way. Low mudbanks ribboning the lake afforded momentary respite, although these were home to hordes of biting insects that swarmed hungrily as the shareholders came down from the carriage to pull leeches from horse-legs. One such bank brought them close to the far shore, separated only by a narrow channel of sluggish water that they crossed without difficulty.

Before them was a long, gentle slope of mud-streaked gravel. Reaching the summit slightly ahead of the carriage, Paran reined in.
Nearest him, two huge pedestals surrounded in rubble marked where statues had once been. In the eternally damp mud around them were tracks, footprints, signs of some kind of scuffle. Immediately beyond rose the first of the intact monuments, the dull black stone appallingly lifelike in its rendition of hide and muscle. At its base stood a structure of some kind.

The carriage arrived, and Paran heard the side door open. Shareholders were leaping down to establish a defensive perimeter.

Dismounting, Paran walked towards the structure, Hedge coming up alongside him.

'Someone built a damned house,' the sapper said.

'Doesn't look lived in.'

'Not now, it don't.'

Constructed entirely from driftwood, the building was roughly rectangular, the long sides parallel to the statue's pedestal. No windows were visible, nor, from this side, any entrance. Paran studied it for a time, then headed towards one end. 'I don't think this was meant as a house,' he said. 'More like a temple.'

'Might be right – that driftwood makes no joins and there ain't no chinking or anything to fill the gaps. A mason would look at this and say it was for occasional use, which makes it sound more like a temple or a corral ...'

They reached one end and saw a half-moon doorway.

Branches had been set in rows in the loamy ground before it, creating a sort of walkway. Muddy feet had trod its length, countless sets, but none very recent.

'Wore leather moccasins,' Hedge observed, crouching close to study the nearest prints. 'Seams were topside except at the back of the heel where there's a cross-stitch pattern. If this was Genabackis, I'd say Rhivi, except for one thing.'

'What?' Paran asked.

'Well, these folk have wide feet. Really wide.'

The ghost's head slowly turned towards the building's entrance. 'Captain, someone died in there.'

Paran nodded. 'I can smell it.'

They looked over as Ganath and Karpolan Demesand – the latter flanked by the two Pardu shareholders – approached. The Trygalle merchant-mage made a face as the foul stench of rotting meat reached him. He scowled over at the open doorway. 'The ritual spilling of blood,' he said, then uncharacteristically spat. 'These Deragoth have found worshippers. Master of the Deck, will this detail prove problematic?'

'Only if they show up,' Paran said. 'After that, well, they might end up having to reconsider their faith. This could prove tragic for them ...'

'Are you reconsidering?' Karpolan asked.

'I wish I had that luxury. Ganath, will you join me in exploring the interior of the temple?'

Her brows rose fractionally, then she nodded. 'Of course. I note that darkness rules within – do you have need for light?'

'It wouldn't hurt.'

Leaving the others, they walked side by side towards the doorway. In a low voice, Ganath said, 'You suspect as I do, Ganoes Paran.'
'Yes.'

'Karpolan Demesand is no fool. He will realize before long.'

'Yes.'

'Then we should display brevity in our examination.'

'Agreed.'

Reaching the doorway, Ganath gestured and a dull, bluish light slowly rose in the chamber beyond.

They stepped within.

A single room – no inner walls. The floor was mud, packed by traffic. A shattered, up-ended tree-stump dominated the centre, the roots reaching out almost horizontally, as if the tree had grown on flat bedrock, sending its tendrils out to all sides. In the centre of this makeshift altar the core of the bole itself had been carved into a basin shape, filled now by a pool of black, dried blood. Bound spreadeagled to outstretched roots were two corpses, both women, once bloated by decay but now rotted into gelatinous consistency as if melting, bones protruding here and there. Dead maggots lay in heaps beneath each body.

'Sedora Orr,' Paran surmised, 'and Darpareth Vayd.'

'That seems a reasonable assumption,' Ganath said. 'The Trygalle sorceress must have been injured in some way, given her stated prowess.'

'Well, that carriage was a mess.'

'Indeed. Have we seen enough, Ganoes Paran?'

'Blood ritual – an Elder propitiation. I would think the Deragoth have been drawn near.'

'Yes, meaning you have little time once you have effected their release.'

'I hope Karpolan is up to this.' He glanced over at the Jaghut. 'In a true emergency, Ganath, can you ... assist?'

'Perhaps. As you know, I am not pleased with what you intend here. What would please me even less, however, is being torn apart by Hounds of Darkness.'

'I share that aversion. Good. So, if I call upon your assistance, Ganath, you will know what to do?'

'Yes.'

Paran turned about. 'It may sound unreasonable,' he said, 'but my sympathy for the likely plight of these worshippers has diminished somewhat.'

'Yes, that is unreasonable. Your kind worship from fear, after all. And what you unleash here will be the five faces of that fear. And so shall these poor people suffer.'

'If they weren't interested in the attention of their gods, Ganath, they would have avoided the spilling of blood on consecrated ground.'

'Someone among them sought that attention, and the power that might come from it. A High Priest or shaman, I suspect.'

'Well then, if the Hounds don't kill that High Priest, his followers will.'

'A harsh lesson, Ganoes Paran.'

'Tell that to these two dead women.'
The Jaghut made no reply.

They walked from the temple, the light fading behind them.

Paran noted Karpolan Demesand's fixed regard, the dread plain, undeniable, and he slowly nodded. The Trygalle master turned away and, exhausted as he had been earlier, his weariness seemed to increase tenfold.

Hedge came close. 'Could've been shareholders,' he suggested.

'No,' said Ganath. 'Two women, both expensively attired. One must presume that the shareholders met their fate elsewhere.'

Paran said to Hedge, 'Now comes your final task, sapper. Summoning the Deragoth – but consider this first – they're close, and we need time to—'

'Run like Hood's bowels, aye.' Hedge lifted a satchel into view. 'Now, before you ask me where I been hiding this, don't bother. Here in this place, details like that don't matter.' He grinned. 'Some people would like to take gold with 'em when they go. Me, I'll take Moranth munitions over gold any day. After all, you don't know what you're going to meet on the other side, right? So, it's always better holding onto the option of blowing things up.'

'Wise counsel, Hedge. And those munitions will work here?'

'Absolutely, Captain. Death once called this home, remember?'

Paran studied the nearest statue. 'You intend to shatter them.'

'Aye.'

'Timed charge.'

'Aye.'

'Only, you have five to set, and the farthest one looks two, three hundred paces away.'

'Aye. That's going to be a problem – well, let's call it a challenge. Granted, Fid's better at this finesse stuff than me. But tell me something, Captain – you're sure these Deragoth ain't just going to hang round here?'

'I'm sure. They'll return to their home realm – that's what the first two did, didn't they?'

'Aye, but they had their shadows. Might be these ones will go hunting their own first.'

Paran frowned. He'd not considered that. 'Oh, I see. Into the Realm of Shadow, then.'

'If that's where the Hounds of Shadow are at the moment, aye.'

Damn. 'All right, set your charges, Hedge, but don't start the sand grains running just yet.'

'Right.'

Paran watched the sapper head off. Then he drew out his Deck of Dragons. Paused, glancing over at Ganath, then Karpolan Demesand. Both saw what he held in his hands.

The Trygalle master visibly blanched, then hurried back to his carriage. After a moment – and a long, unreadable look – the Jaghut followed suit.

Paran allowed himself a small smile. Yes, why announce yourselves to whomever I'm about to call upon? He squatted, setting the deck face-down on the mudstained walkway of branches. Then lifted the top card and set it down to the right. High House Shadow – who's in charge here, damned Deck, you or me? 'Shadowthrone,' he murmured, 'I require your attention.'

The murky image of the Shadow House remained singularly lifeless on the lacquered card.
'All right,' Paran said, 'I'll revise my wording.

Shadowthrone, talk to me here and now or everything you've done and everything you're planning to do will get, quite literally, torn to pieces.'

A shimmer, further obscuring the House, then something like a vague figure, seated on a black throne. A voice hissed out at him, 'This had better be important. I'm busy and besides, even the idea of a Master of the Deck nauseates me, so get on with it.'

'The Deragoth are about to be released, Shadowthrone.'

Obvious agitation. 'What gnat-brained idiot would do that?'

'Can't be helped, I'm afraid—'

'You!'

'Look, I have my reasons, and they will be found in Seven Cities.'

'Oh,' the figure settled back down, 'those reasons. Well, yes. Clever, even. But still profoundly stupid.'

'Shadowthrone,' Paran said, 'the two Hounds of Shadow that Rake killed. The two taken by Dragnipur.'

'What about them?'

'I'm not sure how much you know, but I freed them from the sword.' He waited for another bout of histrionics, but ... nothing. 'Ah, so you know that. Good. Well, I have discovered where they went ... here, where they conjoined with their counterparts, and were then freed – no, not me. Now, I understand that they have since been killed. For good, this time.'

Shadowthrone raised a long-fingered hand that filled most of the card. Closed it into a fist. 'Let me see,' the god's voice purred, 'if I understand you.' One finger snapped upward. 'The Nameless Idiots go and release Dejim Nebrahl. Why? Because they're idiots. Their own lies caught up with them, so they needed to get rid of a servant who was doing what they wanted him to do in the first place, only doing it too well!' Shadowthrone's voice was steadily climbing in pitch and volume. A second finger shot into view. 'Then, you, the Master Idiot of the Deck of Dragons, decide to release the Deragoth, to get rid of Dejim Nebrahl. But wait, even better!' A third finger. 'Some other serious nasty wandering Seven Cities just killed two Deragoth, and maybe that nasty is still close by, and would like a few more trophies to drag behind his damned horse!' His voice was now a shriek. 'And now! Now!' The hand closed back into a fist, shaking about. 'You want me to send the Hounds of Shadow to Seven Cities! Because it's finally occurred to that worm-ridden walnut you call a brain that the Deragoth won't bother with Dejim Nebrahl until they find my Hounds! And if they come looking here in my realm, there'll be no stopping them!' He halted suddenly, the fist motionless. Then various fingers sprang into view in an increasingly chaotic pattern. Shadowthrone snarled and the frenzied hand vanished. A whisper: 'Pure genius. Why didn't I think of that?' The tone began rising once more. 'Why? Because I'm not an idiot!!'

With that the god's presence winked out.

Paran grunted, then said, 'You never told me if you were going to send the Hounds of Shadow to Seven Cities.'

He thought then that he heard a faint scream of frustration, but perhaps it was only imagined. Paran returned the card to the deck, put it back into an inside pocket, and slowly straightened. 'Well,' he sighed, 'that wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it'd be.'

By the time Hedge returned, both Ganath and Karpolan had reappeared, their glances towards Paran decidedly uneasy.

The ghost gestured Paran closer and said quietly, 'It ain't going to work the way we wanted it, Captain. Too much distance between them – by the time I get to the closest one, the farthest one will have gone up, and if
those Hounds are close, well, like I said, it ain't going to work.'

'What do you suggest?'

'You ain't going to like it. I sure don't, but it's the only way.'

'Out with it, sapper.'

'Leave me behind. Get going. Now.'

'Hedge—'

'No, listen, it makes sense. I'm already dead – I can find my own way out.'

'Maybe you can find your own way out, Hedge. More likely what's left of you will get torn to pieces, if not by the Deragoth, then any of a host of other local nightmares.'

'Captain, I don't need this body – it's just for show, so's you got a face to look at. Trust me, it's the only way you and the others are going to get out of this alive.'

'Let's try a compromise,' Paran said. 'We wait as long as we can.'

Hedge shrugged. 'As you like, just don't wait too long, Captain.'

'Get on your way, then, Hedge. And ... thank you.'

'Always an even trade, Captain.'

The ghost headed off. Paran turned to Karpolan Demesand. 'How confident are you,' he asked, 'about getting us out of here fast?'

'This part should be relatively simple,' the Trygalle sorcerer replied. 'Once a path is found into a warren, its relationship to others becomes known. The Trygalle Trade Guild's success is dependent entirely upon its Surveyants – its maps, Ganoes Paran. With each mission, those maps become more complete.'

'Those are valuable documents,' Paran observed. 'I trust you keep them well protected.'

Karpolan Demesand smiled, and said nothing.

'Prepare the way, then,' Paran said.

Hedge was already out of sight, lost somewhere in the gloom beyond the nearest statues. Mists had settled in the depressions, but the mercurial sky overhead seemed as remote as ever. For all that, Paran noticed, the light was failing. Had their sojourn here encompassed but a single day? That seemed ... unlikely.

The bark of a munition reached him – a sharper. 'That's the signal,' Paran said, striding over to his horse. 'The farthest statue will go first.' He swung himself into the saddle, guided his horse closer to the carriage, into which Karpolan and Ganath had already disappeared. The shutter on the window slid to one side as he arrived.

'Captain—'

A thunderous detonation interrupted him, and Paran turned to see a column of smoke and dust rising.

'Captain, it seems – much to my surprise—'

A second explosion, closer this time, and another statue seemed to simply vanish.

'As I was saying, it appears my options are far more limited than I first—'

From the distance came a deep, bestial roar.

_The first Deragoth—_
'Ganoes Paran! As I was saying—'

The third statue detonated, its base disappearing within an expanding, billowing wave of smoke, stone and dust. Front legs shorn through, the huge edifice pitched forward, jagged cracks sweeping through the rock, and began its descent. Then struck.

The carriage jumped, then bounced back down on its ribbed stanchions. Glass broke somewhere inside.

The reverberations of the concussion rippled through the ground.

Horses screamed and fought their bits, eyes rolling.

A second howl shook the air.

Paran squinted through the dust and smoke, seeking Hedge somewhere between the last statue to fall and the ones yet to be destroyed. But in the gathering darkness he saw no movement. All at once, the fourth statue erupted. Some vagary of sequence tilted the monument to one side, and as it toppled, it struck the fifth.

'We must leave!'

The shriek was Karpolan Demesand's.

'Hold on—'

'Ganoes Paran, I am no longer confident—'

'Just hold it—'

A third howl, echoed by the Deragoth that had already arrived – and those last two roars were ... close.

'Shit.' He could not see Hedge – the last statue, already riven with impact fissures, suddenly pitched downward as the munitions at its base exploded.

'Paran!'

'All right – open the damned gate!'

The train of horses reared, then surged forward, slewing the carriage round as they began a wild descent on the slope. Swearing, Paran kicked his horse into motion, risking a final glance back—

—to see a huge, hump-shouldered beast emerge from the clouds of dust, its eyes lambent as they fixed on Paran and the retreating carriage. The Deragoth's massive, broad head lowered, and it began a savagely fast sprint.

'Karpolan!'

The portal opened like a popped blister – watery blood or some other fluid spraying from its edges – directly in front of them. A charnel wind battered them. 'Karpolan? Where—'

The train of horses, screaming one and all, plunged into the gate, and a heartbeat later Paran followed. He heard it sear shut behind him, and then, from all sides – madness.

Rotted faces, gnawed hands reaching up, long-dead eyes imploring as decayed mouths opened – 'Take us! Take us with you!'

'Don't leave!'

'He's forgotten us – please, I beg you—'

'Hood cares nothing—'

Bony fingers closed on Paran, pulled, tugged, then began clawing at him. Others had managed to grab hold
of projections on the carriage and were being dragged along.

The pleas shifted into anger – ‘Take us – or we will tear you to pieces!’

‘Cut them – bite them – tear them apart!’

Paran struggled to free his right arm, managed to close his hand on the grip of his sword, then drag it free. He began flailing the blade on each side.

The shrieks from the horses were insanity’s own voice, and now shareholders were screaming as well, as they hacked down at reaching hands and arms.

Twisting about in his saddle as he chopped at the clawing limbs, Paran glimpsed a sweeping vista – a plain of writhing figures, the undead, every face turned now towards them – undead, in their tens of thousands – undead, so crowding the land that they could but stand, out to every horizon, raising now a chorus of despair—

‘Ganath!’ Paran roared. ‘Get us out of here!’

A sharp retort, as of cracking ice. Bitter wind swirled round them, and the ground pitched down on one side.

Snow, ice, the undead gone.

Wheeling blue sky. Mountain crags—

Horses skidding, legs splaying, their screams rising in pitch. A few animated corpses, flailing about. The carriage, looming in front of Paran, its back end sliding round.

They were on a glacier. Skidding, sliding downward at ever increasing speed.

Distinctly, Paran heard one of the Pardu shareholders: ‘Oh, this is much better.’

Then, eyes blurring, horse slewing wildly beneath him, there was only time for the plunging descent – down, it turned out, an entire mountainside.

Ice, then snow, then slush, the latter rising like a bow wave before horses and sideways-descending carriage, rising and building, slowing them down. All at once, the slush gave way to mud, then stone—

Flipping the carriage, the train of horses dragged with it.

Paran’s own mount fared better, managing to angle itself until it faced downhill, forelegs punching snow and slush, seeking purchase. At the point it reached the mud, and having seen what awaited it, the horse simply launched into a charge. A momentary stumble, then, as the ground levelled out, it slowed, flanks heaving – and Paran turned in the saddle, in time to see the huge carriage tumble to a shattered halt. The bodies of shareholders were sprawled about, upslope, in the mud, limp and motionless on the scree of stones, almost indistinguishable from the corpses.

The train of horses had broken loose, yet all but one were down, legs kicking amidst a tangle of traces, straps and buckles.

Heart still hammering the anvil of his chest, Paran eased his horse to a stop, turning it to face upslope, then walking the exhausted, shaky beast back towards the wreckage.

A few shareholders were picking themselves up here and there, looking dazed. One began swearing, sagging back down above a broken leg.

‘Thank you,’ croaked a corpse, flopping about in the mud. ‘How much do I owe you?’

The carriage was on its side. The three wheels that had clipped the mud and stone had shattered, and two opposite had not survived the tumbling. Leaving but a single survivor, spinning like a mill-stone. Back storage hatches had sprung open, spilling their contents of supplies. On the roof, still strapped in place, was the crushed body of a shareholder, blood running like meltwater down the copper tiles, his arms and legs hanging limp, the
exposed flesh pummelled and grey in the bright sunlight.

One of the Pardu women picked herself up from the mud and limped over to come alongside Paran as he reined in near the carriage.

'Captain,' she said, 'I think we should make camp."

He stared down at her. 'Are you all right?'

She studied him for a moment, then turned her head and spat out a red stream. Wiped her mouth, then shrugged. 'Hood knows, we've had worse trips ...'

The savage wound of the portal, now closed, still marred the dust-laden air. Hedge stepped out from where he'd been hiding near one of the pedestals. The Deragoth were gone – anything but eager to remain overlong in this deathly, unpleasant place.

So he'd stretched things a little. No matter, he'd been convincing enough, yielding the desired result.

_Here I am. On my own, in Hood's own Hood-forsaken pit. You should've thought it through, Captain. There was nothing sweet in the deal for us, and only fools agree to that. Well, being fools is what killed us, and we done learned that lesson._

He looked round, trying to get his bearings. In this place, one direction was good as another. Barring the damned sea, of course. _So, it's done. Time to explore ..._

The ghost left the wreckage of the destroyed statues behind, a lone, mostly insubstantial figure walking the denuded, muddy land. As bowlegged as he had been in life.

Dying left no details behind, after all. And most certainly, nothing like absolution awaited the fallen.

Absolution comes from the living, not the dead, and, as Hedge well knew, it has to be earned.

She was remembering things. Finally, after all this time. Her mother, camp follower, spreading her legs for the Ashok Regiment before it was sent to Genabackis. After it had left, she just went and died, as if without those soldiers she could only breathe out, never again in – and it was what you drew in that gave you life. So, just like that. Dead. Her offspring was left to fare for itself, alone, uncared for, unloved.

Mad priests and sick cults and, for the girl born of the mother, a new camp to follow. Every path of independence was but a dead-end side-track off that more deeply rutted road, the one that ran from parent to child – this much was clear to her now.

Then Heboric, Destriant of Treach, had dragged her away – before she found herself breathing ever out – but no, before him, there had been Bidithal and his numbing gifts, his whispered assurances of mortal suffering being naught more than a layered chrysalis, and upon death the glory would break loose, unfolding its iridescent wings. _Paradise_.

Oh, that had been a seductive promise, and her drowning soul had clung to the solace of its plunging weight as she sank deathward. She had once dreamed of wounding young, wide-eyed acolytes, of taking the knife in her own hands and cutting away all pleasure. Misery loves – needs – _company; there is nothing altruistic in sharing_. Self-interest feeds on malice and all else falls to the wayside.

She had seen too much in her short life to believe anyone professing otherwise. Bidithal's love of pain had fed his need to deliver numbness. The numbness within him made him capable of delivering pain. And the broken god he claimed to worship – well, the Crippled One knew he would never have to account for his lies, his false promises. He sought out lives in abeyance, and with their death he was free to discard those whose lives he had used up. This was, she realized, exquisite enslavement: a faith whose central tenet was unprovable. There would be no killing this faith. The Crippled God would find a multitude of mortal voices to proclaim his empty promises, and within the arbitrary strictures of his cult, evil and desecration could burgeon unchecked.
A faith predicated on pain and guilt could proclaim no moral purity. A faith rooted in blood and suffering—

'We are the fallen,' Heboric said suddenly.

Sneering, Scillara pushed more rustleaf into the bowl of her pipe and drew hard. 'A priest of war would say that, wouldn't he? But what of the great glory found in brutal slaughter, old man? Or have you no belief in the necessity of balance?'

'Balance? An illusion. Like trying to focus on a single mote of light and seeing naught of the stream and the world that stream reveals. All is in motion, all is in flux.'

'Like these damned flies,' Scillara muttered.

Cutter, riding directly ahead, glanced back at her. 'I was wondering about that,' he said. 'Carrion flies – are we heading towards a site of battle, do you think? Heboric?'

He shook his head, amber eyes seeming to flare in the afternoon light. 'I sense nothing of that. The land ahead is as you see it.'

They were approaching a broad basin, dotted with a few tufts of dead, yellow reeds. The ground itself was almost white, cracked like a broken mosaic. Some larger mounds were visible here and there, constructed, it seemed, of sticks and reeds. Reaching the edge, they drew to a halt.

Fish bones lay in a heaped carpet along the fringe of the dead marsh's shoreline, blown there by the winds. On one of the closer mounds they could see bird bones and the remnants of eggshells. These wetlands had died suddenly, in the season of nesting.

Flies swarmed the basin, swirling about in droning clouds.

'Gods below,' Felisin said, 'do we have to cross this?'

'Shouldn't be too bad,' Heboric said. 'It's not far across. It'd be dark long before we finish if we try to go round this. Besides,' he waved at the buzzing flies, 'we haven't even started to cross yet they've found us, and skirting the basin won't escape them. At least they're not the biting kind.'

'Let's just get this over with,' Scillara said.

Greyfrog bounded down into the basin, as if to blaze a trail with his opened mouth and snapping tongue.

Cutter nudged his horse into a trot, then, as flies swarmed him, a canter.

The others followed.

Flies alighting like madness on his skin. Heboric squinted as countless hard, frenzied bodies collided with his face. The very sunlight had dimmed amidst this chaotic cloud. Trapped in his sleeves, inside his threadbare leggings and down the back of his neck – he gritted his teeth, resolving to weather this minor irritation.

Balance. Scillara's words disturbed him for some reason – no, perhaps not her words, but the sentiment they revealed. Once an acolyte, now rejecting all forms of faith – something he himself had done, and, despite Treach's intervention, still sought to achieve. After all, the gods of war needed no servants beyond the illimitable legions they always had and always would possess.

**Destriant, what lies beneath this name? Harvester of souls, possessing the power – and the right – to slay in a god's name. To slay, to heal, to deliver justice. But justice in whose eyes? I cannot take a life. Not any more. Never again. You chose wrong, Treach.**

**All these dead, these ghosts ...**

The world was harsh enough – it did not need him and his kind. There was no end to the fools eager to lead others into battle, to exult in mayhem and leave behind a turgid, sobbing wake of misery and suffering and
grief.

He'd had enough.

Deliverance was all he desired now, his only motive for staying alive, for dragging these innocents with him to a blasted, wasted island that had been scraped clean of all life by warring gods. Oh, they did not need him.

Faith and zeal for retribution lay at the heart of the true armies, the fanatics and their malicious, cruel certainties. Breeding like fly-blow in every community. *But worthy tears come from courage, not cowardice, and those armies, they are filled with cowards.*

Horses carrying them from the basin, the flies spinning and swirling in mindless pursuit.

Onto a track emerging from the old shoreline beside the remnants of a dock and mooring poles. Deep ruts climbing a higher beach ridge, from the age when the swamp had been a lake, the ruts cut ragged by the claws of rainwater that found no refuge in roots – because the verdancy of centuries past was gone, cut away, devoured.

*We leave naught but desert in our wake.*

Surmounting the crest, where the road levelled out and wound drunkenly across a plain flanked by limestone hills, and in the distance, a third of a league away directly east, a small, decrepit hamlet. Outbuildings with empty corrals and paddocks. To one side of the road, near the hamlet's edge, a half-hundred or more heaped tree-trunks, the wood grey as stone where fires had not charred it – but it seemed that even in death, this wood defied efforts at its destruction.

Heboric understood that obdurate defiance. *Yes, make yourself useless to humankind. Only thus will you survive, even when what survives of you is naught but your bones. Deliver your message, dear wood, to our eternally blind eyes.*

Greyfrog had dropped back and now leapt ten paces to Cutter's right. It seemed even the demon had reached its stomach's limit of flies, for its broad mouth was shut, the second lids of its eyes, milky white, closed until the barest slits were visible. And the huge creature was very nearly black with those crawling insects.

As was Cutter's youthful back before him. As was the horse the Daru rode. And, to all sides, the ground seethed, glittering and rabid with motion.

*So many flies.*

*So many ...*

*'Something to show you, now ...'*

Like a savage beast suddenly awakened, Heboric straightened in his saddle—

Scillara's mount cantered a stride behind the Destriant's, a little to the old man's left, whilst in her wake rode Felisin. She cursed in growing alarm as the flies gathered round the riders like midnight, devouring all light, the buzzing cadence seeming to whisper words that crawled into her mind on ten thousand legs. She fought back a scream—

As her horse shrieked in mortal pain, dust swirling and spinning beneath it, dust rising and finding shape.

A terrible, wet, grating sound, then something long and sharp punched up between her mount's shoulder-blades, blood gouting thick and bright from the wound. The horse staggered, forelegs buckling, then collapsed, the motion flinging Scillara from the saddle—

She found herself rolling on a carpet of crushed insects, the hoofs of Heboric's horse pounding down around her as the creature shrielled in agony, pitching to the left – something snarling, a barbed flash of skin, feline and fluid, leaping from the dying horse's back—
And figures, emerging as if from nowhere amidst spinning dust, blades of flint flashing – a bestial scream – blood slapping the ground beside her in a thick sheet, instantly blackened by flies – the blades chopping, cutting, slashing into flesh – a piercing shriek, rising in a conflagration of pain and rage – something thudded against her as Scillara sought to rise on her hands and knees, and she looked over. An arm, tattooed in a tiger-stripe pattern, sliced clean midway between elbow and shoulder, the hand, a flash of fitful, dying green beneath swarming flies.

She staggered upright, stabbing pain in her belly, choking as insects crowded into her mouth with her involuntary gasp.

A figure stepped near her, long stone sword dripping, desiccated skull-face swinging in her direction, and that sword casually reached out, slid like fire into Scillara's chest, ragged edge scoring above her top rib, beneath the clavicle, then punching out her back, just above the scapula.

Scillara sagged, felt herself sliding from that weapon as she fell down onto her back.

The apparition vanished within the cloud of flies once more.

She could hear nothing but buzzing, could see nothing but a chaotic, glittering clump swelling above the wound in her chest, through which blood leaked – as if the flies had become a fist, squeezing her heart. Squeezing ...

Cutter had had no time to react. The bite of sudden sand and dust, then his horse's head was simply gone, ropes of blood skirling down as if pursuing its flight. Down beneath the front hoofs, that stumbled, then gave way as the decapitated beast collapsed.

Cutter managed to roll free, gaining his feet within a maelstrom of flies.

Someone loomed up beside him and he spun, one knife free and slashing across in an effort to block a broad, hookbladed scimitar of rippled flint. The weapons collided, and that sword swept through Cutter's knife, the strength behind the blow unstoppable—

He watched it tear into his belly, watched it rip its way free, and then his bowels tumbled into view.

Reaching down to catch them with both hands, Cutter sank as all life left his legs. He stared down at the flopping mess he held, disbelieving, then landed on one side, curling round the terrible, horrifying damage done to him.

He heard nothing. Nothing but his own breathing, and the cavorting flies, now closing in as if they had known all along that this was going to happen.

The attacker had risen from the very dust, on the right side of Greyfrog. Savage agony as a huge chalcedony longsword cut through the demon's forelimb, severing it clean in a gush of green blood. A second cut sliced through the back leg on the same side, and the demon struck the ground, kicking helplessly with its remaining limbs.

Grainy with flies and thundering pain – a momentary scene played out before the demon's eyes. Broad, bestial, clad in furs, a creature of little more than skin and bone, stepping placidly over Greyfrog's back leg, which was lying five paces distant, kicking all by itself. Stepping into the black cloud.

Dismay. I can hop no more.

Even as he had leapt from the back of his horse, two flint swords had caught him, one slashing through muscle and bone, severing an arm, the other thrusting point first into, then through, his chest. Heboric, throat filled with animal snarls, twisted in mid-air in a desperate effort to pull himself free of the impaling weapon. Yet it followed, tearing downward – snapping ribs, cleaving through lung, then liver – and finally ripping out from his side in an explosion of bone shards, meat and blood.
The Destriant's mouth filled with hot liquid, spraying as he struck the ground, rolled, then came to a stop.

Both T'lan Imass walked to where he lay sprawled in the dust, stone weapons slick with gore.

Heboric stared up at those empty, lifeless eyes, watched as the tattered, desiccated warriors stabbed down, rippled points punching into his body again and again. He watched as one flashed towards his face, then shot down into his neck—

Voices, beseeching, a distant chorus of dismay and despair – he could reach them no longer – those lost souls in their jade-swallowed torment, growing fainter, farther and farther away – I told you, look not to me, poor creatures. Do you see, finally, how easy it was to fail you?

I have heard the dead, but I could not serve them. Just as I have lived, yet created nothing.

He remembered clearly now, in a single dread moment that seemed unending, timeless, a thousand images – so many pointless acts, empty deeds, so many faces – all those for whom he did nothing. Baudin, Kulp, Felisin Paran, L'oric, Scillara ... Wandering lost in this foreign land, this tired desert and the dust of gardens filling brutal, sunscorched air – better had he died in the otataral mines of Skullcup. Then, there would have been no betrayals. Fener would hold his throne. The despair of the souls in their vast jade prisons, spinning unchecked through the Abyss, that terrible despair – it could have remained unheard, unwitnessed, and so there would have been no false promises of salvation.

Baudin would not have been so slowed down in his flight with Felisin Paran – oh, I have done nothing worthwhile in this all-too-long life. These ghost hands, they have proved the illusion of their touch – no benediction, no salvation, not for anyone they dared touch. And these reborn eyes, with all their feline acuity, they fade now into their senseless stare, a look every hunter yearns for in the eyes of their fallen foe.

So many warriors, great heroes – in their own eyes at least – so many had set off in pursuit of the giant tiger that was Treach – knowing nothing of the beast's true identity. Seeking to defeat him, to stand over his stilled corpse, and look down into his blank eyes, yearning to capture something, anything, of majesty and exaltation and take it within themselves.

But truths are never found when the one seeking them is lost, spiritually, morally. And nobility and glory cannot be stolen, cannot be earned in the violent rape of a life. Gods, such pathetic, flailing, brutally stupid conceit ... it was good, then, that Treach killed every damned one of them. Dispassionately. Ah, such a telling message in that.

Yet he knew. The T'lan Imass who had killed him cared nothing for all of that. They had acted out of exigency. Perhaps somewhere in their ancient memories, of the time when they were mortal, they too had sought to steal what they themselves could never possess. But such pointless pursuits no longer mattered to them.

Heboric would be no trophy.

And that was well.

And in this final failure, it seemed there would be no other survivors, and in some ways that was well, too. Appropriate. So much for glory found within his final thoughts.

And is that not fitting? In this last thought, I fail even myself.

He found himself reaching ... for something. Reaching, but nothing answered his touch. Nothing at all.
BOOK THREE

SHADOWS OF THE KING
Who can say where divides truth and the host of desires that, together, give shape to memories? There are deep folds in every legend, and the visible, outward pattern presents a false unity of form and intention. We distort with deliberate purpose; we confine vast meaning into the strictures of imagined necessity. In this lies both failing and gift, for in the surrender of truth we fashion, rightly or wrongly, universal significance. Specific gives way to general; detail gives way to grandiose form, and in the telling we are exalted beyond our mundane selves. We are, in truth, bound into greater humanity by this skein of words ...

Introduction to Among the Consigned
Heboric
CHAPTER TWELVE

‘He spoke of those who would fall, and in his cold eyes stood naked the truth that it was we of whom he spoke. Words of broken reeds and covenants of despair, of surrender given as gifts and slaughter in the name of salvation. He spoke of the spilling of war, and he told us to flee into unknown lands, so that we might be spared the spoiling of our lives ...’

Words of the Iron Prophet Iskar Jarak
The Anibar (the Wickerfolk)

One moment the shadows between the trees were empty, the next moment that Samar Dev glanced up, her breath caught upon seeing figures. On all sides where the sunlit clearing was clawed back by the tangle of black spruce, ferns and ivy, stood savages ... 'Karsa Orlong,' she whispered, 'we have visitors ...'

The Teblor, his hands red with gore, cut away another slice of flesh from the dead bhederin's flank, then looked up. After a moment he grunted, then returned to his butchering.

They were edging forward, emerging from the gloom. Small, wiry, wearing tanned hides, strips of fur bound round their upper arms, their skin the colour of bog water, stitched with ritual scarring on exposed chests and shoulders. On their faces grey paint or wood ash covered their lower jaws and above the lips, like beards. Elongated circles of icy blue and grey surrounded their dark eyes. Carrying spears, axes at hide belts along with an assortment of knives, they were bedecked in ornaments of coldhammered copper that seemed shaped to mimic the phases of the moon; and on one man was a necklace made from the vertebrae of some large fish, and descending from it was a gold-ringed, black copper disc, representing, she surmised, a total eclipse. This man, evidently a leader of some kind, stepped forward. Three strides, eyes on an unmindful Karsa Orlong, out into the sunlight, where he slowly knelt.

Samar now saw that he held something in his hands. 'Karsa, pay attention. What you do now will determine whether we pass through their land peaceably or ducking spears from the shadows.'

Karsa reversed grip on the huge skinning knife he had been working with, and stabbed it deep into the bhederin carcass. Then he rose to face the kneeling savage.

'Get up,' he said.

The man flinched, lowering his head.

'Karsa, he's offering you a gift.'

'Then he should do so standing. His people are hiding here in the wilderness because he hasn't done enough of that. Tell him he needs to stand.'

They had been speaking in the trader tongue, and something in the kneeling warrior's reactions led Samar to suspect that he had understood the exchange ... and the demand, for he slowly climbed to his feet. 'Man of the Great Trees,' he now said, his accent harsh and guttural to Samar's ears. 'Deliverer of Destruction, the Anibar offer you this gift, and ask that you give us a gift in return—'

'Then they are not gifts,' Karsa replied. 'What you seek is to barter.'

Fear flickered in the warrior's eyes. The others of his tribe – the Anibar – remained silent and motionless between the trees, yet Samar sensed a palpable dismay spreading among them. Their leader tried again: 'This is the language of barter, Deliverer, yes. Poison that we must swallow. It does not suit what we seek.'

Scowling, Karsa turned to Samar Dev. 'Too many words that lead nowhere, witch. Explain.'
'This tribe follows an ancient tradition lost among most peoples of Seven Cities,' she said. 'The tradition of gift giving. The gift itself is a measure of a number of things, with subtle and often confusing ways of attributing value. These Anibar have of necessity learned about trading, but they do not ascribe value the same way as we do, and so they usually lose in the deal. I suspect they generally fare poorly when dealing with canny, unscrupulous merchants from the civilized lands. There is—'

'Enough,' Karsa interrupted. He gestured towards the leader – who flinched once more – and said, 'Show me this gift. But first, tell me your name.'

'I am, in the poison tongue, Boatfinder.' He held up the object in his hands. 'The courage brand,' he said, 'of a great father among the bhederin.'

Samar Dev, brows lifting, regarded Karsa. 'That would be a penis bone, Teblor.'

'I know what it is,' he answered in a growl. 'Boatfinder, what in turn do you ask of me?'

'Revenants come into the forest, besetting the Anibar clans north of here. They slaughter all in their path, without cause. They do not die, for they command the air itself and so turn aside every spear that seeks them. Thus we hear. We lose many names.'

'Names?' Samar asked.

His gaze flicked to her and he nodded. 'Kin. Eight hundred and forty-seven names woven to mine, among the north clans.' He gestured to the silent warriors behind him. 'As many names to lose among these here, each one. We know grief in the loss for ourselves, but more for our children. The names we cannot take back – they go and never come again, and so we diminish.'

Karsa said, 'You want me to kill revenants,' and he pointed at the gift, 'in exchange for that.'

'Yes.'

'How many of these revenants are there?'

'They come in great ships, grey-winged, and set out into the forest in hunts, each hunt numbering twelve. They are driven by anger, yet nothing we seek to do appeases that anger. We do not know what we do to offend them so.'

probably offered them a damned penis bone. But Samar Dev kept that thought to herself.

'How many hunts?'

'A score thus far, yet their boats do not depart.'

Karsa's entire face had darkened. Samar Dev had never seen such raw fury in him before. She suddenly feared he would tear this small cowering man apart. Instead, he said, 'Cast off your shame, all of you. Cast it off! Slayers need no reason to slay. It is what they do. That you exist is offence enough for such creatures.' He stepped forward and snatched the bone from Boatfinder's hands. 'I will kill them all. I will sink their damned ships. This I—'

'Karsa!' Samar cut in.

He swung to her, eyes blazing.

'Before you vow anything so ... extreme, you might consider something more achievable.' At his expression, she hastened on, 'You could, for example, be content with driving them from the land, back into their ships. Make the forest ... unpalatable.'

After a long, tense moment, the Teblor sighed. 'Yes. That would suffice. Although I am tempted to swim after them.'

Boatfinder was looking at Karsa with eyes wide with wonder and awe.
For a moment, Samar thought that the Teblor was—uncharacteristically—attempting humour. But no, the huge warrior had been serious. And, to her dismay, she believed him and so found nothing funny nor absurd in his words. 'The time for that decision can wait, can’t it?'

'Yes.' He scowled once more at Boatfinder. 'Describe these revenants.'

'Tall, but not as tall as you. Their flesh is the hue of death. Eyes cold as ice. They bear iron weapons, and among them are shamans whose very breath is sickness—terrible clouds of poisonous vapour—all whom it touches die in great pain.'

Samar Dev said to Karsa, 'I think their use of the term "revenant" is meant for anything or anyone not from their world. But the foes they speak of come from ships. That seems unlikely were they in truth undead. The breath of shamans sounds like sorcery.'

'Boatfinder,' Karsa said, 'when I am done here you will lead me to the revenants.'

The colour drained from the man's face. 'It is many, many days of travel, Deliverer. I think to send word that you are coming—to the clans of the north—'

'No. You will accompany us.'

'But—but why?'

Karsa stepped forward, one hand snapping out to clutch Boatfinder by the neck. He dragged the man close. 'You shall witness, and in witnessing you will become more than what you are now. You shall be prepared—for all that is coming, to you and your miserable people.' He released the man, who staggered back, gasping. 'My own people once believed they could hide,' the Teblor said, baring his teeth. 'They were wrong. This I have learned, and this you will now learn. You believe the revenants are all that shall afflict you? Fool. They are but the first.'

Samar watched the giant warrior walk back to his butchering.

Boatfinder stared after him with glistening, terror-filled eyes. Then he spun about, hissed in his own language. Six warriors rushed forward, past their leader, drawing knives as they approached Karsa.

'Teblor,' Samar warned.

Boatfinder raised his hands. 'No! No harm is sought you, Deliverer. They now help you with the cutting, that is all. The bounty is prepared for you, so that we need waste no time—'

'I want the hides cured,' Karsa said.

'Yes.'

'And runners to deliver to us those hides and smoked meat from this kill.'

'Yes.'

'Then we can leave now.'

Boatfinder's head bobbed, as if he could not trust his own voice in answer to that final demand.

Sneering, Karsa retrieved his knife and walked over to a nearby pool of brackish water, where he began washing the blood from the blade, then from his hands and forearms.

Samar Dev drew close to Boatfinder as the half-dozen warriors fell to butchering the dead bhederin. 'Boatfinder: '

He glanced at her with skittish eyes. 'You are a witch—so the Deliverer calls you.'

'I am. Where are your womenfolk? Your children?'
Beyond this swamp, west and north,' he replied. 'The land rises, and there are lakes and rivers where we find the black grain, and among the flat-rock, berries. We are done our great hunt in the open lands, and now they return to our many camps with winter's meat. Yet,' he gestured at his warriors, 'we follow you. We witness the Deliverer slaying the bhederin. He rides a bone-horse – we do not see a bone-horse ridden. He carries a sword of birth-stone. The Iron Prophet tells our people of such warriors – the wielders of birth-stone. He says they come.'

'I have not heard of this Iron Prophet,' Samar Dev said, frowning.

Boatfinder made a gesture and faced south. 'To speak of this, it is the frozen time.' He closed his eyes, and his tone suddenly changed. 'In the Time of Great Slaying, which is the frozen time of the past, the Anibar dwelt on the plains, and would travel almost to the East River, where the great walled camps of the Ugari rose from the land, and with the Ugari the Anibar would trade meat and hides for iron tools and weapons. The Great Slaying came to the Ugari, then, and many fled to seek refuge among the Anibar. Yet the Slayers followed, the Mezla they were called by the Ugari, and a terrible battle was fought and all those who had sheltered among the Anibar fell to the Mezla.

'Fearing retribution for the aid given to the Ugari, the Anibar prepared to flee – deeper into the Odhan – but the leader of the Mezla found them first. With a hundred dark warriors, he came, yet he stayed their iron weapons. The Anibar were not his enemy, he told them, and then he gave warning – others were coming, and they would be without mercy. They would destroy the Anibar. This leader was the Iron Prophet, King Iskar Jarak, and the Anibar heeded his words, and so fled, west and north, until these lands here and the forests and lakes beyond, became their home.' He glanced over to where Karsa, his supplies gathered, sat astride his Jhag horse, and his voice changed once more. 'The Iron Prophet tells us there is a time when, in our greatest peril, wielders of the birth-stone come to defend us. Thus, when we see who travels our land, and the sword in his hands ... this time is soon to be a frozen time.'

Samar Dev studied Boatfinder for a long moment, then she faced Karsa. 'I don't think you will be able to ride Havok,' she said. 'We are about to head into difficult terrain.'

'Until such time comes, I will ride,' the Teblor replied. 'You are free to lead your own horse. Indeed, you are free to carry it over all terrain you deem difficult.'

Irritated, she headed towards her own horse. 'Fine, for now I will ride behind you, Karsa Orlong. At the very least I will not have to worry about being whipped by branches, since you'll be knocking down all those trees in your path.'

Boatfinder waited until both were ready, then he set out, along the north edge of the boggy glade, until he reached its end and promptly turned to vanish into the forest.

Karsa halted Havok and glared at the thick, snarled undergrowth and the crowded black spruce.

Samar Dev laughed, earning her a savage look from the Teblor. Then he slipped down from his stallion's back.

They found Boatfinder waiting for them, an apologetic look on his grey-painted face. 'Game trails, Deliverer. In these forests there are deer, bear, wolf and elk – even the bhederin do not delve deep beyond the glades. Moose and caribou are further north. These game trails, as you see, are low. Even Anibar stoop in swift passage. In the unfound time ahead of which scant can be said, we find more flatrock and the way is easier.'

Both interminable and monotonous, the low forest was a journey tangled and snarled, rife with frustration, as if it lived with the sole purpose of denying passage. The bedrock was close to the surface, a battered purple and black rock, shot through in places with long veins of quartzite, yet its surface was bent, tilted and folded, forming high-walled basins, sinkholes and ravines filled with exfoliated slabs sheathed in slick, emerald-green moss. Tree-falls crowded these depressions, the black spruce's bark rough as sharkskin and the needleless, web-thick branches harsh as claws and unyielding.

Spears of sunlight reached down here and there, throwing motes of intense colour into an otherwise gloomy,
cavernous world.

Towards dusk, Boatfinder led them to a treacherous scree, up which he scrambled. Karsa and Samar Dev, leading their horses, found the climb perilous, every foothold less certain than the last – moss giving way like rotted skin to expose sharp-edged angular rock and deep holes, any one of which could have snapped a horse-leg.

Sodden with grimy sweat, scratched and scraped, Samar Dev finally reached the summit, turning to guide her horse the last few steps. Before them wound more or less flat bedrock, grey with the skin of lichen. From modest depressions here and there rose white and jack pines, the occasional straggly oak, fringed in juniper and swaths of blueberry and wintergreen bushes. Sparrow-sized dragonflies darted through spinning clouds of smaller insects in the fading sunlight.

Boatfinder gestured northward. 'This path leads to a lake. We camp there.'

They set off.

No higher ground was visible in any direction, and as the elongated basolith twisted and turned, flanked every now and then by slightly lower platforms and snags, Samar Dev quickly realized how easy it would be to get lost in this wild land. The path bifurcated ahead and, approaching the junction, Boatfinder strode along the east edge, looking down for a time, then chose the ridge on the right.

Matching his route, Samar Dev glanced over the edge and saw what he had been searching for, a sinuous line of smallish boulders lying on a shelf of stone slightly below them, the pattern creating something like a snake, the head consisting of a wedge-shaped, flattened rock, while at the other end the last stone of the tail was no bigger than her thumbnail. Lichen covered the stones, bunching round each one to suggest that the trail-marker was very old. There was nothing obvious in the petroform that would make the choice of routes clear, although the snake's head was aligned in the direction they were walking.

'Boatfinder,' she called out, 'how is it that you read this serpent of boulders?'

He glanced back at her. 'A snake is away from the heart. A turtle is the heart's path.'

'All right, then why aren't they on this higher ground, so you don't have to look for them?'

'When the black grain is carried south, we are burdened – neither turtle nor snake must lose shape or pattern. We run these stone roads. Burdened.'

'Where do you take the harvest?'

'To our gather camps on the plains. Each band. We gather the harvest. Into one. And divide it, so that each band has sufficient grain. Lakes and rivers and their shores cannot be trusted. Some harvest yields true. Other harvest yields weak. As water rises and as water falls. It is not the same. The flat-rock seeks to be level, across all the world, but it cannot, and so water rises and water falls. We do not kneel before inequity, else we ourselves discard fairness and knife finds knife.'

'Old rules to deal with famine,' Samar said, nodding.

'Rules in the frozen time.'

Karsa Orlong looked at Samar Dev. 'What is this frozen time, witch?'

'The past, Teblor.'

She watched his eyes narrow thoughtfully, then he grunted and said, 'And the unfound time is the future, meaning that now is the flowing time—'

'Yes!' Boatfinder cried. 'You speak life's very secret!' 

Samar Dev pulled herself into the saddle – on this ridge they could ride their horses – carefully. She watched Karsa Orlong follow suit, as a strange stillness filled her being. Born, she realized, of Boatfinder's words. 'Life's
very secret.' This flowing time not yet frozen and only now found out of the unfound. 'Boatfinder, the Iron Prophet came to you long ago – in the frozen time – yet he spoke to you of the unfound time.'

'Yes, you understand, witch. Iskar Jarak speaks but one language, yet within it is each and all. He is the Iron Prophet. The King.'

'Your king, Boatfinder?'

'No. We are his shadows.'

'Because you exist only in the flowing time.'

The man turned and made a reverent bow that stirred something within Samar Dev. 'Your wisdom honours us, witch,' he said.

'Where,' she asked, 'is Iskar Jarak's kingdom?'

Sudden tears in the man's eyes. 'An answer we yearn to find. It is lost—'

'In the unfound time.'

'Yes.'

'Iskar Jarak was a Mezla.'

'Yes.'

Samar Dev opened her mouth for one more question, then realized that it wasn't necessary. She knew its answer. Instead, she said, 'Boatfinder, tell me, from the frozen time into the flowing time, is there a bridge?'

His smile was wistful, filled with longing. 'There is.'

'But you cannot cross it.'

'No.'

'Because it's burning.'

'Yes, witch, the bridge burns.'

*King Iskar Jarak, and the unfound kingdom ...*

Descending like massive, raw steps, the shelves of rock marched down into crashing foam and spume. A fierce wind raked the northern sea's dark waves to the very horizon, where storm-clouds commanded the sky, the colour of blackened armour. At their backs and stretching the western length of coastline, rose a bent-back forest of pines, firs and cedars, their branches torn and made ragged by the battering winds.

Shivering, Taralack Veed drew the furs closer, then turned his back on the raging seas. 'We now travel westward,' he said, speaking loud enough to be heard above the gale. 'Follow this coast until it curls north. Then we strike inland, directly west, into the land of stone and lakes. Difficult, for there is little game to be found there, although we will be able to fish. Worse, there are bloodthirsty savages, too cowardly to attack by day. Always at night. We must be ready for them. We must deliver slaughter.'

Icarium said nothing, his unhuman gaze still fixed on that closing storm.

Scowling, Taralack moved back into the rock-walled camp they had made, crouching in the blessed lee and holding his red, cold-chafed hands over the driftwood fire. Few glimmers of the Jhag's legendary, near mythical equanimity remained. Dark and dour, now. A refashioning of Icarium, by Taralack Veed's own hands, although he but followed the precise instructions given him by the Nameless Ones. *The blade has grown dull. You shall be the whetstone, Gral.*
But whetstones were insensate, indifferent to the blade and to the hand that held it. For a warrior fuelled by passion, such immunity was difficult to achieve, much less maintain. He could feel the weight now, ever building, and knew he would, one day, grow to envy the merciful death that had come to Mappo Runt.

They had made good time thus far. Icarium was tireless. Once given direction. And Taralack, for all his prowess and endurance, was exhausted. *I am no Trell, and this is not simple wandering. Not any more, and never again for Icarium.*

Nor, it seemed, for Taralack Veed.

He looked up when he heard scrabbling, and watched Icarium descend.

'These savages you spoke of,' the Jhag said without preamble, 'why should they seek to challenge us?'

'Their forsaken forest is filled with sacred sites, Icarium.'

'We need only avoid trespass, then.'

'Such sites are not easily recognized. Perhaps a line of boulders on the bedrock, mostly buried in lichen and moss. Or the remnant of an antler in the crotch of a tree, so overgrown as to be virtually invisible. Or a vein of quartzite glittering with flecks of gold. Or the green tool-stone – the quarries are no more than a pale gouge in vertical rock, the green stone shorn from it by fire and cold water. Mayhap little more than a bear trail on bedrock, trodden by the miserable beasts for countless generations. All sacred. There is no fathoming the minds of such savages.'

'It seems you know much of them, yet you have told me you have never before travelled their lands.'

'I have heard of them, in great detail, Icarium.'

A sudden edge in the Jhag's eyes. 'Who was it that informed you so, Taralack Veed of the Gral?'

'I have wandered far, my friend. I have mined a thousand tales—'

'You were being prepared. For me.'

A faint smile suited the moment and Taralack found it easily enough. 'Much of that wandering was in your company, Icarium. Would that I could gift you my memories of the time we have shared.'

'Would that you could,' Icarium agreed, staring down at the fire now.

'Of course,' Taralack added, 'there would be much darkness, many grim and unpleasant deeds, within that gift. The absence within you, Icarium, is both blessing and curse – you do understand that, don't you?'

'There is no blessing in that absence,' the Jhag said, shaking his head. 'All that I have done cannot demand its rightful price. Cannot mark my soul. And so I remain unchanging, forever naïve—'

'Innocent—'

'No, not innocent. There is nothing exculpatory in ignorance, Taralack Veed.'

*You call me by name, now, not as 'friend'. Has mistrust begun to poison you?* 'And so it is my task, each time, to return to you all that you have lost. It is arduous and wears upon me, alas. My weakness lies in my desire to spare you the most heinous of memories. There is too much pity in my heart, and in seeking to spare you I now find that I but wound.' He spat on his hands and slicked back his hair, then stretched his hands out once more close to the flames. 'Very well, my friend. Once, long ago, you were driven by the need to free your father, who had been taken by a House of the Azath. Faced with terrible failure, a deeper, deadlier force was born – your rage. You shattered a wounded warren, and you destroyed an Azath, releasing into the world a host of demonic entities, all of whom sought only domination and tyranny. Some of those you killed, but many escaped your wrath, and live on to this day, scattered about the world like so many evil seeds.

'The most bitter irony is this: your father sought no release. He had elected, of his own will, to become a
Guardian of an Azath House, and it may be he remains so to this day.

‘In consequence of the devastation you wrought, Icarium, a cult, devoted since time began to the Azath, deemed it necessary to create guardians of their own.

Chosen warriors who would accompany you, no matter where you went – for your rage and the destruction of the warren had torn from you all memory of your past – and so now you were doomed, for all time, it seemed, to seek out the truth of all that you have done. And to stumble into rage again and yet again, wreaking annihilation.

‘This cult, that of the Nameless Ones, thus contrived to bind to you a companion. Such as I. Yes, my friend, there have been others, long before I was born, and each has been imbued with sorcery, slowing the rigours of ageing, proof against all manner of disease and poison for as long as the companion's service held true. Our task is to guide you in your fury, to assert a moral focus, and above all, to be your friend, and this latter task has proved, again and again, the simplest and indeed, most seductive of them all, for it is easy to find within ourselves a deep and abiding love for you. For your earnestness, your loyalty, and for the unsullied honour within you.

‘I will grant you, Icarium, your sense of justice is a harsh one. Yet, ultimately, profound in its nobility. And now, awaiting you, there is an enemy. An enemy only you, my friend, are powerful enough to oppose. And so we now journey, and all who seek to oppose us, for whatever reason, must be swept aside. For the greater good.’ He allowed himself to smile again, only this time he filled it with a hint of vast yet courageously contained anguish. ‘You must now wonder, are the Nameless Ones worthy of such responsibility? Can their moral integrity and sense of honour match yours? The answer lies in necessity, and above that, in the example you set. You guide the Nameless Ones, my friend, with your every deed. If they fail in their calling, it will be because you have failed in yours.’

Pleased that he had recalled with perfection the words given him, Taralack Veed studied the great warrior who stood before him, firelit, his face hidden behind his hands. Like a child for whom blindness imposed obliteration.

Icarium was weeping, he realized.

*Good. Even he. Even he will feed upon his own anguish and make of it an addictive nectar, a sweet opiate of self-recrimination and pain.*

*And so all doubt, all distrust, shall vanish.*

*For from those things, no sweet bliss can be wrung.*

From overhead, a spatter of cold rain, and the deep rumble of thunder. The storm would soon be upon them. ‘I am rested enough,’ Taralack said, rising. ‘A long march awaits us—’

‘There is no need,’ Icarium said behind his hands.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The sea. It is filled with ships.’

The lone rider came down from the hills shortly after the ambush. Barathol Mekhar, his huge, scarred and pitted forearms spattered with blood, rose from his long, silent study of the dead demon. He was wearing his armour and helm, and he now drew out his axe.

Months had passed since the T’lan Imass had appeared – he’d thought them long gone, gone even before old Kulat wandered off in his newfound madness. He had not realized – none of them had – that the terrible, undead creatures had never left.

The party of travellers had been slaughtered, the ambush so swiftly executed that Barathol had not even known of its occurrence – until it was far too late. Jhelim and Filiad had suddenly burst into the smithy,
screaming of murder just beyond the hamlet. He had collected his weapon and run with them to the western road, only to find the enemy already departed, their task done, and upon the old road, dying horses and motionless bodies sprawled about as if they had dropped from the sky.

Sending Filiad to find the old woman Nulliss – who possessed modest skill as a healer – Barathol had returned to his smithy, ignoring Jhelim who trailed behind him like a lost pup. He had donned his armour, taking his time. The T’lan Imass, he suspected, would have been thorough. They would have had leisure to ensure that they had made no mistakes. Nulliss would find that nothing could be done for the poor victims.

Upon returning to the west road, however, he was astonished to see the ancient Semk woman shouting orders at Filiad from where she knelt at the side of one figure. It seemed to Barathol’s eyes as he hurried forward, that she had thrust her hands into the man’s body, her scrawny arms making motions as if she was kneading bread dough. Even as she did this, her gaze was on a woman lying nearby, who had begun moaning, legs kicking furrows in the dirt. From her, blood had spilled out everywhere.

Nulliss saw him and called him over.

Barathol saw that the man she knelt beside had been eviscerated. Nulliss was pushing the intestines back inside. ‘For Hood’s sake, woman,’ the blacksmith said in a growl, ‘leave him be. He’s done. You’ve filled his cavity with dirt—’

‘Boiling water is on the way,’ she snapped. ‘I mean to wash it out.’ She nodded towards the thrashing woman. ‘That one is stabbed in the shoulder, and now she’s in labour.’

‘Labour? Gods below. Listen, Nulliss, boiling water won’t do, unless you mean to cook his liver for supper tonight—’

‘Go back to your damned anvil, you brainless ape! It was a clean cut – I’ve seen what boars can do with their tusks and that was a whole lot worse.’

‘Might’ve started clean—’

‘I said I mean to clean it! But we can’t carry him back with his guts trailing behind us, can we?’

Nonplussed, Barathol looked round. He wanted to kill something. A simple enough desire, but he already knew it would be thwarted and this soured his mood. He walked over to the third body. An old man, tattooed and handless – the T’lan Imass had chopped him to pieces. So. He was their target. The others were simply in the way. Which is why they cared nothing whether they lived or died.

Whereas this poor bastard couldn’t be more dead than he was.

After a moment, Barathol made his way towards the last victim in sight. From the hamlet, more people were on the way, two of them carrying blankets and rags. Storuk, Fenar, Hayrith, Stuk, all looking somehow small, diminished and pale with fear. Nulliss began screaming orders once more.

Before him was sprawled a demon of some kind. Both limbs on one side had been sliced away. Not much blood, he noted, but something strange appeared to have afflicted the creature upon its death. It looked ... deflated, as if the flesh beneath the skin had begun to dissolve, melt away into nothing. Its odd eyes had already dried and cracked.

‘Blacksmith! Help me lift this one!’

Barathol walked back.

‘On the blanket. Storuk, you and your brother on that end, one corner each. Fenar, you’re with me on the other end—’

Hayrith, almost as old as Nulliss herself, held in her arms the rags. ‘What about me?’ she asked.

‘Go sit by the woman. Stuff a cloth into the wound – we’ll sear it later, unless the birth gives her trouble—’
'With the blood loss,' Hayrith said, eyes narrowing, 'she probably won't survive it.'

'Maybe. For now, just sit with her. Hold her damned hand and talk, and—'

'Yes, yes, witch, you ain't the only one round here who knows about all that.'

'Good. So get going.'

'You've just been waiting for this, haven't ya?'

'Be quiet, you udderless cow.'

'Queen Nulliss, High Priestess of Bitchiness!'

'Blacksmith,' Nulliss growled, 'hit her with that axe, will you?'

Hissing, Hayrith scurried off.

'Help me,' Nulliss said to him, 'we've got to lift him now.'

It seemed a pointless task, but he did as she asked, and was surprised to hear her pronounce that the young man still lived after they'd set him on the blanket.

As Nulliss and the others carried him away, Barathol strode back to the dismembered corpse of the old, tattooed man. And crouched at his side. It would be an unpleasant task, but it was possible that Barathol could learn something of him from his possessions. He rolled the body over, then halted, staring down into those lifeless eyes. A cat's eyes. He looked with renewed interest at the pattern of tattoos, then slowly sat back.

And only then noticed all the dead flies. Covering the ground on all sides, more flies than he had ever seen before. Barathol straightened, walked back to the dead demon.

Staring down thoughtfully, until distant motion and the sound of horse hoofs snared his attention. Behind him, villagers had returned to retrieve the pregnant woman.

And now he watched as the rider rode directly towards him.

On a lathered horse the colour of sun-bleached bone. Wearing dust-sheathed armour lacquered white. The man's face pale beneath the rim of his helm, drawn with grief. Reining in, he slipped down from the saddle and, ignoring Barathol, staggered over to the demon, where he fell to his knees.

'Who – who did this?' he asked.

'T'lan Imass. Five of them. A broken lot, even as T'lan Imass go. An ambush.' Barathol pointed towards the body of the tattooed man. 'They were after him, I think. A priest, from a cult devoted to the First Hero Treach.'

'Treach is now a god.'

To that, Barathol simply grunted. He looked back at the ramshackle hovels of the hamlet he had come to think of as home. 'There were two others. Both still alive, although one will not last much longer. The other is pregnant and even now gives birth—'

The man stared up at him. 'Two? No, there should have been three. A girl ...'

Barathol frowned. 'I'd thought the priest was their target — they were thorough with him — but now I see that they struck him down because he posed the greatest threat. They must have come for the girl — for she is not here.'

The man rose. He matched Barathol in height, if not breadth. 'Perhaps she fled ... into the hills.'

'It's possible. Although,' he added, pointing at a dead horse nearby, 'I'd wondered at that extra mount, saddled like the others. Cut down on the trail.'
'Ah, yes. I see.'

'Who are you?' Barathol asked. 'And what was this missing girl to you?'

Shock was still writ deep into the lines of his face, and he blinked at the questions, then nodded. 'I am named L'oric. The child was ... was for the Queen of Dreams. I was coming to collect her – and my familiar.' He looked down once more at the demon, and anguish tugged at his features yet again.

'Fortune has abandoned you, then,' Barathol said. A thought occurred to him. 'L'oric, have you any skill in healing?'

'What?'

'You are one of Sha'ik's High Mages, after all—'

L'oric looked away, as if stung. 'Sha'ik is dead. The rebellion is crushed.'

Barathol shrugged.

'Yes,' L'oric said, 'I can call upon Denul, if required.'

'Is the life of that girl all that concerns you?' He gestured down at the demon. 'You can do nothing for your familiar – what of their companions? The young man will die – if he has not already done so. Will you stand here, dwelling only on what you have lost?'

A flash of anger. 'I advise caution,' L'oric said in a low voice. 'You were once a soldier – that much is obvious – yet here you have hidden yourself away like a coward, whilst the rest of Seven Cities rose up, dreaming of freedom. I will not be chastised by one such as you.'

Barathol's dark eyes studied L'oric a moment longer, then he turned away and began walking towards the buildings. 'Someone will come,' he said over his shoulder, 'to dress the dead for burial.'

Nulliss had chosen the old hostelry to deposit her charges. A cot was dragged out from one of the rooms for the woman, whilst the eviscerated youth was laid out on the communal dining table. A cookpot filled with water steamed above the hearth, and Filiad was using a prod to retrieve soaked strips of cloth and carry them over to where the Semk woman worked.

She had drawn out the intestines once more but seemed to be ignoring that pulsing mass for the moment, both of her hands deep in the cavity of his gut. 'Flies!' she hissed as Barathol entered. 'This damned hole is filled with dead flies!'

'You will not save him,' Barathol said, walking to the bar counter and setting down his axe on the battered, dusty surface, the weapon making a heavy clunking sound on the wood. He began removing his gauntlets, glancing over at Hayrith. 'Has she given birth?' he asked.

'Aye. A girl.' Hayrith was washing her hands in a basin, but she nodded towards a small bundled shape lying on the woman's chest. 'Already suckling. I'd thought things were gone bad, blacksmith. Bad. The baby came out blue. Only the cord weren't knotted and weren't round its neck.'

'So why was it blue?'

'Was? Still is. Napan father, I'd say.'

'And the mother's fate?'

'She'll live. I didn't need Nulliss. I know how to clean and sear a wound. Why, I followed the Falah'd of Hissar's Holy Army, seen plenty a battlefields in my day. Cleaned plenty a wounds, too.' She flung water from her hands, then dried them on her grubby tunic. 'She'll have fever, of course, but if she survives that, she'll be fine.'
'Hayrith!' called out Nulliss. 'Get over here and rinse out these rags! Then toss 'em back in the boiling water –
gods below, I'm losing him – his heart, it's fading.'

The door swung open. Heads turned to stare at L'oric, who slowly stepped inside.

'Who in Hood's name is that?' Hayrith asked.

Barathol unstrapped his helm as he said, 'High Mage L'oric, a refugee from the Apocalypse.'

Hayrith cackled. 'Well, ain't he found the right place! Welcome, L'oric! Grab yourself a tankard a dust an' a
plate of ashes an' join us! Fenar, stop staring and go find Chaur an' Urdan – there's horse meat out there needs
butchering – we don't want none a them wolves in the hills comin' down an' gettin' it first.'

Barathol watched as L'oric strode over to where Nulliss knelt above the youth on the table. She was pushing
in rags then pulling them out again – there was far too much blood – no wonder the heart was fading.

'Move aside,' L'oric said to her. 'I do not command High Denul, but at the very least I can clean and seal the
wound, and expunge the risk of infection.'

'He's lost too much blood,' Nulliss hissed.

'Perhaps,' L'oric conceded, 'but let us at least give his heart a chance to recover.'

Nulliss backed away. 'As you like,' she snapped. 'I can do no more for him.'

Barathol went behind the bar, crouched opposite a panel of wood, which he rapped hard. It fell away,
revealing three dusty jugs. Retrieving one, he straightened, setting it down on the counter. Finding a tankard, he
wiped it clean, then, tugging free the stopper, poured the tankard full.

Eyes were on him – all barring those of L'oric himself, who stood beside the youth, hands settling on the
chest. Hayrith asked, in a tone of reverence. 'Where did that come from, blacksmith?'

'Old Kulat's stash,' Barathol replied. 'Don't expect he'll be coming back for it.'

'What's that I smell?'

'Falari rum.'

'Blessed gods above and below!'

Suddenly the locals present in the room were one and all crowding the bar. Snarling, Nulliss pushed Filiad
back. 'Not you – too young—'

'Too young? Woman, I've seen twenty-six years!'

'You heard me! Twenty-six years? Ain't enough to 'predate Falari rum, you scrawny whelp.'

Barathol sighed. 'Don't be greedy, Nulliss. Besides, there's two more jugs on the shelf below.' Collecting his
tankard, he moved away from them, Filiad and Jhelim both fighting as they scrabbled round the counter.

A livid scar was all that remained of the sword slash across the youth's belly, apart from splashes of drying
blood. L'oric still stood beside him, hands motionless on the chest. After a moment, he opened his eyes,
stepping back. 'It's a strong heart ... we'll see. Where's the other one?'

'Over there. Shoulder wound. It's been seared, but I can guarantee sepsis will set in and probably end up
killing her, unless you do something.'

L'oric nodded. 'She is named Scillara. The young man I do not know.' He frowned. 'Heboric Ghost Hands—'
he rubbed at his face – 'I would not have thought ...' He glanced over at Barathol. 'When Treach chose him to be
his Destriant, well, there was so much ... power. T'lan Imass? Five broken T'lan Imass?'

Barathol shrugged. 'I myself did not see the ambush. The Imass first showed up months past, then it seemed
that they'd left. After all, there was nothing here that they wanted. Not even me.'

'Servants of the Crippled God,' L'oric said. 'The Unbound, of High House of Chains.' He headed towards the woman he'd named Scillara. 'The gods are indeed at war ...'

Barathol stared after him. He downed half the rum in the tankard, then joined the High Mage once more. 'The gods, you say.'

'Fever already whispers within her – this will not do.' He closed his eyes and began muttering something under his breath. After a moment, he stepped back, met Barathol's eyes. 'This is what comes. The blood of mortals spilled. Innocent lives ... destroyed. Even here, in this rotted hole of a village, you cannot hide from the torment – it will find you, it will find us all.'

Barathol finished the rum. 'Will you now hunt for the girl?'

'And singlehanded wrest her from the Unbound? No. Even if I knew where to look, it is impossible. The Queen of Dreams' gambit has failed – likely she already knows that.' He drew a deep, ragged breath, and Barathol only now noticed how exhausted the man was. 'No,' he said again, with a vague, then wretched look. 'I have lost my familiar ... yet ...' he shook his head, 'yet, there is no pain – with the severing there should be pain – I do not understand ...'

'High Mage,' Barathol said, 'there are spare rooms here. Rest. I'll get Hayrith to find you some food, and Filiad can stable your horse. Wait here until I return.'

The blacksmith spoke to Hayrith, then left the hostelry, returning once more to the west road. He saw Chaur, Fenar and Urdan stripping saddles and tack from the dead horses. 'Chaur!' he called, 'step away from that one – no, this way, there, stand still, damn you. There. Don't move.' The girl's horse. Reaching it, he moved round carefully, seeking tracks.

Chaur fidgeted – a big man, he had the mind of a child, although the sight of blood had never bothered him.

Ignoring him, Barathol continued reading the scrapes, furrows and dislodged stones, and finally found a small footprint, planted but once, and strangely twisting on the ball of the foot. To either side, larger prints, skeletal yet bound here and there by leather strips or fragments of hide.

So. She had leapt clear of the fatally wounded horse, yet, even as her lead foot contacted the ground, the T'lan Imass snared her, lifting her – no doubt she struggled, but against such inhuman, implacable strength, she had been helpless.

And then, the T'lan Imass had vanished. Fallen to dust. Somehow taking her with them. He did not think that was possible. Yet ... no tracks moved away from the area.

Frustrated, Barathol started back to the hostelry.

At a whining sound behind him he turned. 'It's all right, Chaur. You can go back to what you were doing.'

A bright smile answered him.

As he entered, Barathol sensed that something had changed. The locals were backed to the wall behind the bar. L'oric stood in the centre of the chamber, facing the blacksmith who halted just inside the doorway. The High Mage had drawn his sword, a blade of gleaming white.

L'oric, his eyes hard on Barathol, spoke: 'I have but just heard your name.'

The blacksmith shrugged.

A sneer twisted L'oric's pale face. 'I imagine all that rum loosened their tongues, or they just plain forgot your commands to keep such details secret.'

'I've made no commands,' Barathol replied. 'These people here know nothing of the outside world, and care
even less. Speaking of rum ...' He slid his gaze to the crowd behind the bar. 'Nulliss, any of it left?'

Mute, she nodded.

'On the counter then, if you please,' Barathol said. 'Beside my axe will do.'

'I would be foolish to let you near that weapon,' L'oric said, raising the sword in his hand.

'That depends,' replied Barathol, 'whether you intend fighting me, doesn't it?'

'I can think of a hundred names of those who, in my place right now, would not hesitate.'

Barathol's brows rose. 'A hundred names, you say. And how many of those names still belong to the living?'

L'oric's mouth thinned into a straight line.

'Do you believe,' Barathol went on, 'that I simply walked from Aren all those years ago? I was not the only survivor, High Mage. They came after me. It was damned near one long running battle from Aren Way to Karashimesh. Before I left the last one bleeding out his life in a ditch. You may know my name, and you may believe you know my crime ... but you were not there. Those that were are all dead. Now, are you really interested in picking up this gauntlet?'

'They say you opened the gates—'

Barathol snorted, walked over towards the jug of rum Nulliss had set on the bar. 'Ridiculous. T'lan Imass don't need gates.' The Semk witch found an empty tankard and thunked it on the counter. 'Oh, I opened them all right — on my way out, on the fastest horse I could find. By that time, the slaughter had already begun.'

'Yet you did not stay, did you? You did not fight, Barathol Mekhar! Hood take you, man, they rebelled in your name!'

'Too bad they didn't think to ask me first,' he replied in a growl, filling the tankard. 'Now, put that damned sword away, High Mage.'

L'oric hesitated, then he sagged where he stood and slowly resheathed the weapon. 'You are right. I am too tired for this. Too old.' He frowned, then straightened again. 'You thought those T'lan Imass were here for you, didn't you?'

Barathol studied the man over the battered rim of the tankard, and said nothing.

L'oric ran a hand through his hair, looked round as if he'd forgotten where he was.

'Hood's bones, Nulliss,' Barathol said in a sigh, 'find the poor bastard a chair, will you?'

The grey haze and its blinding motes of silver slowly faded, and all at once Felisin Younger could feel her own body again, sharp stones digging into her knees, the smell of dust, sweat and fear in the air. Visions of chaos and slaughter filled her mind. She felt numbed, and it was all she could do to see, to register the shape of things about her. Before her, sunlight flung sharp-edged shafts against a rock wall rent through with stress fractures. Heaps of windblown sand banked what used to be broad, shallow stone steps that seemed to lead up into the wall itself. Closer, the large knuckles, pale beneath thin, weathered skin, of the hand that clutched her right arm above the elbow, the exposed ligaments of the wrist stretching, making faint sounds like twisting leather. A grip she could not break — she had exhausted herself trying. Close and fetid, the reek of ancient decay, and visible — every now and then — a blood-smeared, rippled blade, broad near its hooked point, narrowing down at the leather-wrapped handle. Black, glassy stone, thinned into translucence along the edge.

Others stood around her, more of the dread T'lan Imass. Spattered with blood, some with missing or mangled limbs, and one with half its face smashed away — but this was old damage, she realized. Their most recent battle, no more than a skirmish, had cost them nothing.

The wind moaned mournfully along the rock wall. Felisin pushed herself to her feet, scraped the embedded
stones from her knees. *They're dead. They're all dead.* She told herself this again and again, as if the words were newly discovered – not yet meaningful to her, not yet a language she could understand. *My friends are all dead.* What was the point of saying them? Yet they returned again and again, as if desperate to elicit a response – any response.

A new sound reached her. Scrabbling, seeming to come from the cliff-face in front of them. Blinking the stinging sweat from her eyes, she saw that one of the fissures looked to have been widened, the sides chipped away as if by a pick, and it was from this that a bent figure emerged. An old man, wearing little more than rags, covered in dust. Suppurating sores wept runny liquid on his forearms and the backs of his hands.

Seeing her, he fell to his knees. 'You have come! They promised – but why would they lie?' Amidst the words issuing from his mouth were odd clicking sounds. 'I will take you, now – you'll see. Everything is fine. You are safe, child, for you have been chosen.'

'What are you talking about?' Felisin demanded, once again trying to tug her arm free – and this time she succeeded, as the deathly hand unclenched. She staggered.

The old man leapt to his feet and steadied her. 'You are exhausted – no surprise. So many rules were broken to bring you here—'

'Stop calling me that!'

'Please – you have been delivered and blood has been spilled in that deliverance – it falls to you to give such sacrifice meaning—'

'Sacrifice? That was murder! They killed my friends!'

'I will help you grieve, for that is my weakness, you see? I grieve always – for myself – because of drink, and the thirst always within me. Weakness. Kneel before it, child. Make of it a thing to worship. There is no point in fighting – the world's sadness is far more powerful than you can ever hope to be, and that is what you must come to understand.'

'I want to leave.'

'Impossible. The Unbound have delivered you. Where could you go even if you might? We are leagues upon leagues from anywhere.' He sucked on the pebbles, swallowed spit, then continued, 'You would have no food. No water. Please, Chosen One, a temple awaits you within this buried city – I have worked so long, so hard to ready it for you. There is food, and water. And soon there will be more servants, all desperate to answer your every desire – once you accept what you have become.' He paused to smile again, and she saw the stones – black, polished, at least three, each the size of a knuckle bone. 'Soon, you shall realize what you have become – leader of the greatest cult of Seven Cities, and it will sweep beyond, across every sea and every ocean – it shall claim the world—'

'You are mad,' Felisin said.

'The Whispers do not lie.' He reached for her and she recoiled at that glistening, pustuled hand. 'Ah, there was plague, you see. Poliel, the goddess herself, she bowed before the Chained One – as must we all, even you
– and only then shall you come into your rightful power. Plague – it claimed many, it left entire cities filled with blackened bodies – but others survived, because of the Whispers, and so were marked – by sores and twisted limbs, by blindness. For some it was their tongues. Rotting and falling off, thus leaving them mute. Among others, their ears bled and all sound has left their world. Do you understand? They had weakness, and the Chained One – he has shown how weakness becomes strength. I can sense them, for I am the first. Your seneschal. I sense them. They are coming.’

She continued staring down at his sickly hand, and after a moment he returned it to his side.

Clicking. ‘Please, follow me. Let me show you all that I have done.’

Felisin lifted her hands to her face. She did not understand. None of this made any sense. ‘What,’ she asked, ‘is your name?’

‘Kulat.’

‘And what,’ she said in a whisper, ‘is mine?’

He bowed. ‘They did not understand – none of them did. The Apocalyptic – it is not just war, not just rebellion. It is devastation. Not just of the land – that is but what follows – do you see? The Apocalypse, it is of the spirit. Crushed, broken, slave to its own weaknesses. Only from such a tormented soul can ruin be delivered to the land and to all who dwell upon it. We must die inside to kill all that lies outside. Only then, once death takes us all, only then shall we find salvation.’ He bowed lower. ‘You are Sha’ik Reborn, Chosen as the Hand of the Apocalypse.’

‘Change of plans,’ muttered Iskaral Pust as he scurried about, seemingly at random, moving into and out of the campfire’s light. ‘Look!’ he hissed. ‘She’s gone, the mangy cow! A few monstrous shadows in the night and poof! Nothing but spiders, hiding in every crack and cranny. Bah! Snivelling coward. I was thinking, Trell, that we should run. Yes, run. You go that way and I’ll go this way – I mean, I’ll be right behind you, of course, why would I abandon you now? Even with those things on the way ...’ He paused, pulled at his hair, then resumed his frantic motion. ‘But why should I worry? Have I not been loyal? Effective? Brilliant as ever? So, why are they here?’

Mappo drew out a mace from his sack. ‘I see nothing,’ he said, ‘and all I can hear is you, High Priest. Who has come?’

‘Did I say anything was coming?’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Can I help it if you’ve lost your mind? But why, that’s what I want to know, yes, why? It’s not like we need the company. Besides, you’d think this was the last place they’d want to be, if what I’m smelling is what I’m smelling, and I wouldn’t be smelling what I’m smelling if something wasn’t there that didn’t smell, right?’ He paused, cocked his head. ‘What’s that smell? Never mind, where was I? Yes, trying to conceive of the inconceivable, the inconceivable being the notion that Shadowthrone is actually quite sane. Preposterous, I know. Anyway, if that, then this, this being he knows what he’s doing. He has reasons – actual reasons.’

‘Iskaral Pust,’ Mappo said, rising from where he had been sitting near the fire. ‘Are we in danger?’

‘Has Hood seen better days? Of course we’re in danger, you oafish fool – oh, I must keep such opinions to myself. How about this? Danger? Haha, my friend, of course not. Haha. Ha. Oh, here they are ...’

Massive shapes emerged from the darkness. Red ember eyes to one side, lurid green eyes on another, then other sets, one gold, another coppery. Silent, hulking and deadly.

The Hounds of Shadow.

Somewhere far away in the desert, a wolf or coyote howled as if it had caught a scent from the Abyss itself. Closer to hand, even the crickets had fallen silent.
The hairs on the back of the Trell's neck stiffened. He too could now smell the fell beasts. Acrid, pungent. With that reek came painful memories. 'What do they want with us, High Priest?'

'Be quiet – I need to think.'

'No need to tax yourself,' said a new voice from the darkness, and Mappo turned to see a man step into the fire's light. Grey-cloaked, tallish, and otherwise nondescript. 'They are but ... passing through.'

Iskaral's face brightened with false pleasure even as he flinched. 'Ah, Cotillion – can you not see? I have achieved all Shadowthrone asked of me—'

'With that clash you had with Dejim Nebrahl,' Cotillion said, 'you have in fact exceeded expectations – I admit, I had no idea you possessed such prowess, Iskaral Pust. Shadowthrone chose well his Magi.'

'Yes, he's full of surprises, isn't he?' The High Priest crabwalked over to crouch by the fire, then he cocked his head and said, 'Now, what does he want? To put me at ease? He never puts me at ease. To lead the Hounds onto some poor fool's trail? Not for long, I hope. For that fool's sake. No, none of these things. He's here to confound me, but I am a High Priest of Shadow, after all, and so cannot be confounded. Why? Because I serve the most confounding god there is, that's why. Thus, need I worry? Of course, but he'll never know, will he? No, I need only smile up at this killer god and say: Would you like some cactus tea, Cotillion?'

'Thank you,' Cotillion replied, 'I would.'

Mappo set his mace down and resumed his seat as Iskaral poured out the tea. The Trell struggled against the desperation growing within him. Somewhere to the north, Icarium sat before flames likely little different from these ones, haunted as ever by what he could not remember. Yet, he was not alone. No, another has taken my place. That should have been cause for relief, but all Mappo could feel was fear. I cannot trust the Nameless Ones — I learned that a long time ago.

The Patron God of Assassins was a long time in replying. Around them, just beyond the camp, the huge Hounds seemed to have settled for the night. 'It is less a curse,' he finally said, 'than a ... residue. The death of an Azath House releases all manner of forces, energies – not just those belonging to the denizens in their earthen tombs. There is, burned into Icarium's soul, something like an infection, or, perhaps, a parasite. Its nature is chaos, and the effect is one of discontinuity. It defies progression, of thought, of spirit, of life itself. Mappo, that infection must be expunged, if you would save Icarium.'

The Trell could barely draw breath. In all the centuries at the Jhag's side, among all the words given him by the Nameless Ones, by scholars and sages across half the world, he had never before heard anything like this. 'Are – are you certain?'

A slow nod. 'As much as is possible. Shadowthrone, and I,' he looked up, then half-shrugged, 'our path to ascendancy was through the Houses of the Azath. There were years – a good number of them – in which neither I nor the man who at that time was known as Emperor Kellanved were to be found anywhere within the Malazan Empire. For we had begun another quest, a bolder gambit. Firelight gleamed in his dark eyes. 'We set out to map the Azath. Every House, across this entire realm. We set out to master its power—'

'But that is not possible,' Mappo said. 'You failed – you cannot have done otherwise, else you both would now be far more than gods—'

'True enough, as far as it goes.' He studied the tea in the clay cup nestled in the bowl of his hands. 'Certain realizations came to us, however, earned from hard experience and somewhat unrelenting diligence. The first
was this: our quest would demand far more than a single, mortal lifespan. The other realizations – well, perhaps I had best leave those for another night, another time. In any case, in comprehending that such a gambit would enforce upon us demands we could not withstand – not as Emperor and Master Assassin, that is – it proved necessary to make use of what we had learned to date.

'To make yourselves gods.'

'Yes. And in so doing, we learned that the Azath are far more than Houses created as prisons for entities of power. They are also portals. And one more thing for certain – they are the repositories for the Lost Elementals.'

Mappo frowned. 'I have not heard that phrase before. Lost Elementals?'

'Scholars tend to acknowledge but four, generally: water, fire, earth and air; yet others exist. And it is from these others that comes the immense power of the Azath Houses. Mappo, one is at an immediate disadvantage in discerning a pattern, when one has but four points of reference, with an unknown number of others as yet invisible, unaccounted for in the scheme.'

'And so we would have, had we not come to understand that the Azath's control was failing. The Nameless Ones, I suspect, have come to the same realization, and so are now driven to desperation. Alas, we believe their latest decision will, if anything, further pitch the Azath towards chaos and dissolution.' He nodded towards Iskaral Pust, who crouched nearby, muttering to himself. 'Hence, our decision to ... intervene. Too late, unfortunately, to prevent Dejim Nebrahl's release, and the ambush itself. But ... you are alive, Trell.'

'And you sought to master such power?' He stared at Cotillion, wondering if even a god was capable of such conceit, such ambition. And they began on their quest long before they became gods ... 'I confess that I hope you and Shadowthrone fail – for what you describe should not fall into anyone's hands, not a god's, not a mortal's. No, leave it to the Azath—'"

Mappo leaned back. 'And you sought to master such power?' He stared at Cotillion, wondering if even a god was capable of such conceit, such ambition. And they began on their quest long before they became gods ... 'I confess that I hope you and Shadowthrone fail – for what you describe should not fall into anyone's hands, not a god's, not a mortal's. No, leave it to the Azath—'

'As you were saying, Mappo?'

And so, Cotillion, in seeking to master the Azath, you now find yourself serving it. Desire versus deed ... 'To lift Icarium's curse,' Mappo shook his head. 'This is an extraordinary offer, Cotillion. I find myself torn between doubt and hope.' A wry smile – 'Ah, I begin to understand how mere concepts are enough.'

'Icarium has earned an end to his torment,' the god said, 'has he not?'

'What must I do?'

'For now, do as you are doing – pursue your friend. Stay on that trail, Mappo. A convergence is coming, of a magnitude so vast it will very likely defy comprehension. The gods seem oblivious to the cliff-edge they are all approaching, and yes, every now and then I include myself among them.'

'You hardly seem oblivious.'

'Well then, perhaps helpless is a more accurate term. In any event, you and I will speak again. For now, do not doubt that you are needed. By us, by every mortal and above all, by Icarium.' He set the cup down and rose.

The faint sound of the Hounds lifting themselves into readiness reached Mappo's ears.
'I know I need not say this,' the god said, 'but I shall anyway. Do not give up hope, Mappo. For this, despair is your greatest foe. When the time comes for you to stand between Icarium and all that the Nameless Ones seek ... well, I believe that you will not fail.'

Mappo watched Cotillion walk into the darkness, the Hounds slipping into the god's wake. After a moment, the Trell glanced over at Iskaral Pust. And found sharp, glittering eyes fixed on him. 'High Priest,' Mappo asked, 'do you intend to join me in my journey?'

'Alas, I cannot.' The Dal Honese glanced away. 'The Trell's insane! He will fail! Of course he will fail! As good as dead, ah, I cannot bear now to even so much as look at him. All Mogora's healing – for naught! A waste!' Iskaral Pust rubbed at his face, then leapt to his feet. 'Too many equally important tasks await me, Mappo Runt. No, you and I shall walk momentarily divergent paths, yet side by side to glory nonetheless! As Cotillion has said, you shall not fail. Nor will I. Victory shall be ours!' He raised a bony fist and shook it at the night sky. Then hugged himself. 'Gods below, we're doomed.'

A cackle from Mogora, who had reappeared, her arms loaded down with firewood implausibly cut and split as if by a master woodsman. She dumped it beside the fire. 'Stir them embers, dear pathetic husband of mine.'

'You cannot command me, hag! Stir them yourself! I have more vital tasks before me right now!'

'Such as?'

'Well, to begin with, I need to pee.'
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

And all these people gathered to honour the one who had died, was it a man, a woman, a warrior, a king, a fool, and where were the statues, the likenesses painted on plaster and stone?

yet so they stood or sat, the wine spilling at their feet, dripping red from their hands, with wasps in their dying season spinning about in sweet thirst and drunken voices cried out, stung awake

voices blended in confused profusion, the question asked again then again – why? But this is where a truth finds its own wonder, for the question was not why did this one die, or such to justify

for in their heart of milling lives there were none for whom this gathering was naught but an echo, of former selves. They asked, again and yet again, why are we here?

The one who died had no name but every name, no face but every face of those who had gathered, and so it was we who learned among wasps swept past living yet nerve-firing one last piercing

that we were the dead and all in an unseen mind— stood or sat a man, or a woman, a warrior, queen or fool, who in drunken leisure gave a moment's thought to all passed by in life.

Fountain Gathering
Fisher Kel Tath

Even with four new wheels, the Trygalle carriage was a battered, decrepit wreck. Two of the horses had died in the fall. Three shareholders had been crushed and a fourth had broken his neck. Karpolan Demesand sat on a folding camp-stool, his head swathed in a bloodstained bandage, sipping herbal tea in successive winces.

They had left Ganath's warren of Omtose Phellack, and now the familiar desert, scrubland and barren hills of Seven Cities surrounded them, the sun reaching towards noon behind a ceiling of cloud. The smell of rain tinged the unusually humid air. Insects spun and swirled overhead.

'This comes,' said Ganath, 'with the rebirth of the inland sea.'

Paran glanced over at her, then resumed cinching tight the girth strap on his horse – the beast had taken to holding its breath, chest swollen in an effort to keep the strap loose, likely hoping Paran would slide off from its back at some perfectly inopportune moment. Horses were reluctant companions in so many human escapades, disasters and foibles – Paran could not resent the animal's well-earned belligerence. 'Ganath,' he said, 'do you know precisely where we are?'

'This valley leads west to Raraku Sea, beyond the inside range; and east, through a little-used pass, down to the city of G'danisban.' She hesitated, then added, 'It has been a long time since I have been this far east ... this close to the cities of your kind.'

'G'danisban. Well, I have need of supplies.'

She faced him. 'You have completed your task, Master of the Deck. The Deragoth unleashed, the D'ivers known as Dejim Nebrahl, the hunter, now the hunted. Do you now return to Darujhistan?'

He grimaced. 'Not yet, alas.'

'There are still more forces you intend to release upon the world?'

A certain edge to her voice brought him round. 'Not if I can help it, Ganath. Where do you now go?'

'West.'
'Ah, yes, to repair the damage to that ritual of yours. I’m curious, what did it imprison?'

'A sky keep of the K’Chain Che’Malle. And ... other things.'

A sky keep? Gods below. 'Where did it come from?'

'A warren, I suppose,' she said.

She knew more than that, he suspected, but he did not press the issue. Paran made some final adjustments to the saddle, and said, 'Thank you, Ganath, for accompanying us – we would not have survived without you.'

'Perhaps, some day, I can ask of you a favour in return.'

'Agreed.' He drew out a long, cloth-wrapped object that had been strapped to the saddle, carried it over to Karpolan Demesand. 'High Mage,' he said.

The corpulent man looked up. 'Ah, our payment.'

'For services rendered,' Paran said. 'Do you wish me to unwrap it?'

'Hood no, Ganoes Paran – sorcery’s the only thing keeping my skull intact right now. Even scabbarded and bundled as that sword now is, I can feel its entropy.'

'Yes, it is an unpleasant weapon,' Paran said. 'In any case, there is yet one more thing to be done.' A gesture from Karpolan and one of the Pardu shareholders came over, collected the otataral sword that had once belonged to Adjunct Lorn. She carried it a short distance, then set it on the ground and backed away. Another shareholder arrived, cradling in his arms a large two-handed mace. He positioned himself over the wrapped weapon, then swung the mace down. And again, and again. Each blow further shattered the otataral blade. Breathing hard, the man stepped back and looked over at Karpolan Demesand. Who then faced Paran once more. 'Collect your shard, Master of the Deck.'

'Thank you,' the Malazan replied, walking over. Crouching, he pulled aside the cut and battered hide. He stared down at the rust-hued slivers of metal for a halfdozen heartbeats, then selected a shard about the length of his index finger and not much wider. Carefully folding it inside a fragment of hide, he then tucked it into his belt pouch. He straightened and strode back to the High Mage. Karpolan Demesand sighed, slowly rose from the stool. 'It is time for us to go home.'

'Have a safe journey, High Mage,' Paran said with a bow.

The man attempted a smile, and the effort stole all colour from his face. Turning away and helped by one of the shareholders, he made his way to the carriage. 'Pray,' Ganath said in a low voice at Paran's side, 'he encounters no untoward opposition in the warrens.'

Paran went to his horse. Then, arms resting on the saddle, he looked over at Ganath. 'In this war,' he said, 'Elder forces will be involved. Are involved. The T’lan Imass may well believe that they have annihilated the Jaghut, but clearly that isn’t the case. Here you stand, and there are others, aren’t there?’

She shrugged. From behind them came the tearing sound of a warren opening. Snapping traces, then the rumble of wheels. 'Ganath—'

'Jaghut are not interested in war.'
Paran studied her for a moment longer, then he nodded. Setting a foot in the stirrup, he pulled himself onto the horse and collected the reins. 'Like you,' he said to the Jaghut, 'I'm feeling a long way from home. Fare well in your travels, Ganath.'

'And you, Master of the Deck.'

Eastward Paran rode along the length of the valley. The river that had once carved through this land was long gone, although the winding path of its course was evident, with stands of brush and withered trees clustered here and there where the last sinkholes had been, old oxbows and flats of alluvial sands fanning out on the bends. After a league the valley opened out into a shallow basin, raw cliffs to the north and long, sloping slides of rubble to the south. Directly ahead, a trail was visible climbing between deepcut runoff channels.

Reaching its base, Paran dismounted and led his mount up the track. The afternoon heat was building, all the more cloying for its unnatural humidity. Far to the west, likely above the Raraku Sea, massive clouds were building. By the time he reached the summit, those clouds had devoured the sun and the breeze at his back was sweet with the promise of rain.

Paran found himself with a view far to the east, down onto rolling hills dotted with domestic goats, the path leading towards a more substantial road that cut north–south along the edge of the plain, the southern route swinging eastward towards a distant smudge of smoke and dust that was, he suspected, G'danisban.

Astride his horse once more, he set off at a canter.

Before long, Paran came to the first herder's hovel, burned and gutted, where goats were now gathering, driven by habit alone as the day's light faded. He discerned no obvious sign of graves, and was not inclined to search among the ruins. Plague, the silent, invisible breath of the Grey Goddess. It was likely, he realized, the city ahead was in the grip of that terror.

The first spatters of rain struck his back, and a moment later, in a rushing sizzle, the downpour was upon him. The rocky trail was suddenly treacherous, forcing Paran to slow his horse to a cautious trot. Visibility reduced to a dozen paces on all sides, the world beyond washed away behind a silver wall. Warm water trickling beneath his clothes, Paran drew up the tattered hood of the military rain-cape covering his shoulders, then hunched over as the rain hammered down.

The worn trail became a stream, muddy water sluicing along amidst rocks and cobbles. Horse slowing to a walk, they pressed on. Between two low hills, the track sprawling out into a shallow lake, and Paran found himself flanked by two soldiers.

One gauntleted hand reached out to take the reins. 'You're headed the wrong way, stranger,' growled the man, in Malazan.

The other held cradled in his arms a crossbow, but it wasn't loaded, and he now spoke from the shadows beneath his hood: 'Is that cape loot? Dragged it from the body of a Malazan soldier, did you?'

'No,' Paran replied. 'Issued to me, just like your capes were to you, soldier.' Ahead, he could just make out in a brief easing of the downpour, was an encampment. Two, perhaps three legions, the tents cloaking a series of hills beneath a low ceiling of smoke from cookfires dying in the rain. Beyond it, with the road winding down a slope, rose the walls of G'danisban. He returned his attention to the soldiers. 'Who commands this army?'

The one with the crossbow said, 'How 'bout you answer the questions to start? You a deserter?'

Well, technically speaking, yes. Then again, I'm supposed to be dead. 'I wish to speak with your commanding officer.'

'You pretty much ain't got no choice, now. Off the horse, stranger. We're arresting you on suspicion of desertion.'

Paran slipped down from the horse. 'Fine. Now will you tell me whose army this is?'

'The lad's push for you. You're now a prisoner of Onearm's Host.'
For all the outward signs, it slowly dawned on Paran that this was not a siege. Companies held the roads leading into G’danisban, and the camp itself formed a half-ring cordon along the north and west sides, no pickets closer than four hundred paces from the unmanned walls.

One of the soldiers led Paran’s horse towards the temporary stables, whilst the other one guided Paran down avenues between sodden tents. Figures moved about, cloaked and hooded, but none wearing full battle regalia.

They entered an officer’s tent.

‘Captain,’ the soldier said, flipping back his hood, ‘we come upon this man trying to ride into G’danisban from the Raraku road. You see, sir, he’s wearing a Malazan military rain-cape. We think he’s a deserter, probably from the Adjunct’s Fourteenth.’

The woman he addressed was lying on her back on a cot that ran parallel to the back wall. She was fair-skinned, her petite features surrounded by a mass of long red hair. Head tilting to take in her soldier and Paran, she was silent for a moment, then resumed her stare at the dipping ceiling above her. ‘Take him to the stockade – we have a stockade, don’t we? Oh, and get his details – what regiment, which legion and all that. So it can be recorded somewhere before he’s executed. Now get out, the both of you, you’re dripping water everywhere.’

‘Just a moment, Captain,’ Paran said. ‘I wish to speak with the High Fist.’

‘Not possible, and I don’t recall giving you permission to speak. Pull out his fingernails for that, Futhgar, will you? When it’s time, of course.’

Years ago, Paran would have done ... nothing. Succumbed to the rules, the written ones and the unwritten ones. He would have simply bided his time. But he was soaked through, in need of a hot bath. He was tired. And, he had gone through something like this once before, long ago and on a distant continent. Back then, of course, it had been a sergeant – same red hair, but a moustache under the nose – even so, the similarity was there, like the poke of an assassin’s knife.

The soldier, Futhgar, was standing on his left, half a pace back. Paran gave nothing away, simply stepping to his right then driving his left elbow into the soldier’s face. Breaking his nose. The man dropped to the ground like a sack of melons.

The captain sat up, legs swinging round, and was on her feet in time for Paran to take a forward step and punch her hard, his knuckles cracking against her jaw. Eyes rolling up, she collapsed back down onto the cot, breaking its wooden legs.

Massaging his hand, Paran looked round. Futhgar was out cold, as was the captain. The steady downpour outside had ensured that no sounds from the brief fight had been heard beyond the tent.

He walked over to the captain’s travel chest. Unlocked. He tilted back the lid and began rummaging through the clothes lying atop armour. Before long, he had enough lengths of material suitable to gag and bind the two soldiers. Dragging Futhgar from near the entrance, he removed the man’s eating knife, his sticker and a broadbladed Kethra gutting knife, then his sword belt. He prepared a wad of cloth for a gag, then bent close to determine if enough air was getting through the man’s broken nose. Not even close. Leaving that for the moment, he tightly bound the wrists and ankles, using a harness strap to link the two behind Futhgar’s back. He then tied a strip round Futhgar’s head, hard against the gaping mouth, leaving room to breathe but no room for the tongue to push outward. He’d be able to make groaning sounds, but not much more than that.

He bound the captain in an identical manner, then added the wad of cloth fixed in place with another strip of material torn from one of the captain’s shirts. And, finally, he tied both of them to either side of the cot, and the cot to the tent’s centre pole, to hinder their squirming from the tent – which he hoped would give him sufficient time. Satisfied, he took one last look round, then, drawing up his hood, he stepped back outside.

He found the main avenue and made his way towards the large command tent at the centre of the encampment. Soldiers walked past, paying him no heed. This was Onearm’s Host, but he’d yet to see a single
familiar face, which wasn't too surprising – he had commanded the Bridgeburners, and the Bridgeburners were
gone. Most of these soldiers would be newcomers to the army, drawn in from garrisons at Pale, Genabarlis and
Nathilog. They would have arrived since the Pannion War. Nonetheless, he expected to find at least someone
from the original force that had marched all the way to Coral, someone who had been part of that devastating battle.

Four soldiers stood guard outside Dujek's command tent. A fifth figure was nearby, holding the reins of a
mudspattered horse.

Paran walked closer, eyes on the horseman. Familiar – he'd found what he had been looking for. An outrider –
but one who'd belonged to Caladan Brood's army, he believed – though I might be wrong in that. Now, what
was his name?

The man's pale brown eyes fixed on him as Paran approached. From within the shadow of the hood, there
came the flicker of recognition, then confusion. The out-rider straightened, then saluted.

Paran shook his head, but it was too late for that. The four guards all stood to attention as well. Paran
answered the salute with a vague, sloppy gesture, then stepped close to the outrider. 'Soldier,' he murmured, 'do
you know me? Make your answer quiet, if you please.'

A nod. 'Captain Ganoes Paran. I don't forget faces or names, sir, but we'd heard you were—'

'Aye, and that's how it stays. Your name?'

'Hurlochel.'

'Now I remember. You acted as chronicler on occasion, didn't you?'

A shrug. 'I keep an account of things, yes, sir. What are you doing here?'

'I need to speak with Dujek.'

Hurlochel glanced over at the guards, then scowled. 'Walk with me, sir. Don't mind them, they're new
enough not to know all the officers.'

Leading the horse, Hurlochel guided Paran away, down a side alley nearby, where he halted.

'Hurlochel,' Paran said, 'why is Dujek's tent guarded by green soldiers? That doesn't make sense at all. What's
happened and why are you camped outside G'danisban?'

'Yes, sir, we've had a hard time of it. It's the plague, you see – the legion healers were keeping it from us, but
what it's done to Seven Cities ... gods, Captain, there's bodies in the tens of thousands. Maybe hundreds of
thousands. Every city. Every village. Caravan camps – everywhere, sir. We had a Gold Moranth accompanying
us, you see, a renegade of sorts. Anyway, there's a temple, in G'danisban. The Grand Temple of Poliel, and it's
where this foul wind is coming from, and it's getting stronger.' Hurlochel paused to wipe rain from his eyes.

'So Dujek decided to strike at the heart, didn't he?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Go on, Hurlochel.'

'We arrived, a month back, and the High Fist formed up companies of his veterans, along with the Gold
Moranth. They planned an assault on that damned temple. Well, they expected at least a High Priestess or some
other sort, but they were ready for it. What nobody planned on, though, was the Grey Goddess herself.'

Paran's eyes widened. 'Who made it back out?'

'Most of them, sir, except the Gold Moranth. But ... they're all sick, sir. The plague's got hold of them and
they're only still alive because of the healers ... only the healers are losing the battle. So, here we are. Stuck, and
nobody skank enough to take real command and make some real decisions.' Hurlochel hesitated, then said,
'Unless that's why you're here, Captain. I sure hope so.'

Paran looked away. 'I'm officially dead, Outrider. Dujek threw us out of the army, myself and a few others—'

'Bridgeburners.'

'Yes.'

'Well, sir, if anybody earned their days in the sweet sun ...'

Paran grimaced. 'Aye, I'm sure that sun's around somewhere. Anyway, I can hardly take command – besides, I'm just a captain—'

'With absolute seniority, sir. Dujek took his officers with him – they were the veterans, after all. So, we got nearly ten thousand soldiers camped here, and the nearest thing to a commander is Captain Sweetcreek, who's a Falari princess, if you can believe that.'

'Red hair?'

'Wild red, aye, and a pretty face—'

'With a swollen jaw. We've met.'

'A swollen jaw?'

'It wasn't a pleasant meeting.' Still Paran hesitated, then he swore and nodded. 'All right. I'll keep the rank of captain ... with seniority. But I need a new name—'

'Captain Kindly, sir.'

'Kindly?'

'Old soldiers talk about him like grandmothers talk monsters to the brats, to keep them in line, sir. Nobody here's met him – at least nobody who's not fevered and half out of their minds.'

'Well, where was Kindly last posted?'

'Fourteenth, sir. The Adjunct's army out west of Raraku. Which direction did you come in from?'

'West.'

'That'll do, sir, I think. I'll make it so's I recognize you. Nobody knows a thing about me, only that the High Fist used me to run messages.'

'So why would I let two soldiers arrest me if I'm supposed to take over command?'

'You did? Well, maybe you wanted to see how we were running things here.'

'All right. One more question, Hurlochel. Why aren't you still with Caladan Brood on Genabackis?'

'The alliance broke up, sir, not long after the Tiste Andii settled in Black Coral. Rhivi back to the plains, the Barghast back to their hills. The Crimson Guard, who were up north, just vanished – no-one knows where they went. When Onearm shipped out, well, seemed like they were headed somewhere interesting.'

'Regrets?'

'With every heartbeat, sir.' Hurlochel then frowned. 'Captain Sweetcreek's got a swollen jaw, you said?'

'I punched her. Along with some soldier named Futhgar. They're bound and gagged in the captain's tent. They might have come round by now.'

The man grinned, but it was not a pleasant grin. 'Captain, you knocked out cold a Falari princess – that's
perfect. It fits with what people have heard about Kindly. That's brilliant.'

Paran winced, then rubbed at his face. *Gods below, what is it with me and royalty?*

She had slowly emerged from the hidden temple to see a straggling line of battered figures walking the road below. Making her way down the dusty, stony slope, she was within fifteen paces before anyone noticed her. There was a strangeness in that moment of meeting, survivors eye to eye, both recognition and disbelief. Acceptance, a sense of something shared, and beneath it the ineffable flow of sorrow. Few words were exchanged.

Joining the soldiers in their march, Lostara Yil found herself alongside Captain Faradan Sort, who told her something of Y'Ghatan’s aftermath. 'Your Fist, Tene Baralta, was hovering on the edge of death, if not of the flesh, then of the spirit. He has lost an arm – it was burned beyond repair – and there was other damage ... to his face. I believe he was a vain man.'

Lostara grunted. 'That damned beard of his, slick with oil.' She thought about Tene Baralta for a time. She'd never liked him much. More than just vain. Perhaps, truth be told, something of a coward, despite all his belligerence and posturing. She remembered the way he had led the retreat following her assassination of the elder Sha'ik, and his eagerness to take credit for every success whilst dancing from the path of disaster. There had been a sadistic streak in the man, and Lostara now feared that it would burgeon, as Tene Baralta sought means to feed all that was wounded within him. 'Why did the army leave all of you behind?'

Faradan Sort shrugged. 'They assumed no-one who had been trapped within the city could have survived the firestorm.' She paused, then added, 'It was a reasonable assumption. Only Sinn knew otherwise, and something told me to trust the girl. So we kept looking.'

'They're all wearing rags ... and they're unarmed.'

'Aye, which is why we need to rejoin the army as soon as possible.'

'Can Sinn magically contact the Fourteenth? Or Quick Ben?'

'I have not asked her. I do not know how much of her ability is unformed talent – such creatures occur occasionally, and without the discipline of schooling as an apprentice, they tend to become avatars of chaos. Power, yes, but undirected, wild. Even so, she was able to defeat the wall of fire and so save Fist Keneb's companies ... well, some of them.'

Lostara glanced over at the captain, then back at the soldiers in their wake for a moment before saying, 'You are Korelri?'

'I am.'

'And you stood the Wall?'

A tight smile, there for an instant then gone. 'None are permitted to leave that service.'

'It's said the Stormriders wield terrible sorcery in their eternal assault upon the Wall.'

'All sorcery is terrible – to kill indiscriminately, often from a great distance, there is nothing more damaging to the mortal who wields such power, whether it is human or something else.'

'Is it better to look your foe in the eye as you take his life?'

'At the very least,' Faradan replied, 'you gave them the chance to defend themselves. And Oponn decides in the end, decides in which set of eyes the light shall fade.'

'Oponn – I thought it was skill.'

'You're still young, Captain Lostara Yil.'
'I am?'

Faradan Sort smiled. 'With each battle I find myself in, my faith in skill diminishes. No, it is the Lord's push or the Lady's pull, each time, every time.'

Lostara said nothing. She could not agree with that assessment, even disregarding the irritation of the other woman's condescension. A clever, skilled soldier lived where dim-witted, clumsy soldiers died. Skill was a currency that purchased Oponn's favour – how could it be otherwise?

'You survived Y'Ghatan,' Faradan Sort said. 'How much of that was the Lady's pull?'

Lostara considered for a moment, then replied, 'None.'

Once, years ago, a few score soldiers had stumbled clear of a vast swamp. Bloodied, half-mad, their very skin hanging in discoloured strips from weeks slogging through mud and black water. Kalam Mekhar had been among them, along with the three he now walked beside, and it seemed that, in the end, only the details had changed.

Black Dog had brutally culled the Bridgeburners, a protracted nightmare war conducted in black spruce stands, in lagoons and bogs, clashing with the Mott Irregulars, the Nathii First Army and the Crimson Guard. The survivors were numbed – to step free of the horror was to cast aside despair, yet whatever came to replace it was slow in awakening. Leaving ... very little. Look at us, he remembered Hedge saying, we're nothing but hollowed-out logs. We done rotted from the inside out, just like every other damned thing in that swamp. Well, Hedge had never been one for optimism.

'You're looking thoughtful,' Quick Ben observed at his side.

Kalam grunted, then glanced over. 'Was wondering, Quick. You ever get tired of your own memories?'

'That's not a good idea,' the wizard replied.

'No, I suppose it isn't. I'm not just getting old, I'm feeling old. I look at all those soldiers behind us – gods below, they're young. Except in their eyes. I suppose we were like that, once. Only ... from then till now, Quick, what have we done? Damned little that meant anything.'

'I admit I've been wondering a few things about you myself,' Quick Ben said. 'That Claw, Pearl, for example.'

'The one that stabbed me in the back? What about him?'

'Why you ain't killed him already, Kalam. I mean, it's not something you'd normally set aside, is it? Unless, of course, you're not sure you can take him.'

From behind the two men, Fiddler spoke: 'It was Pearl that night in Malaz City? Hood's breath, Kalam, the bastard's been strutting round in the Fourteenth since Raraku, no wonder he's wearing a sly smile every time he sees you.'

'I don't give a damn about Pearl, not about killing him, anyway,' Kalam said in a low voice. 'We got bigger things to worry about. What's our Adjunct got in mind? What's she planning?'

'Who says she's planning anything?' Fiddler retorted. He was carrying one of the children in his arms, a girl, fast asleep with her thumb in her mouth. 'She went after Leoman, and now she's fleeing a plague and trying to link up with the transport fleet. And then? My guess is, we're on our way back to Genabackis, or maybe the Korel Peninsula.

It's more of the same 'cause that's what soldiers do, that's how soldiers live.'

'I think you're wrong,' Kalam said. 'It's all snarled, now.'

'What do you mean?'
'Pearl's the key, sapper,' the assassin said. 'Why is he still around? What's the point of spying on the Adjunct? What's the point of dogging the Fourteenth's heels? I'm telling you, Fid, what the Adjunct does next depends on Empress Laseen, her and nobody else.'

'She won't cut us all loose,' Fiddler said. 'Not the Adjunct, not the Fourteenth. We're her only mobile army worthy of the name. There ain't no more commanders out there – well, there are, but the only salute I'd give 'em is point first. Bloody or not, Tavore's put an end to the rebellion here, and that's got to count for something.'

'Fid,' Quick Ben said, 'the war's a lot bigger than you might think, and it's just starting. There's no telling which side the Empress is on.'

'What in Hood's name are you talking about?'

Apsalar spoke. 'A war among the gods, Sergeant. Captain Paran talked of such a war, at length—'

Both Kalam and Quick Ben turned at this.

'Ganoes Paran?' the assassin asked. 'Quick said he left him in Darujhistan. What's he to do with all of this? And when did you speak with him?'

She was leading her horse by the reins three paces behind Fiddler; in the saddle sat three children, dull-eyed in the heat. At Kalam's questions she shrugged, then said, 'He is Master of the Deck of Dragons. In that capacity, he has come here, to Seven Cities. We were north of Raraku when we parted ways. Kalam Mekhar, I have no doubt that you and Quick Ben are in the midst of yet another scheme. For what it is worth, I would advise caution. Too many unknown forces are in this game, and among them will be found Elder Gods and, indeed, Elder Races. Perhaps you believe you comprehend the ultimate stakes, but I suggest that you do not—'

'And you do?' Quick Ben demanded.

'Not entirely, but then, I have constrained my ... goals ... seeking only what is achievable.'

'Now you got me curious,' Fiddler said. 'Here you are, marching with us once again, Apsalar, when I'd figured you'd be settled in some coastal village back in Itko Kan, knitting greasy sweaters for your da. Maybe you left Crokus behind, but it seems to me you ain't left nothing else behind.'

'We travel this same road,' she said, 'for the moment. Sergeant, you need fear nothing from me.'

'And what about the rest of us?' Quick Ben asked.

She did not reply.

Sudden unease whispered through Kalam. He met Quick's eyes for a brief moment, then faced forward once more. 'Let's just catch up with that damned army first.'

'I'd like to see Pearl disposed of,' Quick Ben said.

No-one spoke for a long moment. It wasn't often that the wizard voiced his desire so ... brazenly, and Kalam realized, with a chill, that things were getting bad. Maybe even desperate. But it wasn't that easy. Like that rooftop in Darujhistan – invisible enemies on all sides – you look and look but see nothing.

Pearl, who was once Salk Elan. Mockra warren ... and a blade sliding like fire into my back. Everyone thinks Topper's the master in the Claw, but I wonder ... can you take him, Kalam? Quick's got his doubts – he's just offered to help. Gods below, maybe I am getting old. 'You never answered me, friend,' the assassin said to Quick Ben.

'What was the question again?'

'Ever get tired of your own memories?'

'Oh, that one.'
'Well?'

'Kalam, you have no idea.'

Fiddler didn't like this conversation. In fact, he hated it, and was relieved as everyone fell silent once more, walking the dusty track, every step pushing that damned ruin of a city further behind them. He knew he should be back in the column, with his squad, or maybe up ahead, trying to pry stuff loose from Faradan Sort – that captain was full of surprises, wasn't she just. She'd saved all their lives – there was no doubting that – but that didn't mean that he had to trust her. Not yet, despite the truth that he wanted to, for some arcane reason he'd yet to comprehend.

The little girl with the runny nose sniffled in her sleep, one small hand clutching his left shoulder. Her other hand was at her mouth, and her sucking on her thumb made tiny squeaking sounds. In his arms, she weighed next to nothing.

His squad had come through intact. Only Balm, and maybe Hellian, could say the same. So, three squads out of what, ten? Eleven? Thirty? Moak's soldiers had been entirely wiped out – the Eleventh Squad was gone, and that was a number that would never be resurrected in the future history of the Fourteenth. The captain had settled on the numbers, adding the Thirteenth for Sergeant Urb, and it turned out that Fiddler's own, the Fourth, was the lowest number on the rung. This part of Ninth Company had taken a beating, and Fiddler had few hopes for the rest, the ones that hadn't made it to the Grand Temple. Worse yet, they'd lost too many sergeants. Borduke, Mosel, Moak, Sobelone, Tugg.

*Well, all right, we're beaten up, but we're alive.*

He dropped back a few paces, resumed his march alongside Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas. The last survivor of Leoman's rebel army – barring Leoman himself – had said little, although the scowl knotting his expression suggested his thoughts were anything but calm. A scrawny boy was riding his shoulders, head bobbing and dipping as he dozed.

'I was thinking,' Fiddler said, 'of attaching you to my squad. We were always one short.'

'Is it that simple, Sergeant?' Corabb asked. 'You Malazans are strange. I cannot yet be a soldier in your army, for I have not yet impaled a babe on a spear.'

'Corabb, the sliding bed is a Seven Cities invention, not a Malazan one.'

'What has that to do with it?'

'I mean, Malazans don't stick babes on spears.'

'Is it not your rite of passage?'

'Who has been telling you this rubbish? Leoman?'

The man frowned. 'No. But such beliefs were held to among the followers of the Apocalypse.'

'Isn't Leoman one such follower?'

'I think not. No, never. I was blind to that. Leoman believed in himself and no other. Until that Mezla bitch he found in Y'Ghatan.'

'He found himself a woman, did he? No wonder he went south.'

'He did not go south, Sergeant. He fled into a warren.'

'A figure of speech.'

'He went with his woman. She will destroy him, I am sure of that, and now I say that is only what Leoman deserves. Let Dunsparrow ruin him, utterly—'
'Hold on,' Fiddler cut in, as an uncanny shiver rose through him, 'did you call her Dunsparrow?'

'Yes, for such she named herself.'

'A Malazan?'

'Yes, tall and miserable. She would mock me. Me, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, Leoman's Second, until I became his Third, the one he was content to leave behind. To die with all the others.'

Fiddler barely heard him. 'Dunsparrow,' he repeated.

'Do you know the hag? The witch? The seductress and corrupter?'

_Gods, I once tossed her on my knee._ He realized of a sudden that he was clawing a hand through the remnants of his singed, snarled hair, unmindful of the snags, indifferent to the tears that started from his eyes. The girl squirmed. He stared over at Corabb, unseeing, then hurried ahead, feeling dizzy, feeling ... appalled. _Dunsparrow ... she'd be in her twenties now. Middle twenties, I suppose. What was she doing in Y'Ghatan?_

He pushed between Kalam and Quick Ben, startling both men.

'Fid?'

'Tug Hood's snake till he shrieks,' the sapper said. 'Drown the damned Queen of Dreams in her own damned pool. Friends, you won't believe who went with Leoman into that warren. You won't believe who shared Leoman's bed in Y'Ghatan. No, you won't believe anything I say.'

'Abyss take you, Fid,' Kalam said in exasperation, 'what are you talking about?'

'Dunsparrow. That's who's at Leoman's side right now. Dunsparrow. Whiskeyjack's little sister and I don't know — I don't know anything — what to think, only I want to scream and I don't know why even there, no, I don't know anything any more. Gods, Quick – Kalam – what does it mean? What does any of it mean?'

'Calm down,' Quick Ben said, but his voice was strangely high, tight. 'For us, for us, I mean, it doesn't necessarily mean anything. It's a damned coincidence and even if it isn't, it's not like it means anything, not really. It's just ... peculiar, that's all. We knew she was a stubborn, wild little demon, we knew that, even then – and you knew her better than us, me and Kalam, we only met her once, in Malaz City. But you, you were like her uncle, which means you got some explaining to do!'

Fiddler stared at the man, at his wide eyes. 'Me? You've lost your mind, Quick. Listen to you! Blaming me, for her! Wasn't nothing to do with me!'

'Stop it, both of you,' Kalam said. 'You're frightening the soldiers behind us. Look, we're all too nervous right now, about all sorts of things, to be able to make sense of any of this, assuming there's any sense to be made. People choose their own lives, what they do, where they end up, it don't mean some god's playing around. So, Whiskeyjack's little sister is now Leoman's lover, and they're both hiding out in the Queen of Dreams' warren. All right, better that than crumbling bones in the ashes of Y'Ghatan, right? Well?'

'Maybe, maybe not,' Fiddler said.

'What in Hood's name does that mean?' Kalam demanded.

Fiddler drew a deep, shaky breath. 'We must have told you, it's not like it was secret or anything, and we always used it as an excuse, to explain her, the way she was and all that. Never so she could hear, of course, and we said it to take its power away—'

'Fiddler!'

The sapper winced at Kalam's outburst. 'Now who's frightening everyone——'

'You are! And never mind everyone else – you're frightening me, damn you!'
'All right. She was born to a dead woman – Whiskeyjack's stepmother, she died that morning, and the baby – Dunsparrow – well, she was long in coming out, she should have died inside, if you know what I mean. That's why the town elders gave her up to the temple, to Hood's own. The father was already dead, killed outside Quon, and Whiskeyjack, well, he was finishing his prenticeship. We was young then. So me and him, we had to break in and steal her back, but she'd already been consecrated, blessed in Hood's name – so we took its power away by talking about it, ha ha, making light and all that, and she grew up normal enough. More or less. Sort of...' He trailed away, refused to meet the two sets of staring eyes, then scratched at his singed face. 'We need us a Deck of Dragons, I think ...'

Apsalar, four paces behind the trio, smiled as the wizard and assassin both simultaneously cuffed Sergeant Fiddler. A short-lived smile. Such revelations were troubling. Whiskeyjack had always been more than a little reticent about where he'd come from, about the life before he became a soldier. Mysteries as locked away as the ruins beneath the sands. He'd been a mason, once, a worker in stone. She knew that much. A fraught profession among the arcana of divination and symbolism. Builder of barrows, the one who could make solid all of history, every monument raised in eternal gestures of surrender. There were masons among many of the Houses in the Deck of Dragons, a signifier of both permanence and its illusion. Whiskeyjack, a mason who set his tools down, to embrace slaughter. Was it Hood's own hand that guided him?

It was believed by many that Laseen had arranged Dassem Ul'tor's death, and Dassem had been the Mortal Sword of Hood – in reality if not in name – and the centre of a growing cult among the ranks of the Malazan armies. The empire sought no patron from among the gods, no matter how seductive the invitation, and in that Laseen had acted with singular wisdom, and quite possibly at the command of the Emperor. Had Whiskeyjack belonged to Dassem's cult? Possibly – still, she had seen nothing to suggest that was so. If antthing, he had been a man entirely devoid of faith.

Nor did it seem likely that the Queen of Dreams would knowingly accept the presence of an avatar of Hood within her realm. Unless the two gods are now allies in this war. The very notion of war depressed her, for gods were as cruel and merciless as mortals. Whiskeyjack's sister may be as much an unwitting player in all this as the rest of us. She was not prepared to condemn the woman, and not yet ready to consider her an ally, either.

She wondered again at what Kalam and Quick Ben were planning. Both were formidable in their own right, yet intrinsic in their methods was staying low, beneath notice. What was obvious – all that lay on the surface – was invariably an illusion, a deceit. When the time came to choose sides, out in the open, they were likely to surprise everyone.

Two men, then, whom no-one could truly trust. Two men whom not even the gods could trust, for that matter.

She realized that, in joining this column, in coming among these soldiers, she had become ensnared in yet another web, and there was no guarantee she would be able to cut herself free. Not in time.

The entanglement worried her. She could not be certain that she'd walk away from a fight with Kalam. Not a fight that was face to face, that is. And now his guard was up. In fact, she'd invited it. Partly from bravado, and partly to gauge his reaction. And just a little ... misdirection.

Well, there was plenty of that going round.

The two undead lizards, Curdle and Telorast, were maintaining some distance from the party of soldiers, although Apsalar sensed that they were keeping pace, somewhere out in the scrubland south of the raised road. Whatever their hidden motives in accompanying her, they were for the moment content to simply follow. That they possessed secrets and a hidden purpose was obvious to her, as was the possibility that that purpose involved, on some level, betrayal. And that too is something that we all share.

Sergeant Balm was cursing behind Bottle as they walked the stony road. Scorched boots, soles flapping, mere rags covering the man's shoulders beneath the kiln-hot sun, Balm was giving voice to the miseries afflicting everyone who had crawled out from under Y'Ghatan. Their pace was slowing, as feet blistered and sharp rocks
cut into tender skin, and the sun raised a resisting wall of blinding heat before them. Clawing through it had become a vicious, enervating struggle.

Where others among the squads carried children, Bottle found himself carrying a mother rat and her brood of pups, the former perched on his shoulder and the latter swathed in rags in the crook of one arm. More sordid than comic, and even he could see that, but he would not relinquish his new ... allies.

Striding at Bottle’s side was the halfblood Seti, Koryk. Freshly adorned in human finger bones and not much else. He’d knotted them in the singed strands of his hair, and with each step there was a soft clack and clatter, the music grisly to Bottle’s ears.

Koryk carried more in a clay pot with a cracked rim that he’d found in the pit of a looted grave. No doubt he planned on distributing them to the other soldiers. As soon as we’ve found enough clothes to wear.

He caught a skittering sound off among the withered scrub to his left. Those damned lizard skeletons. Chasing down my scouts. He wondered to whom they belonged. Reasonable to assume they were death-aspected, which possibly made them servants of Hood. He knew of no mages among the squads who used Hood’s Warren – then again those who did rarely advertised the fact. Maybe that healer, Deadsmell, but why would he want familiars now? He sure didn’t have them down in the tunnels. Besides, you’d need to be a powerful mage or priest to be able to conjure up and bind two familiars. No, not Deadsmell. Who, then?

Quick Ben. That wizard had far too many warrens swirling round him. Fiddler had vowed to drag Bottle up to the man, and that was an introduction Bottle had no desire to make. Fortunately, the sergeant seemed to have forgotten his squad, caught up as he was in this sordid reunion of old-timers.

‘Hungry enough yet?’ Koryk asked.

Startled, Bottle glanced over at the man. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Skewered pinkies to start, then braised rat – it’s why you’ve brought them along, isn’t it?’

‘You’re sick.’

Just ahead, Smiles turned to fling back a nasty laugh. ‘Good one. You can stop now, Koryk – you’ve reached your quota for the year. Besides, Bottle ain’t gonna eat them rats. He’s married the momma and adopted the whelps – you missed the ceremony, Koryk, when you was off hunting bones. Too bad, we all cried.’

‘We missed our chance,’ Koryk said to Bottle. ‘We could’ve beat her unconscious and left her in the tunnels.’

A good sign. Things are getting back to normal. Everything except the haunted look in the eyes. It was there, in every soldier who’d gone through the buried bones of Y’Ghatan. Some cultures, he knew, used a ritual of burial and resurrection to mark a rite of passage. But if this was a rebirth, it was a dour one. They’d not emerged innocent, or cleansed. If anything, the burdens seemed heavier. The elation of having survived, of having slipped out from the shadow of Hood’s Gates, had proved woefully shortlived.

It should have felt ... different. Something was missing. The Bridgeburners had been forged by the Holy Desert Raraku – so for us, wasn’t Y’Ghatan enough? It seemed that, for these soldiers here, the tempering had gone too far, creating something pitted and brittle, as if one more blow would shatter them.

Up ahead, the captain called out a halt, her voice eliciting a chorus of curses and groans of relief. Although there was no shade to be found, walking through this furnace was far worse than sitting by the roadside easing burnt, cut and blistered feet. Bottle stumbled down into the ditch and sat on a boulder. He watched, sweat stinging his eyes, as Deadsmell and Lutes moved among the soldiers, doing what they could to heal the wounds.

‘Did you see that Red Blade captain?’ Smiles asked, crouching nearby. ‘Looking like she’d just come from a parade ground.’

‘No she didn’t,’ Corporal Tarr said. ‘She’s smoke-stained and scorched, just like you’d expect.’
'Only she's got all her hair.'

'So that's what you snarly,' Koryk observed. 'Poor Smiles. You know it won't grow back, don't you? Never. You're bald now for the rest of your life—'

'Liar.'

Hearing the sudden doubt in her voice, Bottle said, 'Yes, he is.'

'I knew that. And what's with the black-haired woman on the horse? Anybody here know who she is?'

'Fiddler recognized her,' Tarr said. 'A Bridgeburner, I'd guess.'

'She makes me nervous,' Smiles said. 'She's like that assassin, Kalam. Eager to kill someone.'

_I suspect you're right,' Tarr said. 'And Fid wasn't exactly thrilled to see her, either._

Tarr spoke: 'Koryk, when you going to share those finger bones you collected?'

'Want yours now?'

'Aye, I do.'

Her throat parched, her skin layered in sweat even as shivers rippled through her, Hellian stood on the road. Too tired to walk, too sick to sit down – she feared she'd never get up again, just curl into a little juddering ball until the ants under her skin finished their work and all that skin just peeled away like deer hide, whereupon they'd all march off with it, singing songs of triumph in tiny squeaking voices.

It was the drink, she knew. Or, rather, the lack of it. The world around her was too sharp, too clear; none of it looked right, not right at all. Faces revealed too many details, all the flaws and wrinkles unveiled for the first time. She was shocked to realize that she wasn't the oldest soldier there barring that ogre Cuttle. Well, that was the one good thing that had come of this enforced sobriety. Now, if only those damned faces could disappear just like the wrinkles on them, then she'd be happier. No, wait, it was the opposite, wasn't it? No wonder she wasn't happy.

_Ugly people in an ugly world._ That's what came from seeing it all the way it really was. Better when it was blurred – all farther away back then, it had seemed, so far away she'd not noticed the stinks, the stains, the errant hairs rising from volcanic pores, the miserable opinions and suspicious expressions, the whisperings behind her back.

Turning, Hellian glared down at her two corporals. 'You think I can't hear you? Now be quiet, or I'll rip one of my ears off and won't you two feel bad.'

Touchy and Brethless exchanged a glance, then Touchy said, 'We ain't said nothing, Sergeant.'

'Nice try.'

The problem was, the world was a lot bigger than she had ever imagined. More crannies for spiders than a mortal could count in a thousand lifetimes. Just look around for proof of that. And it wasn't just spiders any more. No, here there were flies that bit and the bite sank an egg under the skin. And giant grey moths that fluttered in the night and liked eating scabs from sores when you were sleeping. Waking up to soft crunching way too close by. Scorpions that split into two when you stepped on them. Fleas that rode the winds. Worms that showed up in the corners of your eyes and made red swirling patterns through your eyelids, and when they got big enough they crawled out your nostrils. Sand ticks and leather leeches, flying lizards and beetles living in dung.

Her entire body was crawling with parasites – she could feel them. Tiny ants and slithering worms under her skin, burrowing into her flesh, eating her brain. And, now that the sweet taste of alcohol was gone, they all wanted out. She expected, at any moment, to suddenly erupt all over, all the horrid creatures clambering out
and her body deflating like a punctured bladder. Ten thousand wriggling things, all desperate for a drink.

'I'm going to find him,' she said. 'One day.'

'Who?' Touchy asked.

'That priest, the one who ran away. I'm going to find him, and I'm going to tie him up and fill his body with worms. Push 'em into his mouth, his nose, his eyes and ears and other places, too.'

No, she wouldn't let herself explode. Not yet. This sack of skin was going to stay intact. She'd make a deal with all the worms and ants, some kind of deal. A truce. Who said you can't reason with bugs?

'It sure is hot,' Touchy said.

Everyone looked at him.

Gesler scanned the soldiers where they sat or sprawled alongside the track. What the fire hadn't burned the sun now had. Soldiers on the march wore their clothes like skin, and for those whose skin wasn't dark, the burnished bronze of hands, faces and necks contrasted sharply with pallid arms, legs and torsos. But what had once been pale was now bright red. Among all those light-skinned soldiers who'd survived Y'Ghatan, Gesler himself was the only exception. The golden hue of his skin seemed unaffected by this scorching desert sun.

'Gods, these people need clothes,' he said.

Beside him, Stormy grunted. About the extent of his communication lately, ever since he'd heard of Truth's death.

'They'll start blistering soon,' Gesler went on, 'and Deadsmell and Lutes can only do so much. We got to catch up with the Fourteenth. He turned his head, squinted towards the front of the column. Then he rose. 'Ain't nobody thinking straight, not even the captain.'

Gesler made his way up the track. He approached the gathering of old Bridgeburners. 'We been missing the obvious,' he said.

'Nothing new in that,' Fiddler said, looking miserable.

Gesler nodded towards Apsalar. 'She's got to ride ahead and halt the army. She's got to get 'em to bring us horses, and clothes and armour and weapons. And water and food. We won't even catch up otherwise.'

Apsalar slowly straightened, brushing dust from her leggings. 'I can do that,' she said in a quiet voice.

Kalam rose and faced Captain Faradan Sort, who stood nearby. 'The sergeant's right. We missed the obvious.'

'Except that there is no guarantee that anyone will believe her,' the captain replied after a moment. 'Perhaps, if one of us borrowed her horse.'

Apsalar frowned, then shrugged. 'As you like.'

'Who's our best rider?' Kalam asked.

'Masan Gilani,' Fiddler said. 'Sure, she's heavy infantry, but still ...'

Faradan Sort squinted down the road. 'Which squad?'

'Urb's, the Thirteenth.' Fiddler pointed. 'The one who's standing, the tall one, the Dal Honese.'

Masan Gilani's elongated, almond-shaped eyes narrowed as she watched the old soldiers approaching.

'You're in trouble,' Scant said. 'You did something, Gilani, and now they want your blood.'
It certainly looked that way, so Masan made no reply to Scant's words. She thought back over all of the things she had done of late. Plenty to consider, but none came to mind that anyone might find out about, not after all this time. 'Hey, Scant,' she said.

The soldier looked up. 'What?'

'You know that big hook-blade I keep with my gear?'

Scant's eyes brightened. 'Yes?'

'You can't have it,' she said. 'Saltlick can have it.'

'Thanks, Masan,' Saltlick said.

'I always knew,' Hanno said, 'you had designs on Salty. I could tell, you know.'

'No I don't, I just don't like Scant, that's all.'

'Why don't you like me?'

'I just don't, that's all.'

They fell silent as the veterans arrived. Sergeant Gesler, his eyes on Masan, said, 'We need you, soldier.'

'That's nice.' She noted the way his eyes travelled her mostly naked frame, lingering on her bared breasts with their large, dark nipples, before, with a rapid blinking, he met her eyes once more.

'We want you to take Apsalar's horse and catch up with the Fourteenth.' This was from Sergeant Strings or Fiddler or whatever his name was these days. It seemed Gesler had forgotten how to talk.

'That's it?'

'Aye.'

'All right. It's a nice horse.'

'We need you to convince the Adjunct we're actually alive,' Fiddler went on. 'Then get her to send us mounts and supplies.'

'All right.'

The woman presumably named Apsalar led her horse forward and handed Masan Gilani the reins. She swung up into the saddle, then said, 'Anybody got a spare knife or something?'

Apsalar produced one from beneath her cloak and passed it up to her.

Masan Gilani's fine brows rose. 'A Kethra. That will do. I'll give it back to you when we meet up again.'

Apsalar nodded.

The Dal Honese set off.

'Shouldn't take long,' Gesler said, watching as the woman, riding clear of the column, urged her horse into a canter.

'We'll rest for a while longer here,' Faradan Sort said, 'then resume our march.'

'We could just wait,' Fiddler said.

The captain shook her head, but offered no explanation.
The sun settled on the horizon, bleeding red out to the sides like blood beneath flayed skin. The sky overhead was raucous with sound and motion as thousands of birds winged southward. They were high up, mere black specks, flying without formation, yet their cries reached down in a chorus of terror.

To the north, beyond the range of broken, lifeless hills and steppe-land ribbed by seasonal run-off, the plain descended to form a white-crusted salt marsh, beyond which lay the sea. The marsh had once been a modest plateau, subsiding over millennia as underground streams and springs gnawed through the limestone. The caves, once high and vast, were now crushed flat or partially collapsed, and those cramped remnants were flooded or packed with silts, sealing in darkness the walls and vaulted ceilings crowded with paintings, and side chambers still home to the fossilized bones of Imass.

Surmounting this plateau there had been a walled settlement, small and modest, a chaotic array of attached residences that would have housed perhaps twenty families at the height of its occupation. The defensive walls were solid, with no gates, and for the dwellers within, ingress and egress came via the rooftops and single-pole ladders.

Yadeth Garath, the first human city, was now little more than salt-rotted rubble swallowed in silts, buried deep and unseen beneath the marsh. No history beyond the countless derivations from its ancient name remained, and of the lives and deaths and tales of all who had once lived there, not even bones survived.

Dejim Nebrahl recalled the fisher folk who had dwelt upon its ruins, living in their squalid huts on stilts, plying the waters in their round, hide boats, and walking the raised wooden platforms that crossed the natural canals wending through the swamp. They were not descendants of Yadeth Garath. They knew nothing of what swirled beneath the black silts, and this itself was an undeniable truth, that memory withered and died in the end. There was no single tree of life, no matter how unique and primary this Yadeth Garath – no, there was a forest, and time and again, a tree, its bole rotted through, toppled to swiftly vanish in the airless muck.

Dejim Nebrahl recalled those fisher folk, the way their blood tasted of fish and molluscs, dull and turgid and clouded with stupidity. If man and woman cannot – will not – remember, then they deserved all that was delivered upon them. Death, destruction and devastation. This was no god's judgement – it was the world's, nature's own. Exacted in that conspiracy of indifference that so terrified and baffled humankind.

Lands subside. Waters rush in. The rains come, then never come. Forests die, rise again, then die once more. Men and women huddle with their broods in dark rooms in all their belated begging, and their eyes fill with dumb failure, and now they are crumbled specks of grey and white in black silt, motionless as the memory of stars in a long-dead night sky.

Exacting nature's judgement, such was Dejim Nebrahl's purpose. For the forgetful, their very shadows stalk them. For the forgetful, death ever arrives unexpectedly.

The Trolbarahl had returned to the site of Yadeth Garath, as if drawn by some desperate instinct. Dejim Nebrahl was starving. Since his clash with the mage near the caravan, his wanderings had taken him through lands foul with rotted death. Nothing but bloated, blackened corpses, redolent with disease. Such things could not feed him.

The intelligence within the D'ivers had succumbed to visceral urgency, a terrible geas that drove him onward on the path of old memories, of places where he had once fed, the blood hot and fresh pouring down his throats.

Kanarbar Belid, now nothing but dust. Vithan Taur, the great city in the cliff-face – now even the cliff was gone. A swath of potsherds reduced to gravel was all that remained of Minikenar, once a thriving city on the banks of a river now extinct. The string of villages north of Minikenar revealed no signs that they had ever existed. Dejim Nebrahl had begun to doubt his own memories.

Driven on, across the gnawed hills and into the fetid marsh, seeking yet another village of fisher folk. But he had been too thorough the last time, all those centuries past, and none had come to take the place of the slaughtered. Perhaps some dark recollection held true, casting a haunted pall upon the swamp. Perhaps the bubbling gases still loosed ancient screams and shrieks and the boatmen from the isles, passing close, made warding gestures before swinging the tiller hard about.
Fevered, weakening, Dejim Nebrahl wandered the rotted landscape.

Until a faint scent reached the D'ivers.

Beast, and human. Vibrant, alive, and close.

The T’rolbarahl, five shadow-thewed creatures of nightmare, lifted heads and looked south, eyes narrowing. There, just beyond the hills, on the crumbling track that had once been a level road leading to Minikenar. The D'ivers set off, as dusk settled on the land.

Masan Gilani slowed her horse's canter when the shadows thickened with the promise of night. The track was treacherous with loose cobbles and narrow gullies formed by run-off. It had been years since she'd last ridden wearing so little – nothing more than a wrap about her hips – and her thoughts travelled far back to her life on the Dal Honese plains. She'd carried less weight back then. Tall, lithe, smooth-skinned and bright with innocence. The heaviness of her full breasts and the swell of her belly and hips came much later, after the two children she'd left behind to be raised by her mother and her aunts and uncles. It was the right of all adults, man or woman, to take the path of wandering; before the empire conquered the Dal Honese, such a choice had been rare enough, and for the children, raised by kin on all sides, their health tended by shamans, midwives and shoulder-witches, the abandonment of a parent was rarely felt.

The Malazan Empire had changed all that, of course. While many adults among the tribes stayed put, even in Masan Gilani's time, more and more men and women had set out to explore the world, and at younger ages. Fewer children were born; mixed-bloods were more common, once warriors returned home with new husbands or wives, and new ways suffused the lives of the Dal Honese. For that was one thing that had not changed over time – we ever return home. When our wandering is done.

She missed those rich grasslands and their young, fresh winds. The heaving clouds of the coming rains, the thunder in the earth as wild herds passed in their annual migrations. And her riding, always on the strong, barely tamed crossbred horses of the Dal Honese, the faint streaks of their zebra heritage as subtle on their hides as the play of sunlight on reeds. Beasts as likely to buck as gallop, hungry to bite with pure evil in their red-rimmed eyes. Oh, how she loved those horses.

Apsalar's mount was a far finer breed, of course. Longlimbed and graceful, and Masan Gilani could not resist admiring the play of sleek muscles beneath her and the intelligence in its dark, liquid eyes.

The horse shied suddenly in the growing gloom, head lifting. Startled, Masan Gilani reached for the kethra knife she had slipped into a fold in the saddle.

Shadows took shape on all sides, lunged. The horse reared, screaming as blood sprayed.

Masan Gilani rolled backward in a tight somersault, clearing the rump of the staggering beast and landing lightly in a half-crouch. Slashing the heavy knife to her right as a midnight-limbed creature rushed her. She felt the blade cut deep, scoring across two out-thrust forelimbs. A bestial cry of pain, then the thing reared back, dropping to all fours – and stumbling on those crippled forelimbs.

Reversing grip, she leapt to close on the apparition, and drove the knife down into the back of its scaled, feline neck. The beast collapsed, sagging against her shins.

A heavy sound to her left, as the horse fell onto its side, four more of the demons tearing into it. Legs kicked spasmodically, then swung upward as the horse was rolled onto its back, exposing its belly. Terrible snarling sounds accompanied the savage evisceration.

Leaping over the dead demon, Masan Gilani ran into the darkness.

A demon pursued her.

It was too fast. Footfalls sounded close behind her, then ceased.

She threw herself down into a hard, bruising roll, saw the blur of the demon's long body pass over her.
Masan Gilani slashed out with the knife, cutting through a tendon on the creature’s right back leg.

It shrieked, careening in mid-air, the cut-through leg folding beneath its haunches as it landed and its hips twisting round with the momentum.

Masan Gilani flung the knife. The weighted blade struck its shoulder, point and edge slicing through muscle to caroom off the scapula and spin into the night.

Regaining her feet, the Dal Honese plunged after it, launching herself over the spitting beast.

Talons raked down her left thigh, pitching her round, off-balance. She landed awkwardly against a slope of stones, the impact numbing her left shoulder. Sliding downward, back towards the demon, Masan dug her feet into the slope’s side, then scrambled up the incline, flinging out handfuls of sand and gravel into her wake.

A sharp edge sliced along the back of her left hand, down to the bone – she’d found the kethra, lying on the slope. Grasping the grip with suddenly slick fingers, Masan Gilani continued her desperate clamber upward.

Another leap from behind brought the demon close, but it slid back down, spitting and hissing as the bank sagged in a clatter of stones and dust.

Reaching the crest, Masan pulled herself onto her feet, then ran, half-blind in the darkness. She heard the demon make another attempt, followed by another shower of sliding stones and rubble. Ahead she could make out a gully of some sort, high-walled and narrow. Two strides from it, she threw herself to the ground in response to a deafening howl that tore through the night.

Another howl answered it, reverberating among the crags, a sound like a thousand souls plunging into the Abyss. Gelid terror froze Masan Gilani’s limbs, drained from her all strength, all will. She lay in the grit, her gasps puffing tiny clouds of dust before her face, her eyes wide and seeing nothing but the scatter of rocks marking the gully’s fan.

From somewhere beyond the slope, down where her horse had died, came the sound of hissing, rising from three, perhaps four throats. Something in those eerie, almost-human voices whispered terror and panic.

A third howl filled the dark, coming from somewhere to the south, close enough to rattle her sanity. She found her forearms reaching out, her right hand clawing furrows in the scree, the kethra knife still gripped tight as she could manage with her blood-smeared left hand.

Not wolves. Gods below, the throats that loosed those howls—

A sudden heavy gusting sound, to her right, too close. She twisted her head round, the motion involuntary, and cold seeped down through her paralysed body as if sinking roots into the hard ground. A wolf but not a wolf, padding down a steep slope to land silent on the same broad ledge Masan Gilani was lying on – a wolf, but huge, as big as a Dal Honese horse, deep grey or black – there was no way to be certain. It paused, stood motionless for a moment in full profile, its attention clearly fixed on something ahead, down on the road.

Then the massive beast’s head swung round, and Masan Gilani found herself staring into lambent, amber eyes, like twin pits into madness.

Her heart stopped in her chest. She could not draw breath, could not pull her gaze from that creature’s deathly regard.

Then, a slow – so very slow – closing of those eyes, down to the thinnest slits – and the head swung back.

The beast padded towards the crest. Stared down for a time, then slipped down over the edge. And vanished from sight.

Sudden air flooded her lungs, thick with dust. She coughed – impossible not to – twisting round into a ball, hacking and gagging, spitting out gobs of gritty phlegm. Helpless, giving herself – giving everything – away. Still coughing, Masan Gilani waited for the beast to return, to pick her up in its huge jaws, to shake her once, hard, hard enough to snap her neck, her spine, to crunch down on her ribcage, crushing everything inside.
She slowly regained control of her breathing, still lying on sweat-soaked ground, shivers rippling through her.

From somewhere far overhead, in that dark sky, she heard birds, crying out. A thousand voices, ten thousand. She did not know that birds flew at night. Celestial voices, winging south as fast as unseen wings could take them.

Closer by ... no sound at all.

Masan Gilani rolled onto her back, stared unseeing upward, feeling blood streaming down her slashed thigh. *Wait till Saltlick and the rest hear about this one* ...

Dejim Nebrahl raced through the darkness, three beasts in full flight, a fourth limping in their wake, already far behind. Too weak, made mindless with hunger, all cunning lost, and now yet one more D'ivers kin was dead. Killed effortlessly by a mere human, who then crippled another with a lazy flick of that knife.

The T'rolbarahl needed to feed. The horse's blood had barely begun to slake a depthless thirst, yet with it came a whisper of strength, a return to sanity.

Dejim Nebrahl was being hunted. An outrage, that such a thing could be. The stench of the creatures rode the wind, seeming to gust in from all sides except directly ahead. Fierce, ancient life and deadly desire, bitter to the T'rolbarahl's senses. What manner of beasts were these?

The fourth kin, lagging half a league behind now, could feel the nearness of the pursuers, loping unseen, seemingly content to keep pace, almost uninterested in closing, in finishing off this wounded D'ivers. They had announced themselves with their howls, but since then, naught but silence, and the palpable nearness of their presence.

They were but toying with Dejim Nebrahl. A truth that infuriated the T'rolbarahl, that burned like acid through their thumping hearts. Were they fully healed, and seven once again rather than three and scant more, those creatures would know terror and pain. Even now, Dejim Nebrahl contemplated laying an ambush, using the wounded kin as bait. But the risks were too great – there was no telling how many of these hunters were out there.

And so there was little choice. Flee, desperate as hares, helpless in this absurd game.

For the first three kin, the scent of the hunters had begun to fade. It was true – few creatures could keep pace with Dejim Nebrahl for very long. It seemed, then, that they would content themselves with the crippled trailer, giving the D'ivers an opportunity to see them for the first time, to mark them for the others, until such time as vengeance could be exacted.

And yet, the mysterious beasts did not lunge into view, did not tear into the fourth kin. And even for that one, the scent was fading.

It made no sense.

Dejim Nebrahl slowed his flight, wondering, curious, and not yet in the least suspicious.

From cool relief to growing chill, the night descended among the trudging soldiers, raising a mutter of new complaints. A sleeping child in his arms, Fiddler walked two strides behind Kalam and Quick Ben, while in his wake strode Apsalar, her footfalls the barest of whispers.

Better than scorching sun and heat ... but not much better. Burnt and blistered skin on shoulders now radiated away all the warmth the flesh could create. Among the worst afflicted, fever awoke like a child lost in the woods, filling shadows with apparitions. Twice in the past hundred paces one of the soldiers had cried out in fear – seeing great moving shapes out in the night. Lumbering, swaggering, with eyes flashing like embers the hue of murky blood. Or so Mayfly had said, surprising everyone with the poetic turn of phrase.
But like the monsters conjured from the imaginations of frightened babes, they never came closer, never quite revealed themselves. Both Mayfly and Galt swore that they had seen ... something. Moving parallel with the column, but quicker, and soon past. Fevered minds, Fiddler told himself again, that and nothing more.

Yet, he felt in himself a growing unease. As if they did indeed have company along this broken track, out there in the darkness, among the trenches and gullies and jumbled rockfalls. A short time earlier he'd thought he had heard voices, distant and seeming to descend from the night sky, but that had since faded. Nonetheless, his nerves were growing frayed – likely weariness, likely an awakening fever within his own mind.

Ahead, Quick Ben's head suddenly turned, stared out to the right, scanned the darkness.

'Something?' Fiddler asked in a low voice.

The wizard glanced back at him, then away again, and said nothing.

Ten paces later, Fiddler saw Kalam loosen the longknives in their scabbards.

Shit.

He dropped back until he was alongside Apsalar, and was about to speak when she cut him off.

'Be on your guard, sapper,' she said quietly. 'I believe we have nothing to fear ... but I cannot be certain.'

'What's out there?' he demanded.

'Part of a bargain.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

She suddenly lifted her head, as if testing the wind, and her voice hardened as she said in a loud voice, 'Everyone off the road – south side only – now.'

At the command, thin fear whispered along the ancient road. Unarmed, unarmoured – this was a soldier's worst nightmare. Crouching down, huddling in the shadows, eyes wide and unblinking, breaths drawing still, the Malazans strained for any telltale sound in the darkness beyond.

Staying low to the ground, Fiddler made his way along to rejoin his squad. If something was coming for them, better he died with his soldiers. As he scrabbled he sensed a presence catching up from behind, and turned to see Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. The warrior held a solid, clublike piece of wood, too thick to be a branch, more like a tap-root from some ancient gulindha. 'Where did you find that?' Fiddler demanded in a hiss.

A shrug was the only answer.

Reaching his squad, the sergeant halted and Bottle crawled over to him. 'Demons,' the soldier whispered, 'out there—' a jerk of the head indicated the north side of the road. 'At first I thought it was the pall of evil offshore, the one that flushed the birds from the salt-marshes beyond the bay—'

'The pall of what?' Fiddler asked.

'But it wasn't that. Something a lot closer. Had a rhizan wheeling round out there – it came close to a beast. A damned big beast, Sergeant. Halfway between wolf and bear, only the size of a bull bhederin. It was headed west—'

'You still linked to that rhizan, Bottle?'

'No, it was hungry enough to break loose – I'm not quite recovered, Sergeant—'

'Never mind. It was a good try. So, the bear-wolf or wolfbhederin was heading west ...'

'Aye, not fifty paces across from us – no way it didn't know we were here,' Bottle said. 'It's not like we was
sneaking along, was it?

'So it ain't interested in us.'

'Maybe not yet, Sergeant.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, I'd sent a capemoth ahead of us up the road, used it to test the air – they can sense things when those things are moving, stirring the air, giving off heat into the night – that heat is sometimes visible from a long way away, especially the colder the night gets. Capemoths need all that to avoid rhizan, although it doesn't always—'

'Bottle, I ain't no naturalist – what did you see or sense or hear or whatever through that damned capemoth?'

'Well, creatures up ahead, closing fast—'

'Oh, thanks for that minor detail, Bottle! Glad you finally got round to it!

'Shh, uh, Sergeant. Please. I think we should just lie low – whatever's about to happen's got nothing to do with us.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas spoke: 'Are you certain of that?'

'Well, no, but it stands to reason—'

'Unless they're all working together, closing a trap—'

'Sergeant,' Bottle said, 'we ain't that important.'

'Maybe you ain't, but we got Kalam and Quick Ben, and Sinn and Apsalar—'

'I don't know much about them, Sergeant,' Bottle said, 'but you might want to warn them what's coming, if they don't know already.'

If Quick hasn't smelled all this out he deserves to get his tiny head ripped off. 'Never mind them.' Twisting round, Fiddler squinted into the darkness south of them. 'Any chance of moving to better cover? This ditch ain't worth a damned thing.'

'Sergeant,' Bottle hissed, his voice tightening, 'we ain't got time.'

Ten paces apart and moving now parallel along the route of the old road, one taking the centre of the track, the flankers in the rough ditches to either side, Dejim Nebrahl glided low to the ground, tipped leathery ears pricked forward, eyes scanning the way ahead.

Something wasn't right. Half a league behind the three the fourth kin limped along, weak with blood-loss and exhausted by fear, and if the hunters remained close, they were now stalking in absolute silence. The kin halted, sinking low, head swivelling as its sharp eyes searched the night. Nothing, no movement beyond the flit of rhizan and capemoths.

The three on the road caught the scent of humans, not far, and savage hunger engulfed all other thoughts. They stank of terror – it would taint their blood when he drank deep, a taste metallic and sour, a flavour Dejim Nebrahl had grown to cherish.

Something lumbered onto the track thirty strides ahead.

Huge, black, familiar.

Deragoth. Impossible – they were gone, swallowed by a nightmare of their own making. This was all wrong.

A sudden howl from far to the south, well behind the fourth kin, who spun, snarling at the sound.
The first three D’ivers spread out, eyes on the lone beast padding towards them. *If but one, then she is doomed*—

The beast surged forward in a charge, voicing a bellowing roar.

Dejim Nebrahl sprinted to meet it.

The flanking D’ivers twisted outward as more huge shapes pounded to close with them, two to each side. Jaws spread wide, lips peeling back, the Deragoth reached Dejim Nebrahl, giving voice to thunder. Massive canines sank down into the kin, slicing through muscle, crushing bone. Limbs snapped, ribs splintered and tore into view through ruptured flesh and hide.

Pain – such pain – the centre D’ivers sprang into the air to meet the charge of the Deragoth ahead. And his right leg was caught in huge jaws, jolting Dejim Nebrahl to a halt in mid-flight. Joints popped even as the leg bones were crunched into shards.

Flung hard to the ground, Dejim sought to spin round, talons lashing out at his attacker's broad head. He tore into one eye and ripped it loose, sending it whirling off into the darkness.

The Deragoth flinched back with a squeal of agony.

Then a second set of jaws closed round the back of the kin's neck. Blood sprayed as the teeth ground and cut inward, crushing cartilage, then bone.

Blood filled Dejim Nebrahl's throat.

*No, it cannot end like this*—

The other two kin were dying as well, as the Deragoth tore them to pieces.

Far to the west, the lone survivor crouched, trembling.

The Hounds attacked, three appearing in front of the last D’ivers. Moments before they closed, all three twisted away – a feint – which meant—

Wolf jaws ripped into the back of Dejim Nebrahl's neck, and lifted the D’ivers from the ground.

The T’rolbarahl waited for the clenching, the killing, but it never came. Instead, the beast that held it was running fast over the ground, others of its kind to either side. West, and north, then, eventually, swinging southward, out into the wastes.

Untiring, on and on through the cold night.

Helpless in the grip of those jaws, the last D’ivers of Dejim Nebrahl did not struggle, for struggle was pointless. There would be no quick death, for these creatures had some other purpose in mind for him. Unlike the Deragoth, he realized, these Hounds possessed a master.

A master who found reason to keep Dejim Nebrahl alive.

A curious, fraught salvation – *but I still live, and that is enough. I still live.*

The fierce battle was over. Kalam, lying near Quick Ben, narrowed his gaze, just barely making out the huge shapes of the demons as they set off, without a backward glance, westward along the track.

'Looks like their hunt's not yet over,' the assassin muttered, reaching up to wipe the sweat that had been stinging his eyes.

'Gods below,' Quick Ben said in a whisper.

'Did you hear those distant howls?' Kalam asked, sitting up. 'Hounds of Shadow – I'm right, aren't I, Quick?
So, we got lizard cats, and giant bear-dogs like the one Toblakai killed in Raraku, and the Hounds ... wizard, I
don't want to walk this road no more.'

'Gods below,' the man at his side whispered again.

Lieutenant Pores's cheerful embrace with the Lady went sour with an ambush of a patrol he'd led inland from
the marching army, three days west of Y'Ghatan. Starving bandits, of all things. They'd beaten them off, but he
had taken a crossbow quarrel clean through his upper left arm, and a sword-slash just above his right knee, deep
enough to sever muscle down to the bone. The healers had mended the damage, sufficient to roughly knit torn
flesh and close scar tissue over the wounds, but the pain remained excruciating. He had been convalescing on
the back of a crowded wagon, until they came within sight of the north sea and the army encamped, whereupon
Captain Kindly had appeared.

Saying nothing, Kindly had clambered into the bed of the wagon, grasped Pores by his good arm, and
dragged him from the pallet. Down off the back, the lieutenant nearly buckling under his weak leg, then
staggering and stumbling as the captain tugged him along.

Gasping, Pores had asked, 'What's the emergency, Captain? I heard no alarms—'

'Then you ain't been listening,' Kindly replied.

Pores looked round, somewhat wildly, but he could see no-one else rushing about, no general call to arms –
the camp was settling down, cookfires lit and figures huddled beneath rain-capes against the chill carried on the
sea breeze. 'Captain—'

'My officers don't lie about plucking nose hairs, Lieutenant. There's real injured soldiers in those wagons,
and you're just in their way. Healers are done with you. Time to stretch out that bad leg. Time to be a soldier
again – stop limping, damn you – you're setting a miserable example here, Lieutenant.'

'Sorry, sir.' Sodden with sweat, Pores struggled to keep up with his captain. 'Might I ask, where are we
going?'

'To look at the sea,' Kindly replied. 'Then you're taking charge of the inland pickets, first watch, and I
strongly suggest you do a weapons and armour inspection, Lieutenant, since there is the chance that I will take
a walk along those posts.'

'Yes, sir.'

Up ahead, on a rise overlooking the grey, white-capped sea, stood the Fourteenth's command. The Adjunct,
Nil and Nether, Fists Blistig, Temul and Keneb, and, slightly apart and wrapped in a long leather cloak,
Tamber. Just behind them stood Warleader Gall and his ancient aide Imrahl, along with captains Ruthan Gudd
and Madan'Tul Rada. The only one missing was Fist Tene Baralta, but Pores had heard that the man was still in
a bad way, one-armed and one-eyed, his face ravaged by burning oil, and he didn't have Kindly in charge of him
either, which meant he was being left to heal in peace.

Ruthan Gudd was speaking in a low voice, his audience Madan'Tul Rada and the two Khundryl warriors, '... just fell into the sea – those breakers, that tumult in the middle of the bay, that's where the citadel stood. A tier
of raised land surrounded it – the island itself – and there was a causeway linking it to this shore – nothing left
of that but those pillars just topping the sands above the tideline. It's said the shattering of a Jaghut enclave far
to the north was responsible—'

'How could that sink this island?' Gall demanded. 'You make no sense, Captain.'

'The T'lan Imass broke the Jaghut sorcery – the ice lost its power, melted into the seas, and the water levels
rose. Enough to eat into the island, deluging the tier, then devouring the feet of the citadel itself. In any case,
this was thousands of years ago—'

'Are you an historian as well as a soldier?' the Warleader asked, glancing over, his tear-tattooed face bathed
red like a mask in the setting sun's lurid light.
The captain shrugged. 'The first map I ever saw of Seven Cities was Falari, a sea-current map marking out the treacherous areas along this coast – and every other coastline, all the way to Nemil. It had been copied countless times, but the original dated from the days when the only metals being traded were tin, copper, lead and gold. Falar's trade with Seven Cities goes back a long way, Warleader Gall. Which makes sense, since Falar is halfway between Quon Tali and Seven Cities.'

Captain Kindly observed, 'It's odd, Ruthan Gudd, you do not look Falari. Nor is your name Falari.'

'I am from the island of Strike, Kindly, which lies against the Outer Reach Deeps. Strike is the most isolated of all the islands in the chain, and our legends hold that we are all that remains of the original inhabitants of Falar – the red- and gold-haired folk you see and think of as Falari were in fact invaders from the eastern ocean, from the other side of Seeker's Deep, or some unknown islands well away from the charted courses across that ocean. They themselves do not even recall their homelands, and most of them believe they have always lived in Falar. But our old maps show different names, Strike names for all the islands and the kingdoms and peoples, and the word "Falar" does not appear among them.'

If the Adjunct and her retinue were speaking, Pores could hear nothing. Ruthan Gudd's words and the stiff wind drowned out all else. The lieutenant's leg throbbed with pain; there was no angle at which he could hold his injured arm comfortably. And now he was chilled, the old sweat like ice against his skin, thinking only of the warm blankets he had left behind.

There were times, he reflected morosely, when he wanted to kill Captain Kindly.

Keneb stared out at the heaving waters of the Kokakal Sea. The Fourteenth had circumvented Sotka and were now thirteen leagues west of the city. He could make out snatches of conversation from the officers behind them, but the wind swept enough words away to make comprehension a chore, and likely not worth the effort. Among the foremost line of officers and mages, no-one had spoken in some time.

Weariness, and, perhaps, the end of this dread, miserable chapter in the history of the Fourteenth.

They had pushed hard on the march, first west and then northward. Somewhere in the seas beyond was the transport fleet and its escort of dromons. Gods, an intercept must be possible, and with that, these battered legions could get off this plague-ridden continent.

To sail away ... but where?

Back home, he hoped. Quon Tali, at least for a time. To regroup, to take on replacements. To spit out the last grains of sand from this Hood-taken land. He could return to his wife and children, with all the confusion and tredpalation such a reunion would entail. There'd been too many mistakes in their lives together, and even those few moments of redemption had been tainted and bitter. Minala. His sister-in-law, who had done what so many victims did, hidden away her hurts, finding normality in brutal abuse, and had come to believe the fault lay with her, rather than the madman she had married.

Killing the bastard hadn't been enough, as far as Keneb was concerned. What still needed to be expunged was a deeper, more pervasive rot, the knots and threads all bound in a chaotic web that defined the time at that fell garrison. One life tied to every other by invisible, thrumming threads, unspoken hurts and unanswered expectations, the constant deceits and conceits – it had taken a continentwide uprising to shatter all of that. And we are not mended.

Not so long a reach, to see how the Adjunct and this damned army was bound in the same tangled net, the legacies of betrayal, the hard, almost unbearable truth that some things could not be answered.

Broad-bellied pots crowding market stalls, their flanks a mass of intricately painted yellow butterflies, swarming barely seen figures and all sweeping down the currents of a silt-laden river. Scabbards bearing black feathers. A painted line of dogs along a city wall, each beast linked to the next by a chain of bones. Bazaars selling reliquaries purportedly containing remnants of great heroes of the Seventh Army. Bult, Lull, Chenned and Duiker. And, of course, Coltaine himself.
When one's enemy embraces the heroes of one's own side, one feels strangely ... cheated, as if the theft of life was but the beginning, and now the legends themselves have been stolen away, transformed in ways beyond control. But Coltaine belongs to us. How dare you do this? Such sentiments, sprung free from the dark knot in his soul, made no real sense. Even voicing them felt awkward, absurd. The dead are ever refashioned, for they have no defence against those who would use or abuse them – who they were, what their deeds meant. And this was the anguish ... this ... injustice.

These new cults with their grisly icons, they did nothing to honour the Chain of Dogs. They were never intended to. Instead, they seemed to Keneb pathetic efforts to force a link with past greatness, with a time and a place of momentous significance. He had no doubt that the Last Siege of Y’Ghatan would soon acquire similar mythical status, and he hated the thought, wanted to be as far away from the land birthing and nurturing such blasphemies as was possible.

Blistig was speaking now: 'These are ugly waters to anchor a fleet, Adjunct, perhaps we could move on a few leagues—'

'No,' she said.

Blistig glanced at Keneb.

'The weather shall turn,' Nil said.

A child with lines on his face. This is the true legacy of the Chain of Dogs. lines on his face, and hands stained red.

And Temul, the young Wickan commanding resentful, embittered elders who still dreamed of vengeance against the slayers of Coltaine. He rode Duiker's horse, a lean mare with eyes that Keneb could have sworn were filled with sorrow. Temul carried scrolls, presumably containing the historian's own writings, although he would not show them to anyone. This warrior of so few years, carrying the burden of memory, carrying the last months of life in an old man once soldier among the Old Guard who had, inexplicably, somehow touched this Wickan youth. That alone, Keneb suspected, was a worthy story, but it would remain forever untold, for Temul alone understood it, holding within himself each and every detail, and Temul was not one to explain, not a teller of stories. No, he just lives them. And this is what those cultists yearn for, for themselves, and what they will never truly possess.

Keneb could hear nothing of the huge encampment behind him. Yet one tent in particular within that makeshift city dominated his mind. The man within it had not spoken in days. His lone eye seemingly stared at nothing. What remained of Tene Baralta had been healed, at least insofar as flesh and bone was concerned. The man's spirit was, alas, another matter. The Red Blade's homeland had not been kind to him. Keneb wondered if the man was as eager to leave Seven Cities as he was.

Nether said, 'The plague is growing more virulent. The Grey Goddess hunts us.'

The Adjunct's head turned at that.

Blistig cursed, then said, 'Since when is Poliel eager to side with some damned rebels – she's already killed most of them, hasn't she?'

'I do not understand this need,' Nether replied, shaking her head. 'But it seems she has set her deathly eyes upon Malazans. She hunts us, and comes ever closer.'

Keneb closed his eyes. Haven't we been hurt enough?

They came upon the dead horse shortly after dawn. Amidst the swarm of capemoths feeding on the carcass were two skeletal lizards, standing on their hind legs, heads ducking and darting as they crunched and flayed the bird-sized insects.

'Hood's breath,' Lostara muttered, 'what are those?'
Telorast and Curdle,' Apsalar replied. 'Ghosts bound to those small frames. They have been my companions for some time now.'

Kalam moved closer and crouched beside the horse. 'Those lizard cats,' he said. 'Came in from all sides.' He straightened, scanning the rocks. 'I can't imagine Masan Gilani surviving the ambush.'

'You'd be wrong,' said a voice from the slope to their right.

The soldier sat on the crest, legs sprawled down the slope. One of those legs was crimson from upper thigh to the cracked leather boot. Masan Gilani's dark skin was ashen, her eyes dull. 'Can't stop the bleeding, but I got one of the bastards and wounded another. Then the Hounds came ...'

Captain Faradan Sort turned to the column. 'Deadsmell! Up front, quick!'

'Thank you for the knife,' Masan Gilani said to Apsalar.

'Keep it,' the Kanese woman said.

'Sorry about your horse.'

'So am I, but you are not to blame.'

Kalam said, 'Well, it seems we're in for a long walk after all.'

Bottle made his way to the front of the column in Deadsmell's wake, close enough to look long and hard at the two bird-like reptile skeletons perched on the horse carcass and intent on killing capemoths. He watched their darting movements, the flicking of their bony tails, the way the darkness of their souls bled out like smoke from a cracked water-pipe.

Someone came to his side and he glanced over. Fiddler, the man's blue eyes fixed on the undead creatures. 'What do you see, Bottle?'

'Sergeant?'

Fiddler took him by the arm and pulled him off to one side. 'Out with it.'

'Ghosts, possessing those bound-up bones.'

The sergeant nodded. 'Apsalar said as much. Now, what kind of ghosts?'

Frowning, Bottle hesitated.

Fiddler hissed a curse. 'Bottle.'

'Well, I was assuming she knows, only has her reasons for not mentioning it, so I was thinking, it wouldn't be polite—'

'Soldier—'

'I mean, she was a squad-mate of yours, and—'

'A squad-mate who just happened to have been possessed herself, by the Rope, almost all the time that I knew her. So if she's not talking, it's no surprise. Tell me, Bottle, what manner of flesh did those souls call home?'

'Are you saying you don't trust her?'

'I don't even trust you.'

Frowning, Bottle looked away, watched Deadsmell working on Masan Gilani on the slope, sensed the whisper of Denul sorcery ... and something like Hood's own breath. The bastard is a necromancer, damn him!
'Bottle.'

'Sergeant? Oh, sorry. I was just wondering.'

'Wondering what?'

'Well, why Apsalar has two dragons in tow.'

'They're not dragons. They're tiny lizards—'

'No, Sergeant, they're dragons.'

Slowly, Fiddler's eyes widened.

Bottle'd known he wouldn't like it.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There is something profoundly cynical, my friends, in the notion of paradise after death. The lure is evasion. The promise is excusative. One need not accept responsibility for the world as it is, and by extension, one need do nothing about it. To strive for change, for true goodness in this mortal world, one must acknowledge and accept, within one’s own soul, that this mortal reality has purpose in itself, that its greatest value is not for us, but for our children and their children. To view life as but a quick passage along a foul, tortured path – made foul and tortured by our own indifference – is to excuse all manner of misery and depravity, and to exact cruel punishment upon the innocent lives to come.

I defy this notion of paradise beyond the gates of bone. If the soul truly survives the passage, then it behooves us – each of us, my friends – to nurture a faith in similitude: what awaits us is a reflection of what we leave behind, and in the squandering of our mortal existence, we surrender the opportunity to learn the ways of goodness, the practice of sympathy, empathy, compassion and healing – all passed by in our rush to arrive at a place of glory and beauty, a place we did not earn, and most certainly do not deserve.

The Apocryphal Teachings of Tanno Spiritwalker Kimloc
The Decade in Ehrlitan

Chaur held out the baby as if to begin bouncing it on one knee, but Barathol reached out to rest a hand on the huge man’s wrist. The blacksmith shook his head. ‘Not old enough for that yet. Hold her close, Chaur, so as not to break anything.’

The man answered with a broad smile and resumed cuddling and rocking the swaddled infant.

Barathol Mekhar leaned back in his chair, stretching out his legs, and briefly closed his eyes, making a point of not listening to the argument in the side room where the woman, Scillara, resisted the combined efforts of L’oric, Nulliss, Filiad and Urdan, all of whom insisted she accept the baby, as was a mother’s responsibility, a mother’s duty and a host of other guilt-laden terms they flung at her like stones. Barathol could not recall the last time the villagers in question had displayed such vehement zeal over anything. Of course, in this instance, their virtue came easy, for it cost them nothing.

The blacksmith admitted to a certain admiration for the woman. Children were indeed burdensome, and as this one was clearly not the creation of love, Scillara’s lack of attachment seemed wholly reasonable. On the opposite side, the ferocity of his fellow townsfolk was leaving him disgusted and vaguely nauseous.

Hayrith appeared in the main room, moments earlier a silent witness to the tirade in the side chamber where they’d set Scillara’s cot. The old woman shook her head. ‘Idiots. Pompous, prattling twits! Just listen to all that piety, Barathol! You’d think this babe was the Emperor reborn!’

‘Gods forbid,’ the blacksmith muttered.

‘Jessa last house on the east road, she’s got that year-old runt with the withered legs that ain’t gonna make it. She’d not refuse the gift, and everyone here knows it.’

Barathol nodded, somewhat haphazardly, his mind on other matters.

‘There’s even Jessa second floor of the old factor house, though she ain’t had any milk t’give in fifteen years. Still, she’d be a good mother and this village could use a wailing child to help drown out all the wailing grown-ups. Get the Jessas together on this and it’ll be fine.’

‘It’s L’oric,’ Barathol said.

‘What’s that?’
'L'oric. He's so proper he burns to the touch. Or, rather, he burns everything he touches.'

'Well, it ain't his business, is it?'

'People like him make everything their business, Hayrith.'

The woman dragged a chair close and sat down across from the blacksmith. She studied him with narrowed eyes. 'How long you going to wait?' she asked.

'As soon as the lad, Cutter, is able to travel,' Barathol said. He rubbed at his face. 'Thank the gods all that rum's drunk. I'd forgotten what it does to a man's gut.'

'It was L'oric, wasn't it?'

He raised his brows.

'Him showing up here didn't just burn you – it left you scorched, Barathol. Seems you did some bad things in the past' – she snorted – 'as if that makes you different from all the rest of us. But you figured you could hide out here for ever, and now you know that ain't going to be. Unless, of course,' her eyes narrowed to slits, 'you kill L'oric'

The blacksmith glanced over at Chaur, who was making faces and cooing sounds down at the baby, while it in turn seemed to be blowing bubbles, as yet blissfully unaware of the sheer ugliness of the monstrous face hovering over it. Barathol sighed. 'I'm not interested in killing anyone, Hayrith.'

'So you're going with these people here?'

'As far as the coast, yes.'

'Once L'oric gets word out, they'll start hunting you again. You reach the coast, Barathol, you find the first ship off this damned continent, is what you do. 'Course, I'll miss you – the only man with more than half a brain in this whole town. But Hood knows, nothing ever lasts.'

They both looked over as L'oric appeared. The High Mage's colour was up, his expression one of baffled disbelief. 'I just don't understand it,' he said.

Barathol grunted. 'It's not for you to understand.'

'This is what civilization has come to,' the man said, crossing his arms and glaring at the blacksmith.

'You got that right.' Barathol drew his legs in and stood. 'I don't recall Scillara inviting you into her life.'

'My concern is with the child.'

The blacksmith began walking towards the side chamber. 'No it isn't. Your obsession is with propriety. Your version of it, to which everyone else must bend a knee. Only, Scillara's not impressed. She's too smart to be impressed.'

Entering the room, Barathol grasped Nulliss by the scruff of her tunic. 'You,' he said in a growl, 'and the rest of you, get out.' He guided the spitting, cursing Semk woman out through the doorway, then stood to one side watching the others crowd up in their eagerness to escape.

A moment later, Barathol and Scillara were alone. The blacksmith faced her. 'How is the wound?'

She scowled. 'The one that's turned my arm into a withered stick or the one that'll make me walk like a crab for the rest of my life?'

'The shoulder. I doubt the crab-walk is permanent.'

'And how would you know?'

He shrugged. 'Every woman in this hamlet has dropped a babe or three, and they walk just fine.'
She eyed him with suspicion. 'You're the one called Barathol. The blacksmith.'

'Yes.'

'The mayor of this pit you call a hamlet.'

'Mayor? I don't think we warrant a mayor. No, I'm just the biggest and meanest man living here, which to most minds counts for far too much.'

'L'oric says you betrayed Aren. That you're responsible for the death of thousands, when the T'lan Imass came to crush the rebellion.'

'We all have our bad days, Scillara.'

She laughed. A rather nasty laugh. 'Well, thank you for driving those fools away. Unless you plan on picking up where they left off.'

He shook his head. 'I have some questions about your friends, the ones you were travelling with. The T'lan Imass ambushed you with the aim, it seems, of stealing the young woman named Felisin Younger.'

'L'oric said as much,' Scillara replied, sitting up straighter in the bed and wincing with the effort. 'She wasn't important to anybody. It doesn't make sense. I think they came to kill Heboric more than steal her.'

'She was the adopted daughter of Sha'ik.'

The woman shrugged, winced again. 'A lot of foundlings in Raraku were.'

'The one named Cutter, where is he from again?'

'Darujhistan.'

'Is that where all of you were headed?'

Scillara closed her eyes. 'It doesn't matter now, does it? Tell me, have you buried Heboric?'

'Yes, he was Malazan, wasn't he? Besides, out here we've a problem with wild dogs, wolves and the like.'

'Might as well dig him up, Barathol. I don't think Cutter will settle for leaving him here.'

'Why not?'

Her only answer was a shake of her head.

Barathol turned back to the doorway. 'Sleep well, Scillara. Like it or not, you're the only one here who can feed your little girl. Unless we can convince Jessa last house on the east road. At all events, she'll be hungry soon enough.'

'Hungry,' the woman muttered behind him. 'Like a cat with worms.'

In the main room the High Mage had taken the babe from Chaur's arms. The huge simpleton sat with tears streaming down his pocked face, this detail unnoticed by L'oric as he paced with the fidgeting infant in his arms.

'A question,' Barathol said to L'oric, 'how old do they have to get before you lose all sympathy for them?'

The High Mage frowned. 'What do you mean?'

Ignoring him, the blacksmith walked over to Chaur. 'You and me,' he said, 'we have a corpse to dig up. More shovelling, Chaur, you like that.'

Chaur nodded and managed a half-smile through his tears and runny nose.
Outside, Barathol led the man to the smithy where they collected a pick and a shovel, then they set off for the stony plain west of the hamlet. There'd been an unseasonal spatter of rain the night before, but little evidence of that remained after a morning of fiercely hot sunlight. The grave was beside a half-filled pit containing the remnants of the horses after Urdan had finished butchering them. He had been told to burn those remains but had clearly forgotten. Wolves, coyotes and vultures had all found the bones and viscera, and the pit now swarmed with flies and maggots. Twenty paces further west, the now bloated, shapeless carcass of the toad demon lay untouched by any scavenger.

As Chaur bent to the task of disinterring Heboric's wrapped corpse, Barathol stared across at that demon's misshapen body. The now-stretched hide was creased with white lines, as if it had begun cracking. From this distance Barathol could not be certain, but it seemed there was a black stain ringing the ground beneath the carcass, as if something had leaked out.

'I'll be right back, Chaur.'

The man smiled.

As the blacksmith drew closer, his frown deepened. The black stain was dead flies, in their thousands. As unpalatable, then, this demon as the handless man had been. His steps slowed, then halted, still five paces from the grisly form. He'd seen it move – there, again, something pushing up against the blistered hide from within.

And then a voice spoke in Barathol's head.

'Impatience. Please, be so kind, a blade slicing with utmost caution, this infernal hide.'

The blacksmith unsheathed his knife and stepped forward. Reaching the demon's side, he crouched down and ran the finely honed edge along one of the cracks in the thick, leathery skin. It parted suddenly and Barathol leapt back, cursing, as a gush of yellow liquid spurted from the cut.

Something like a hand, then forearm and elbow pushed through, widening the slice, and moments later the entire beast slithered into view, four eyes blinking in the bright light. Where the carcass had had two limbs missing, there were now new ones, smaller and paler, but clearly functional. 'Hunger. Have you food, stranger? Are you food?'

Sheathing his knife, Barathol turned about and walked back to where Chaur was dragging free Heboric's body. He heard the demon following.

The blacksmith reached the pick he had left beside the grave pit and collected the tool, turning and hefting it in his hands. 'Something tells me,' he said to the demon, 'you're not likely to grow a new brain once I drive this pick through your skull.'

'Exaggeration. I quake with terror, stranger. Amused. Greyfrog was but joking, encouraged by your expression of terror.'

'Not terror. Disgust.'

The demon's bizarre eyes swivelled in their sockets and the head twitched to look past Barathol. 'My brother has come. He is there, I sense him.'

'You'd better hurry,' Barathol said. 'He's about to adopt a new familiar.' The blacksmith lowered the pick and glanced over at Chaur.

The huge man stood over the wrapped corpse of Heboric, staring with wide eyes at the demon.

'It's all right, Chaur,' said Barathol. 'Now, let's carry the dead man to the tailings heap back of the smithy.'

Smiling again, the huge man picked up Heboric's body. The stench of decaying flesh reached Barathol.

Shrugging, the blacksmith collected the shovel.

Greyfrog set off in a loping gait towards the hamlet's main street.
Dozing, Scillara's eyes snapped open as an exultant voice filled her mind. 'Joy! Dearest Scillara, time of vigil is at an end! Stalwart and brave Greyfrog has defended your sanctity, and the brood even now squirms in Brother L'oric's arms.'

'Greyfrog? But they said you were dead! What are you doing talking to me? You never talk to me!'

'Female with brood must be sheathed with silence. All slivers and darts of irritation fended off by noble Greyfrog. And now, happily, I am free to infuse your sweet self with my undying love!'

'Gods below, is this what the others had to put up with?' She reached for her pipe and pouch of rustleaf.

A moment later the demon squeezed through the doorway, followed by L'oric, who held in his arms the babe.

Scowling, Scillara struck spark to her pipe.

'The child is hungry,' L'oric said.

'Fine. Maybe that will ease the pressure and stop this damned leaking. Go on, give me the little leech.'

The High Mage came closer and handed the infant over. 'You must acknowledge that this girl belongs to you, Scillara.'

'Oh she's mine all right. I can tell by the greedy look in her eyes. For the sake of the world, you should pray, L'oric, that all she has of her father is the blue skin.'

'You know, then, who that man was?'

'Korbolo Dom.'

'Ah. He is, I believe, still alive. A guest of the Empress.'

'Do you think I care, L'oric? I was drowning in durhang. If not for Heboric, I'd still be one of Bidithal's butchered acolytes. Heboric ...' She looked down at the babe suckling from her left breast, squinting through the smoke of the pipe. Then she glared up at L'oric. 'And now some damned T'lan Imass have killed him – why?'

'He was a servant of Treach. Scillara, there is war now among the gods. And it is us mortals who shall pay the price for that. It is a dangerous time to be a true worshipper – of anyone or anything. Except, perhaps, chaos itself, for if one force is ascendant in this modern age, it is surely that.'

Greyfrog was busy licking itself, concentrating, it seemed, on its new limbs. The entire demon looked ... smaller.

Scillara said, 'So you're reunited with your familiar, L'oric. Which means you can go now, off to wherever and whatever it is you have to do. You can leave, and get as far away from here as possible. I'll wait for Cutter to wake up. I like him. I think I'll go where he goes. This grand quest is done. So go away.'

'Not until I am satisfied that you will not surrender your child to an unknown future, Scillara.'

'It's not unknown. Or at least, no more unknown than any future. There are two women here both named Jessâ and they'll take care of it. They'll raise it well enough, since they seem to like that sort of thing. Good for them, I say. Besides, I'm being generous here – I'm not selling it, am I? No, like a damned fool, I'm giving the thing away.'

'The longer and the more often you hold that girl,' L'oric said, 'the less likely it is that you will do what you presently plan to do. Motherhood is a spiritual state – you will come to that realization before too long.'

'That's good, so why are you still here? Clearly, I'm already doomed to enslavement, no matter how much I rail.'
'Spiritual epiphany is not enslavement.'

'Show how much you know, High Mage.'

'I feel obliged to tell you, your words have crushed Greyfrog.'

'He'll survive it – he seems able to survive everything else. Well, I'm about to switch tits here, you two eager to watch?'

L'oric spun on his heel and left.

Greyfrog's large eyes blinked translucently up at Scillara. 'I am not crushed. Brother of mine misapprehends. Broods climb free and must fend, each runtling holds to its own life. Recollection. Many dangers. Transitional thought. Sorrow. I must now accompany my poor brother, for he is well and truly distressed by many things in this world. Warmth. I shall harbour well my adoration of you, for it is a pure thing by virtue of being ever unattainable, the consummation thereof. Which would, you must admit, be awkward indeed.'

'Awkward isn't the first word that comes to my mind, Greyfrog. But thank you for the sentiment, as sick and twisted as it happens to be. Listen, try and teach L'oric, will you? Just a few things, like, maybe, humility. And all that terrible certainty – beat it down, beat it out of him. It's making him obnoxious.'

'Paternal legacy, alas. L'oric's own parents ... ah, never mind. Farewell, Scillara. Delicious fantasies, slow and exquisitely unveiled in the dark swampy waters of my imaginanon. All that need sustain me in fecund spirit.'

The demon waddled out.

Hard gums clamped onto her right nipple. Pain and pleasure, gods what a miserable, confusing alliance. Well, at least all the lopsidedness would go away – Nulliss had been planting the babe on her left ever since it had come out. She felt like a badly packed mule.

More voices in the outer room, but she didn't bother listening.

They'd taken Felisin Younger. That was the cruellest thing of all. For Heboric, at least, there was now some peace, an end to whatever had tormented him, and besides, he'd been an old man. Enough had been asked of him. But Felisin...

Scillara stared down at the creature on her chest, its tiny grasping hands, then she settled her head against the back wall and began repacking her pipe.

Something formless filling his mind, what had been timeless and only in the last instants, in the drawing of a few breaths, did awareness arrive, carrying him from one moment to the next. Whereupon Cutter opened his eyes. Old grey tree-trunks spanned the ceiling overhead, the joins thick with cobwebs snarled around the carcasses of moths and flies. Two lanterns hung from hooks, their wicks low. He struggled to recall how he had ended up here, in this unfamiliar room.

'Darujhistan ... a bouncing coin. Assassins ...'

No, that was long ago. Tremorlor, the Azath House, and Moby ... that god-possessed girl – Apsalar, oh, my love ... Hard words exchanged with Cotillion, the god who had, once, looked through her eyes. He was in Seven Cities; he had been travelling with Heboric Ghost Hands, and Felisin Younger, Scillara, and the demon Greyfrog. He had become a man with knives, a killer, given the chance.

Flies ...

Cutter groaned, one hand reaching tentatively for his belly beneath the ragged blankets. The slash was naught but a thin seam. He had seen ... his insides spilling out. Had felt the sudden absence of weight, the tug that pulled him down to the ground. Cold, so very cold.
The others were dead. They had to be. Then again, Cutter realized, he too should be dead. They'd cut him wide open. He slowly turned his head, studying the narrow room he found himself in. A storage chamber of some kind, a larder, perhaps. The shelves were mostly empty. He was alone.

The motion left him exhausted – he did not have the strength to draw his arm back from where it rested on his midsection.

He closed his eyes.

A dozen slow, even breaths, and he found himself standing, in some other place. A courtyard garden, unkempt and now withered, as if by years of drought. The sky overhead was white, featureless. A stone-walled pool was before him, the water smooth and unstirred. The air was close and unbearably hot.

Cutter willed himself forward, but found he could not move. He stood as if rooted to the ground.

To his left, plants began crackling, curling black as a ragged hole formed in the air. A moment later two figures stumbled through that gate. A woman, then a man. The gate snapped shut in their wake, leaving only a swirl of ash and a ring of scorched plants.

Cutter tried to speak, but he had no voice, and after a few moments it was clear that they could not see him. He was as a ghost, an unseen witness.

The woman was as tall as the man, a Malazan which he was certainly not. Handsome in a hard, unyielding way. She slowly straightened.

Another woman now sat on the edge of the pool. Fairskinned, delicately featured, her long golden-hued hair drawn up and bound in an elaborate mass of braids. One hand was immersed in the pool, yet no ripples spanned outward. She was studying the water's surface, and did not look up as the Malazan woman spoke.

'Now what?'

The man, two vicious-looking flails tucked in his belt, had the look of a desert warrior, his face dark and flat, the eyes slitted amidst webs of squint-lines. He was armoured as if for battle. At his companion's question he fixed his gaze on the seated woman and said, 'You were never clear on that, Queen of Dreams. The only part of this bargain I'm uneasy about.'

'Too late for regrets,' the seated woman murmured.

Cutter stared at her anew. The Queen of Dreams. A goddess. It seemed that she too had no inkling that Cutter was somehow present, witnessing this scene. But this was her realm. How could that be?

The man had scowled at the Queen's mocking observation. 'You seek my service. To do what? I am done leading armies, done with prophecies. Give me a task if you must, but make it straightforward. Someone to kill, someone to protect – no, not the latter – I am done with that, too.'

'It is your ... scepticism ... I most value, Leoman of the Flails. I admit, however, to some disappointment. Your companion is not the one I anticipated.'

The man named Leoman glanced over at the Malazan woman, but said nothing. Then, slowly, his eyes widened and he looked back at the goddess. 'Corabb?'

'Chosen by Oponn,' the Queen of Dreams said. 'Beloved of the Lady. His presence would have been useful ...' A faint frown, then a sigh, and still she would not look up as she said, 'In his stead, I must countenance a mortal upon whom yet another god has cast an eye. To what end, I wonder? Will this god finally use her? In the manner that all gods do?' She frowned, then said, 'I do not refute this ... alliance. I trust Hood understands this well enough. Even so, I see something unexpected stirring ... in the depths of these waters. Dunsparrow, did you know you were marked? No, I gather you did not – you were but newborn when sanctified, after all. And then stolen away, from the temple, by your brother. Hood never forgave him for that, and took in the end a most satisfying vengeance, ever turning away a healer's touch when nothing else was needed, when that touch could have changed the world, could have shattered an age-old curse.' She paused for a moment, still staring...
down into the pool. 'I believe Hood now regrets his decision – his lack of humility stings him yet again. Dunsparrow, with you, I suspect, he may seek restitution ...'

The Malazan woman was pale. 'I had heard of my brother's death,' she said in a low voice. 'But all death comes by Hood's hand. I see no need for restitution in this.'

'By Hood's hand. True enough, and so too Hood chooses the time and the manner. Only on the rarest of occasions, however, does he manifestly intervene in a single mortal's death. Consider his usual ... involvement ... as little more than withered fingers ensuring the seamless weave of life's fabric, at least until the arrival of the knot.'

Leoman spoke: 'Ponder the delicacies of dogma some other time, you two, I already grow weary of this place. Send us somewhere, Queen, but first tell us what services you require.'

She finally looked up, studied the desert warrior in silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, 'For now, I require from you ... nothing.'

There was silence then, and Cutter eventually realized that the two mortals were not moving. Not even the rise and fall of breath was visible. Frozen in place ... just like me.

The Queen of Dreams slowly turned her head, met Cutter's eyes, and smiled.

Sudden, spinning retreat – he awoke with a start, beneath threadbare blankets and a cross-beamed ceiling layered in the carcasses of sucked-dry insects. Yet that smile lingered, racing like scalded blood through him. She had known, of course she had known, had brought him there, to that moment, to witness. But why? Leoman of the Flails ... the renegade commander from Sha'ik's army, the one who had been pursued by the Adjunct Tavore's army. Clearly he found a way to escape, but at a price. Maybe that was the lesson – never bargain with gods.

A faint sound reached him. The wail of a babe, insistent, demanding.

Then a closer noise, scuffling, and Cutter twisted his head round to see the curtain covering the doorway drawn back and a young, unfamiliar face staring in at him. The face quickly withdrew. Voices, heavy footsteps, then the curtain was thrown aside. A huge, midnight-skinned man strode in.

Cutter stared at him. He looked ... familiar, yet he knew he'd never before met this man.

'Scillara is asking after you,' the stranger said.

'That child I'm hearing – hers?'

'Yes, for the moment. How do you feel?'

'Weak, but not as weak as before. Hungry, thirsty. Who are you?'

'The local blacksmith. Barathol Mekhar.'

Mekhar? 'Kalam ...'

A grimace. 'Cousin, distant. Mekhar refers to the tribe – it's gone now, slaughtered by Falah'd Enezgura of Aren, during one of his westward conquests. Most of us survivors scattered far and wide.' He shrugged, eyeing Cutter. 'I'll get you food and drink. If a Semk witch comes in here and tries to enlist you in her cause, tell her to get out.'

'Cause? What cause?'

'Your friend Scillara wants to leave the child here.'

'Oh.'

'Does that surprise you?'
He considered. 'No, not really. She wasn't herself back then, from what I understood. Back in Raraku. I expect she wants to leave all reminders far behind her.'

Barathol snorted and turned back to the doorway. 'What is it with all these refugees from Raraku, anyway? I'll be back shortly, Cutter.'

Mekhar. The Daru managed a smile. This one here looked big enough to pick up Kalam and fling him across a room. And, if Cutter had read the man's expression aright, in that single unguarded moment when he'd said Kalam's name, this Barathol was likely inclined to do just that, given the chance.

*Thank the gods I have no brothers or sisters ... or cousins, for that matter.*

His smile suddenly faded. The blacksmith had mentioned Scillara, but no-one else. Cutter suspected it hadn't been an oversight. Barathol didn't seem the type who was careless with his words. *Bern fend ...*

L'oric stepped outside. His gaze worked its way down the squalid street, building to building, the decrepit remnants of what had once been a thriving community. Intent on its own destruction, even then, though no doubt few thought that way at the time. The forest must have seemed endless, or at least immortal, and so they had harvested with frenzied abandon. But now the trees were gone, and all those hoarded coins of profit had slipped away, leaving hands filled with nothing but sand. Most of the looters would have moved on, sought out some other stand of ancient trees, to persist in the addiction of momentary gain. *Making one desert after another ... until the deserts meet.*

He rubbed at his face, felt the grit of his stay here, raw as crushed glass on his cheeks. There were some rewards, at least, he told himself. A child was born. Greyfrog was at his side once more, and he had succeeded in saving Cutter's life. *And Barathol Mekhar, a name riding ten thousand curses ...* well, Barathol was nothing like L'oric had imagined him to be, given his crimes. Men like Korbolo Dom better fit his notions of a betrayer, or the twisted madness of someone like Bidithal. And yet Barathol, an officer in the Red Blades, had murdered the Fist of Aren. He'd been arrested and gaoled, stripped of his rank and beaten without mercy by his fellow Red Blades – the first and deepest stain upon their honour, fuelling their extreme acts of zealotry ever since.

Barathol was to have been crucified on Aren Way. Instead, the city had risen in rebellion, slaughtering the Malazan garrison and driving the Red Blades from the city.

And then the T'lan Imass had arrived, delivering the harsh, brutal lesson of imperial vengeance. And Barathol Mekhar had been seen, by scores of witnesses, flinging open the north gate ... *But it is true. T'lan Imass need no opened gates ...*

The question no-one had asked was: why would an officer of the Red Blades murder the city's Fist?

L'oric suspected Barathol was not one to give him the satisfaction of an answer. The man was well past defending himself, with words at any rate. The High Mage could see as much in the huge man's dark eyes – he had long ago given up on humanity. And his own sense of his place in it. He was not driven to justify what he did; no sense of decency nor honour compelled the man to state his case. Only a soul that has surrendered utterly gives up on notions of redemption. Something had happened, once, that crushed Barathol's faith, leaving unbarred the paths of betrayal.

Yet these local folk came close to outright worship in their regard for Barathol Mehkar, and it was this that L'oric could not understand. Even now, when they knew the truth, when they knew what their blacksmith had done years ago, they defied the High Mage's expectations. He was baffled, left feeling strangely helpless.

*Then again, admit it, L'oric, you have never been able to gather followers, no matter how noble your cause.* Oh, there were allies here, adding their voices to his own outrage at Scillara's appalling indifference regarding her child, but he knew well enough that such unity was, in the end, transitory and ephemeral. They might all decry Scillara's position, but they would do nothing about it; indeed, all but Nulliss had already come to accept the fact that the child was going to be passed into the hands of two women both named Jessa. *There, problem solved. But in truth it is nothing but a crime accommodated.*
The demon Greyfrog ambled to his side and settled belly-down in the dust of the street. Four eyes blinking lazily, it offered nothing of its thoughts, yet an ineffable whisper of commiseration calmed L'oric's inner tumult.

The High Mage sighed. 'I know, my friend. If I could but learn to simply pass through a place, to be wilfully unmindful of all offences against nature, both small and large. This comes, I suspect, of successive failures. In Raraku, in Kurald Liosan, with Felisin Younger, gods below, what a depressing list. And you, Greyfrog, I failed you as well ...'

'Modest relevance,' the demon said. 'I would tell you a tale, brother. Early in the clan's history, many centuries past, there arose, like a breath of gas from the deep, a new cult. Chosen as its representative god was the most remote, most distant of gods among the pantheon. A god that was, in truth, indifferent to the clans of my kind. A god that spoke naught to any mortal, that intervened never in mortal affairs. Morbid. The leaders of the cult proclaimed themselves the voice of that god. They wrote down laws, prohibitions, ascribances, propitiations, blasphemies, punishments for nonconformity, for dispute and derivations. This was but rumour, said details maintained in vague fugue, until such time as the cult achieved domination and with domination, absolute power.

'Terrible enforcement, terrible crimes committed in the name of the silent god. Leaders came and went, each further twisting words already twisted by mundane ambition and the zeal for unity. Entire pools were poisoned. Others drained and the silts seeded with salt. Eggs were crushed. Mothers dismembered. And our people were plunged into a paradise of fear, the laws made manifest and spilled blood the tears of necessity. False regret with chilling gleam in the centre eye. No relief awaited, and each generation suffered more than the last.'

L'oric studied the demon at his side. 'What happened?'

'Seven great warriors from seven clans set out to find the Silent God, set out to see for themselves if this god had indeed blessed all that had come to pass in its name.'

'And did they find the silent god?'

'Yes, and too, they found the reason for its silence. The god was dead. It had died with the first drop of blood spilled in its name.'

'I see, and what is the relevance of this tale of yours, however modest?'

'Perhaps this. The existence of many gods conveys true complexity of mortal life. Conversely, the assertion of but one god leads to a denial of complexity, and encourages the need to make the world simple. Not the fault of the god, but a crime committed by its believers.'

'If a god does not like what is done in its name, then it should act.'

'Yet, if each crime committed in its name weakens it ... very soon, I think, it has no power left and so cannot act, and so, ultimately, it dies.'

'You come from a strange world, Greyfrog.'

'Yes.'

'I find your story most disturbing.'

'Yes.'

'We must undertake a long journey now, Greyfrog.'

'I am ready, brother.'

'In the world I know,' L'oric said, 'many gods feed on blood.'

'As do many mortals:
The High Mage nodded. 'Have you said your goodbyes, Greyfrog?'

'I have.'

'Then let us leave this place.'

Filiad appeared at the entrance to the smithy, catching Barathol's attention. The blacksmith gave two more pumps of the bellows feeding the forge, then drew off his thick leather gloves and waved the youth over.

'The High Mage,' Filiad said, 'he's left. With that giant toad. I saw it, a hole opening in the air. Blinding yellow light poured from it, and they just disappeared inside it and then the hole was gone!'

Barathol rummaged through a collection of black iron bars until he found one that looked right for the task he had in mind. He set it on the anvil. 'Did he leave behind his horse?'

'What? No, he led it by the reins.'

'Too bad.'

'What do we do now?' Filiad asked.

'About what?'

'Well, everything, I guess.'

'Go home, Filiad.'

'Really? Oh. All right. I guess. See you later, then.'

'No doubt,' Barathol said, drawing on the gloves once more.

After Filiad left, the blacksmith took up the iron bar with a set of tongs and thrust the metal into the forge, pumping one-legged on the floor-bellows. Four months back, he had used the last of his stolen hoard of Aren coins on a huge shipment of charcoal; there was just enough left for this final task.

T'lan Imass. Nothing but bone and leathery skin. Fast and deadly, masters of ambush. Barathol had been thinking for days now about the problem they represented, about devising a means of dealing with them. For he suspected he'd meet the bastards again.

His axe was heavy enough to do damage, if he hit hard enough. Still, those stone swords were long, tapered to a point for thrusting. If they stayed outside his reach ...

To all of that, he thought he had found a solution.

He pumped some more, until he was satisfied with the white-hot core in the heart of the forge, and watched as the bar of iron acquired a cherubic gleam.

'We now follow the snake, which takes us to a gather camp on the shores of a black grain lake, beyond which we traverse flat-rock for two days, to another gather camp, the northernmost one, for all that lies beyond it is both flowing and unfound.'

Samar Dev studied the elongated, sinuous line of boulders on the ledge of bedrock below and to their left. Skins of grey and green lichen, clumps of skeletal dusty green moss, studded with red flowers, surrounding each stone, and beyond that the deeper verdancy of another kind of moss, soft and sodden. On the path they walked the bedrock was scoured clean, the granite pink and raw, with layers falling away from edges in large, flat plates. Here and there, black lichen the texture of sharkskin spilled out from fissures and veins. She saw a deer antler lying discarded from some past rutting season, the tips of its tines gnawed by rodents, and was reminded how, in the natural world, nothing goes to waste.
Dips in the high ground held stands of black spruce, as many dead as living, while in more exposed sections of the bedrock low-lying juniper formed knee-high islands spreading branches over the stone, each island bordered by shrubs of blueberry and wintergeen. Jackpines stood as lone sentinels atop rises in the strangely folded, amorphous rock.

Harsh and forbidding, this was a landscape that would never yield to human domination. It felt ancient in ways not matched by any place Samar Dev had seen before, not even by the wastelands of the Jhag Odhan. It was said that beneath every manner of surface on this world, whether sand or sea, floodplain or forest, there was solid rock, twisted and folded by unseen pressures. But here, all other possible surfaces had been scoured away, exposing the veined muscle itself.

This land suited Karsa Orlong. A warrior scoured clean of all civil trappings, a thing of muscle and will and hidden pressures. While, in strange contrast, the Anibar, Boatfinder, seemed an interloper, almost a parasite, his every motion furtive and oddly guilt-laden. From this broken, rock-skinned place of trees and clearwater lakes, Boatfinder and his people took black grain and the skins of animals; they took birch bark and reeds for making baskets and nets. Not enough to scar this landscape, not enough to claim conquest.

As for her, she found herself viewing her surroundings in terms of trees left unharvested, of lakes still rich with fish, of more efficient ways to gather the elongated, mudcoloured grains from the reed beds in the shallows – the so-called black grain that needed to be beaten free of the stalks, gathered in the hollow of the long, narrowboats the Anibar used, beaten down with sticks amidst webs and spinning spiders and the buzz of tiger-flies. She could think only of resources and the best means of exploiting them. It felt less and less like a virtue with every passing day.

They continued along the trail, Boatfinder in the lead, followed by Karsa who led his horse by the reins, leaving Samar Dev with a view of the animal's rump and swishing tail. Her feet hurt, each step on the hard stone reverberating up into her spine – there had to be a way of padding such impacts, she told herself, perhaps some kind of multilayering technology for boot soles – she would have to think on that. And these biting flies – Boatfinder had cut juniper branches, threading them through a headscarf so that the green stems dangled in front of his forehead and down the back of his neck. Presumably this worked, although the man looked ridiculous. She contemplated surrendering her vanity and following suit, but would hold out a while longer.

Karsa Orlong was undertaking this journey now as if it had become some kind of quest. Driven by the need to deliver judgement, upon whomsoever he chose, no matter what the circumstances. She had begun to understand just how frightening this savage could be, and how it fed her own growing fascination with him. She half-believed this man could cut a swath through an entire pantheon of gods.

A dip in the trail brought them onto mossy ground, through which broken branches thrust up jagged grey fingers. To the right was a thick, twisted scrub oak, centuries old and scarred by lightning strikes; all the lesser trees that had begun growth around it were dead, as if the battered sentinel exuded some belligerent poison. To the left was the earthen wall of a toppled pine tree's root-mat, vertical and as tall as Karsa, rising from a pool of black water.

Havok came to an abrupt halt and Samar Dev heard a grunt from Karsa Orlong. She worked her way round the Jhag horse until she could clearly see that wall of twisted roots. In which was snared a withered corpse, the flesh wrinkled and blackened, limbs stretched out, neck exposed but of the head only the lower jaw line visible. The chest area seemed to have imploded, the hollow space reaching up into the heart of the huge tree itself. Boatfinder stood opposite, his left hand inscribing gestures in the air.

'This toppled but recently,' Karsa Orlong said. 'Yet this body, it has been there a long time, see how the black water that once gathered about the roots has stained its skin. Samar Dev,' he said, facing her, 'there is a hole in its chest – how did such a thing come to be?'

She shook her head. 'I cannot even determine what manner of creature this is.'

'Jaghut,' the Toblakai replied. 'I have seen the like before. Flesh becomes wood, yet the spirit remains alive within—'

'You're saying this thing is still alive?'
'I do not know – the tree has fallen over, after all, and so it is dying—'

'Death is not sure,' Boatfinder cut in, his eyes wide with superstitious terror. 'Often, the tree reaches once more skyward. But this dweller, so terribly imprisoned, it cannot be alive. It has no heart. It has no head.'

Samar Dev stepped closer to examine the body's sunken chest. After a time she backed away, made uneasy by something she could not define. 'The bones beneath the flesh continued growing,' she said, 'but not as bone. Wood. The sorcery belongs to D'ris, I suspect. Boatfinder, how old would you judge this tree?'

'Frozen time, perhaps thirty generations. Since it fell, seven days, no more. And, it is pushed over.'

'I smell something,' Karsa Orlong said, passing the reins to Boatfinder.

Samar Dev watched the giant warrior walk ahead, up the opposite slope of the depression, halting on the summit of the basolith. He slowly unslung his stone sword.

And now she too caught a faint sourness in the air, the smell of death. She made her way to Karsa's side.

Beyond the dome of rock the trail wound quickly downward to debouch on the edge of a small boggy lake. To one side, on a slight shelf above the shoreline, was a clearing in which sat the remnants of a rough camp – three round structures, sapling-framed and hide-walled. Two were halfburnt, the third knocked down in a mass of shattered wood and torn buckskin. She counted six bodies lying motionless here and there, in and around the camp, one face-down, torso, shoulders and head in the water, long hair flowing like bleached seaweed. Three canoes formed a row on the other side of the trail, their bark hulls stove in.

Boatfinder joined her and Karsa on the rise. A small keening sound rose from him.

Karsa took the lead down the trail. After a moment, Samar Dev followed.

'Stay back from the camp,' Karsa told her. 'I must read the tracks.'

She watched him move from one motionless form to the next, his eyes scanning the scuffed ground, the places where humus had been kicked aside. He went to the hearth and ran his fingers through the ash and coals, down to the stained earth beneath. Somewhere on the lake beyond, a loon called, its cry mournful and haunting. The light had grown steely, the sun now behind the forest line to the west. On the rise above the trail, Boatfinder's keening rose in pitch.

'Tell him to be quiet,' Karsa said in a growl.

'I don't think I can do that,' she replied. 'Leave him his grief.'

'His grief will soon be ours.'

'You fear this unseen enemy, Karsa Orlong?'

He straightened from where he had been examining the holed canoes. 'A four-legged beast has passed through here recently – a large one. It collected one of the corpses ... but I do not think it has gone far.'

'Then it has already heard us,' Samar Dev said. 'What is it, a bear?' Boatfinder had said that black bears used the same trails as the Anibar, and he'd pointed out their scat on the path. He had explained that they were not dangerous, normally. Still, wild creatures were ever unpredictable, and if one had come upon these bodies it might well now view the kill-site as its own.

'A bear? Perhaps, Samar Dev. Such as the kind from my homeland, a dweller in caves, and on its hind legs half again as tall as a Teblor. But this one is yet different, for the pads of its paws are sheathed in scales.'

'Scales?'

'And I judge it would weigh more than four adult warriors of the Teblor.' He eyed her. 'A formidable creature.'
'Boatfinder has said nothing of such beasts in this forest.'

'Not the only intruder,' the Toblakai said. 'These Anibar were murdered with spears and curved blades. They were then stripped of all ornaments, weapons and tools. There was a child among them but it was dragged away. The killers came from the lake, in wooden-keeled longboats. At least ten adults, two of them wearing boots of some sort, although the heel pattern is unfamiliar. The others wore moccasins made of sewn strips, each one overlapping on one side.'

'Overlapping? Ridged – that would improve purchase, I think.'

'Samar Dev, I know who these intruders are.'

'Old friends of yours?'

'We did not speak of friendship at the time. Call down Boatfinder, I have questions for him—'

The sentence was unfinished. Samar Dev looked over to find Karsa standing stock-still, his gaze on the trees beyond the three canoes. She turned and saw a massive hulking shape pushing its forefront clear of bending saplings. An enormous, scaled head lifted from steep shoulders, eyes fixing on the Toblakai.

Who raised his stone sword in a two-handed grip, then surged forward.

The giant beast's roar ended in a high-pitched squeal, as it bolted – backward, into the thicket. Sudden crashing, heavy thumps—

Karsa plunged into the stand, pursuing.

Samar Dev found that she was holding her dagger in her right hand, knuckles white.

The crashing sounds grew more distant, as did the frantic squeals of the scaled bear.

She turned at scrabbling from the slope and watched Boatfinder come down to huddle at her side. His lips were moving in silent prayers, eyes on the broken hole in the stand of trees.

Samar sheathed her dagger and crossed her arms. 'What is it with him and monsters?' she demanded.

Boatfinder sat down in the damp mulch, began rocking back and forth.

Samar Dev was just completing her second burial when Karsa Orlong returned. He walked up to the hearth she had lit earlier and beside which Boatfinder sat hunched over and swathed in furs, voicing a low moaning sound of intractable sorrow. The Toblakai set his sword down.

'Did you kill it?' she asked. 'Did you cut its paws off, skin it alive, add its ears to your belt and crush its chest in with your embrace?'

'Escaped,' he said in a grunt.

'Probably halfway to Ehrlitan by now.'

'No, it is hungry. It will return, but not before we have moved on.' He gestured to the remaining bodies. 'There is no point – it will dig them up.'

'Hungry, you said.'

'Starving. It is not from this world. And this land here, it offers little – the beast would do better on the plains to the south.'

'The map calls this the Olphara Mountains. Many lakes are marked, and I believe the small one before us is joined to others, further north, by a river.'

'These are not mountains.'
They once were, millennia past. They have been worn down. We are on a much higher elevation than we were just south of here.'

'Nothing can gnaw mountains down to mere stubs, witch.'

'Nonetheless. We should see if we can repair these canoes – it would be much easier—'

'I shall not abandon Havok.'

'Then we will never catch up with our quarry, Karsa Orlong.'

'They are not fleeing. They are exploring. Searching.'

'For what?'

The Toblakai did not answer.

Samar Dev wiped dirt from her hands, then walked over to the hearth. 'I think this hunt we are on is a mistake. The Anibar should simply flee, leave this broken land, at least until the intruders have left.'

'You are a strange woman,' Karsa pronounced. 'You wished to explore this land, yet find yourself made helpless by it.'

She started. 'Why do you say that?'

'Here, one must be as an animal. Passing through, quiet, for this is a place that yields little and speaks in silence. Thrice in our journey we have been tracked by a bear, silent as a ghost on this bedrock. Crossing and re-crossing our trail. You would think such a large beast would be easy to see, but it is not. There are omens here, Samar Dev, more than I have ever seen before in any place, even my homeland. Hawks circle overhead. Owls watch us pass from hollows in dead trees. Tell me, witch, what is happening to the moon?'

She stared into the fire. 'I don't know. It seems to be breaking up. Crumbling. There is no record of anything like that happening before, neither the way it has grown larger, nor the strange corona surrounding it.' She shook her head. 'If it is an omen, it is one all the world can see.'

'The desert folk believe gods dwell there. Perhaps they wage war among themselves.'

'Superstitious nonsense,' she said. 'The moon is this world's child, the last child, for there were others, once.' She hesitated. 'It may be that two have collided, but it is difficult to be sure – the others were never very visible, even in the best of times. Dark, smudged, distant, always in the shadow cast by this world, or that of the largest moon – the one we see most clearly. Of late, there has been much dust in the air.'

'There are more fireswords in the sky,' Karsa said. 'Just before dawn, you may see ten in the span of three breaths, each slashing down through the dark. Every night.'

'We may learn more when we reach the coast, for the tides will have changed.'

'Changed, how?'

'The moon's own breath,' she replied. 'We can measure that breath ... in the ebb and flood of the tides. Such are the laws of existence.'

The Toblakai snorted. 'Laws are broken. Existence holds to no laws. Existence is what persists, and to persist is to struggle. In the end, the struggle fails.' He was removing strips of smoked bhederin meat from his pack. 'That is the only law worthy of the name.'

She studied him. 'Is that what the Teblor believe?'

He bared his teeth. 'One day I will return to my people. And I will shatter all that they believe. And I will say to my father, "Forgive me. You were right to disbelieve. You were right to despise the laws that chained us." And to my grandfather, I shall say nothing at all.'
'Have you a wife in your tribe?'
'I have victims, no wives.'

A brutal admission, she reflected. 'Do you intend reparation, Karsa Orlong?'
'That would be seen as weakness.'
'Then the chains still bind you.'

'There was a Nathii settlement, beside a lake, where the Nathii had made slaves of my people. Each night, after hauling nets on the lake, those slaves were all shackled to a single chain. Not a single Teblor so bound could break that chain. Together, their strengths and wills combined, no chain could have held them.'

'So, for all your claims of returning to your people and shattering all that they believe, you will, in truth, need their help to manage such a thing. It sounds as if it is not just your father from whom you require forgiveness, Karsa Orlong.'
'I shall take what I require, witch.'

'Were you one of those slaves in the Nathii fishing village?'
'For a time.'

'And, to escape – and clearly you did escape – you ended up needing the help of your fellow Teblor.' She nodded. 'I can see how that might gnaw on your soul.'

He eyed her. 'You are truly clever, Samar Dev, to discover how all things fit so neatly in place.'

'I have made long study of human nature, the motivations that guide us, the truths that haunt us. I do not think you Teblor are much different from us in such things.'

'Unless, of course, you begin with an illusion – one that suits the conclusion you sought from the start.'
'I try not to assume veracity,' she replied.

'Indeed.' He handed her a strip of meat.

She crossed her arms, refusing the offer for the moment. 'You suggest I have made an assumption, an erroneous one, and so, although I claim to understand you, in truth I understand nothing. A convenient argument, but not very convincing, unless you care to be specific'

'I am Karsa Orlong. I know the measure of each step I have taken since I first became a warrior. Your selfsatisfaction does not offend me, witch.'

'The savage now patronizes me! Gods below!'

He proffered the meat again. 'Eat, Samar Dev, lest you grow too weak for outrage.'

She glared at him, then accepted the strip of bhederin. 'Karsa Orlong, your people live with a lack of sophistication similar to these Anibar here. It is clear that, once, the citizens of the great civilizations of Seven Cities lived in a similar state of simplicity and stolid ignorance, haunted by omens and fleeing the unfathomable. And no doubt we too concocted elaborate belief systems, quaint and ridiculous, to justify all those necessities and restrictions imposed upon us by the struggle to survive. Fortunately, however, we left all that behind. We discovered the glory of civilization – and you, Teblor, hold still to your misplaced pride, holding up your ignorance of such glory as a virtue. And so you still do not comprehend the great gift of civilization—'

'I comprehend it fine,' Karsa Orlong replied around a mouthful of meat. 'The savage proceeds into civilization through improvements—'
'Yes!'

'Improvements in the manner and efficiency of killing people.'

'Hold on—'

'Improvements in the unassailable rules of degradation and misery.'

'Karsa—'

'Improvements in ways to humiliate, impose suffering and justify slaughtering those savages too stupid and too trusting to resist what you hold as inevitable. Namely, their extinction. Between you and me, Samar Dev, he added, swallowing, 'who should the Anibar fear more?'

'I don't know,' she said through gritted teeth. 'Why don't we ask him?'

Boatfinder lifted his head and studied Samar Dev with hooded eyes. 'In the frozen time,' he said in a low voice, 'Iskar Jarak spoke of the Unfound.'

'Iskar Jarak was not a god, Boatfinder. He was a mortal, with a handful of wise words – it's easy to voice warnings. Actually staying around to help prepare for them is another thing altogether!'

'Iskar Jarak gave us the secrets, Samar Dev, and so we have prepared in the frozen time, and prepare now, and will prepare in the Unfound.'

Karsa barked a laugh. 'Would that I had travelled here with Iskar Jarak. We would find little to argue over, I think.'

'This is what I get,' muttered Samar Dev, 'in the company of barbarians.'

The Toblakai's tone suddenly changed. 'The intruders who have come here, witch, believe themselves civilized. And so they kill Anibar. Why? Because they can. They seek no other reason. To them, Samar Dev, Karsa Orlong will give answer. This savage is not stupid, not trusting, and by the souls of my sword, I shall give answer.'

All at once, night had arrived, and there in that silent forest it was cold.

From somewhere far to the west, rose the howl of wolves, and Samar Dev saw Karsa Orlong smile.

Once, long ago, Mappo Runt had stood with a thousand other Trell warriors. Surmounting the Orstanz Ridge overlooking the Valley of Bayen Eckar, so named for the shallow, stony river that flowed northward to a distant, mythical sea – mythical for the Trell at least, none of whom had ever travelled that far from their homeland steppes and plains. Arrayed on the slope opposite and down on the river's western bank, fifteen hundred paces distant, was the Nemil army, commanded in those days by a muchfeared general, Saylan'mathas.

So many of the Trell had already fallen, not in battle, but to the weakness of life encamped around the trader posts, forts and settlements that now made the borderlands a hazy, ephemeral notion and little more. Mappo himself had fled such a settlement, finding refuge among the stillbelligerent hill clans.

A thousand Trell warriors, facing an army eight times their number. Mace, axe and sword hammering shield-rims, a song of death-promise rising from their throats, a sound like earth-thunder rolling down into the valley where birds flew low and strangely frenzied, as if in terror they had forgotten the sky's sanctuary overhead, instead swooping and wheeling between the grey-leaved trees clumped close to the river on both sides, seeming to swarm through thickets and shrubs.

Upon the valley's other side, units of soldiers moved in ever-shifting presentation: units of archers, of slingers, of pike-wielding infantry and the much feared Nemil cataphracts – heavy in armour atop massive horses, roundshields at the ready although their lances remained at rest in stirrup-sockets, as they trooped at the trot to the far wings, making plain their intention to flank once the foot soldiers and Trell warriors were fully
engaged in the basin of the valley.

Bayen Eckar, the river, was no barrier, barely knee-deep. The cataphracts would cross unimpeded. Saylan'mathas was visible, mounted with flanking retainers, traversing the distant ridge. Banners streamed above the terrible commander, serpentine in gold-trimmed black silk, like slashes of the Abyss clawing through the air itself. As the train presented along the entire ridge, weapons lifted in salute, yet no cry rose heavenward, for such was not the habit of this man's hand-picked army. That silence was ominous, murderous, frightful.

Down from the Trellish steppes, leading this defiant army of warriors, had come an elder named Trynigarr, to this, his first battle. An elder for whom the honorific was tainted with mockery, for this was one old man whose fount of wisdom and advice seemed long since dried up; an old man who said little. Silent and watchful, is Trynigarr, like a hawk. An observation followed by an ungenerous grin or worse a bark of laughter.

He led now by virtue of sobriety, for the three other elders had all partaken five nights before of Weeping Jegurra cactus, each bead sweated out on a prickly blade by three days of enforced saturation in a mixture of water and The Eight Spices, the latter a shamanistic concoction said to hold the voice and visions of earth-gods; yet this time the brew had gone foul, a detail unnoticed – the trench dug round the cactus bole had inadvertently captured and drowned a venomous spider known as the Antelope, and the addition of its toxic juices had flung the elders into a deep coma. One from which, it turned out, they would never awaken.

Scores of blooded young warriors had been eager to take command, yet the old ways could not be set aside. Indeed, the old ways of the Trell were at the heart of this war itself. And so command had fallen to Trynigarr, so wise he has nothing to say.

The old man stood before the warriors now, on this fated ridge, calm and silent as he studied the enemy presenting one alignment after another, whilst the flanking cavalry – three thousand paces or more distant to north and south – finally wheeled and began the descent to the river. Five units each, each unit a hundred of the superbly disciplined, heavy-armoured soldiers, those soldiers being noble-born, brothers and fathers and sons, wild daughters and savage wives; one and all bound to the lust for blood that was the Nemil way of life. That there were entire families among those units, and that each unit was made up mostly of extended families and led by a captain selected by acclamation from among them, made them the most feared cavalry west of the Jhag Odhan.

As Trynigarr watched the enemy, so Mappo Runt watched his warleader. The elder did nothing.

The cataphracts crossed the river and took up inward-facing stations, whereupon they waited. On the slope directly opposite, foot-soldiers began the march down, whilst advance skirmishers crossed the river, followed by medium and then heavy infantry, each reinforcing the advance bridgehead on this side of the river.

The Trell warriors were shouting still, throats raw, and something like fear growing in the ever longer intervals of drawn breath and pauses between beats of weapon on shield. Their battle-frenzy was waning, and all that it had succeeded in pushing aside – all the mortal terrors and doubts that anyone sane could not help but feel at the edge of battle – were now returning.

The bridgehead, seeing itself unopposed, fanned out to accommodate the arrival of the army's main body on the east side of the river. As they moved, deer exploded from the cover of the thickets and raced in darts this way and that between the armies.

Century upon century, the Trell ever fought in their wild frenzy. Battle after battle, in circumstances little different from this one, they would have charged by now, gathering speed on the slope, each warrior eager to outpace the others and so claim the usually fatal glory of being the first to close with the hated enemy. The mass would arrive like an avalanche, the Trell making full use of their greater size to crash into and knock down the front lines, to break the phalanx and so begin a day of slaughter.

Sometimes it had succeeded. More often it had failed – oh, the initial impact had often knocked from their feet row upon row of enemy soldiers, had on occasion sent enemy bodies cartwheeling through the air; and once, almost three hundred years ago, one such charge had knocked an entire phalanx on its ass. But the Nemil had learned, and now the units advanced with pikes levelled out. A Trell charge would spit itself on those deadly iron points; the enemy square, trained to greater mobility and accepting backward motion as easily as
forward, would simply absorb the collision. And the Trell would break, or die where they stood locked in the fangs of the Nemil pikes.

And so, as the Trell did nothing, still fixed like windplucked scarecrows upon the ridge, Saylan'mathas reappeared on his charger, this time before the river, gaze tilted upward as if to pierce the stolid mind of Trynigarr as he rode across the front of his troops. Clearly, the general was displeased; for now, to engage with the Trell he would have to send his infantry upslope, and such position put them at a disadvantage in meeting the charge that would surely come then. Displeased, Mappo suspected, but not unduly worried. The phalanxes were superbly trained; they could divide and open pathways straight down, into which their pikes could funnel the Trell, driven as the warriors would be by their headlong rush. Still, his flanking cavalry had just lost much of their effectiveness, assuming he left them at their present stations, and now Mappo saw messengers riding out from the general’s retinue, one down and the other up the valley’s length. The cataphracts would now proceed upslope to take the same ridge the Trell occupied, and move inward. Twin charges would force the Trell to turn their own flanks. Not that such a move would help much, for the warriors knew of no tactic to meet a cavalry charge.

As soon as the cataphracts swung their mounts and began their ascent, Trynigarr gestured, each hand outward. The signal was passed back through the ranks, down to the ridge’s backslope, then outward, north and south, to the hidden, outlying masses of Trell warriors, each one positioned virtually opposite the unsuspecting cavalry on the flanks. Those warriors now began moving up towards the ridge – they would reach it well before the cataphracts and their armour-burdened warhorses, but they would not stop on the summit, instead continuing over it, onto the valley slope and at a charge, down into the horse-soldiers. Trell cannot meet a cavalry charge, but they can charge into cavalry, provided the momentum is theirs – as it would be on this day.

Dust and distant sounds of slaughter now, from the baggage camp west of the river, as the fifteen hundred Trell Trynigarr had sent across the Bayen Eckar three days past now descended upon the lightly guarded supply camp.

Messengers swarmed in the valley below, and Mappo saw the general’s train halted, horses turning every which way as if to match the confusion of the officers surrounding Saylan’mathas. On the distant flanks, the Trell had appeared, voicing warcries, over the ridge, and were beginning their deadly flow downward into the suddenly confused, churning knot of riders.

Saylan’mathas, who moments earlier had been locked in the mindset of the attacker, found himself shifting stance, his thoughts casting away all notions of delivering slaughter, fixing now on the necessity of defence. He split his army of foot-soldiers, half-legions wheeling out and moving at dog-trot to the far-too-distant flanks, horns keening to alert the cavalry that an avenue of retreat now existed. Elements of light cavalry that had remained on the other side of the river, ready to be cut loose to run down fleeing Trell, the general now sent at a gallop back towards the unseen baggage camp, but their horses had a steep slope to climb first, and before they were halfway up, eight hundred Trell appeared on the crest, wielding their own pikes, these ones half again as long as those used by the Nemil. Taking position with the long weapons settled and angled to match the slope. The light cavalry reached that bristling line uneven and already seeking to flinch back. Spitted horses reared and tumbled downslope, breaking legs of the horses below them. Soldiers spun from their saddles, all advance now gone, and the Trellish line began marching down into the midst of the enemy, delivering death.

The general had halted his centre’s advance to the slope, and now reordered it into a four-sided defence, the pikes a glistening, wavering forest, slowly lifting like hackles on some cornered beast.

Motionless, watching for a time, Trynigarr, Wise in Silence, now half-turned his head, gestured in a small wave with his right hand, and the thousand Trell behind him formed into jostling lines, creating avenues through which the columns of Trell archers came.

Archers was a poor description. True, there were some warriors carrying recurved longbows, so stiff that no human could draw them, the arrows overlong and very nearly the mass of javelins, the fletching elongated, stiffened strips of leather. Others, however, held true javelins and weighted atlatls, whilst among them were slingers, including those with sling-poles and two-wheeled carts behind each warrior, loaded down with the large, thin sacks they would fling into the midst of the enemy, sacks that seethed and rippled.
Sixteen hundred archers, then, many of them women, who later joked that they had emptied their yurts for this battle. Moving forward onto the slope, even as the original warriors, now aligned in columns, moved with them.

Down, to meet the heart of the Nemil army.

Trynigarr walked in their midst, suddenly indistinguishable from any other warrior, barring his age. He was done with commanding, for the moment. Each element of his elaborate plan was now engaged, the outcome left to the bravery and ferocity of young warriors and their clanleaders. This gesture of Trynigarr's was in truth the finest expression of confidence and assurance possible. The battle was here, it was now, measured in the rise and fall of weapons. The elder had done what he could to speak to the inherent strengths of the Trell, while deftly emasculating those of the Nemil and their vaunted general. And so, beneath screeching birds and in sight of terrified deer still running and bounding along the valley slopes, the day and its battle gloried in the spilling of blood.

On the west river bank, Nemil archers, arrayed to face both east and west, sent flights of deadly arrows, again and again, the shafts descending to screams and the thuds of wooden shields, until the advancing warriors, cutting down the last of the light cavalry, re-formed beneath the missile fire, then closed at a trot with their pikes, the first touch of which shattered the archers and their meagre guard of skirmishers. The ranks who had faced east, sending arrows over the Nemil square into the Trell marching to close, were now struck from behind, and there was great slaughter.

Trell arrows arced out to land within the phalanx, the heavy shafts punching through shield and armour. Javelins then followed as the Trell moved closer, and the Nemil front ranks grew pocked, porous and jostling as soldiers moved to take the place of the fallen. Trellish throwing axes met them, and, at last, with less than twenty paces between the forces, the pole-slings whirled above the massed Trell, the huge sacks wheeling ever faster, then released, out, sailing over the heads of the front ranks of Nemil, down, striking pike-heads, bursting apart, each spike spilling out hundreds of black scorpions — and thus the women laughed, saying how they had emptied out their yurts for this gift to the hated Nemil.

Small, in the scheme of things, yet, that day, in that moment, it had been one pebble too many in the farmer's field-cart, and the axle had snapped. Screaming panic, all discipline vanishing. Hard, cold claws of the scorpions... on the neck, slipping down beneath breastplates, the cuffs of gauntlets, down onto the strapped shield arm... and then the savage, acid sting, puncturing like a fang, the blaze of agony surging outward — it was enough, it was more than enough. The phalanx seemed to explode before Mappo's eyes, figures running, shrieking, writhing in wild dances, weapons and shields flung aside, helms torn off, armour stripped away.

Arrows and javelins tore into the heaving mass, and those that raced free of it now met the waiting maces, axes and swords of the Trell. And Mappo, along with his fellow warriors, all frenzy driven from them, delivered cold death.

The great general, Saylan'mathas, died in that press, trampled underfoot by his own soldiers. Why he had dismounted to meet the Trell advance no-one could explain; his horse had been recovered as it trotted back into the baggage camp, its reins neatly looped about the hinged horn of the saddle, the stirrups flipped over the seat.

The cataphracts, those feared horse-soldiers, born of pure blood, had been slaughtered, as had the half-legions of foot-soldiers who arrived too late to do anything but die amidst flailing, kicking horses and the bawling of the mortally wounded nobles.

The Nemil had looked upon a thousand warriors, and thought those Trell the only ones present. Their spies had failed them twice, first among the hill tribes when rumours of the alliance's break-up had been deliberately let loose to the ever whispering winds; then in the days and nights leading to the battle at Bayen Eckar, when Trynigarr had sent out his clans, each with a specific task, and all in accordance with the site where the battle would take place, for the Trell knew this land, could travel unerring on moonless nights, and could hide virtually unseen amidst the rumples and folds of these valleys during the day.

Trynigarr, the elder who had led his first battle, would come to fight six more, each time throwing back the Nemil invaders, until the treaty was signed yielding all human claim on the Trell steppes and hills, and the old
man who so rarely spoke would die drunk in an alley years later, long after the last clan had surrendered, driven from their wildlands by the starvation that came from sustained slaughter of the bhederin herds by Nemil and their half-breed Trellish scouts.

In those last years, Mappo had heard, Trynigarr, his tongue loosened by drink, had talked often, filling the air with slurred, meaningless words and fragmented remembrances. So many words, not one wise, to fill what had once been the wisest of silences.

Three strides behind Mappo Runt, Iskaral Pust, High Priest and avowed Magi of the House of Shadow, led his eerie black-eyed mule and spoke without cessation. His words filled the air like dried leaves in a steady wind, and held all the significance and meaning of the same; punctuated by the sob of moccasins and hoofs dragging free of swamp mud only to squelch back down, the occasional slap at a biting insect, and the sniffling from Pust’s perpetually runny nose.

It was clear to Mappo that what he was hearing were the High Priest’s thoughts, the rambling, directionless interior monologue of a madman vented into the air with random abandon. And every hint of genius was but a chimera, a trail as false as the one they now walked – this supposed short-cut that was now threatening to swallowing them whole, to drag them down into the senseless, dark peat that would be forever indifferent to their sightless eyes.

He had believed that Iskaral Pust had decided upon taking his leave, returning with Mogora – if indeed she had returned, and was not skittering about among the fetid trees and curtains of moss – to their hidden monastery in the cliff. But something as yet unexplained had changed the High Priest’s mind, and it was this detail more than any other that made Mappo uneasy.

He’d wanted this to be a solitary pursuit. Icarium was the Trell’s responsibility, no matter what the Nameless Ones asserted. There was nothing righteous in their judgement – those priests had betrayed him more than once. They had earned Mappo’s eternal enmity, and perhaps, one day, he would visit the extremity of his displeasure upon them.

Sorely used and spiritually abused, Mappo had discovered in them a focus for his hate. He was Icarium’s guardian. His friend. And it was clear, as well, that the Jhag’s new companion led with the fevered haste of a fugitive, a man knowing well he was now hunted, knowing that he had been a co-conspirator in a vast betrayal. And Mappo would not relent.

Nor was he in need of Iskaral Pust’s help; in fact, Mappo had begun to suspect that the High Priest’s assistance was not quite as honourable as it seemed. Traversing this marsh, for example, a journey ostensibly of but two days, Pust insisted, that would deliver them to the coast days in advance of what would have been the case had they walked the high-ground trail. Two days were now five, with no end in sight. What the Trell could not fathom, however, was the possible motivation Iskaral – and by extension, the House of Shadow – might have in delaying him.

Icarium was a weapon no mortal nor god could risk using. That the Nameless Ones believed otherwise was indicative of both madness and outright stupidity. Not so long ago, they had set Mappo and Icarium on a path to Tremorlor, an Azath House capable of imprisoning Icarium for all eternity. Such imprisonment had been their design, and as much as Mappo railed against and finally defied them, he had understood, even then, that it made sense. This abrupt, inexplicable about-face reinforced the Trell’s belief that the ancient cult had lost its way, or had been usurped by some rival faction.

A sudden yelp from Iskaral Pust – a huge shadow slipped over the two travellers, then was gone, even as Mappo looked up, his eyes searching through the moss-bearded branches of the huge trees – seeing nothing, yet feeling still the passage of a cool wind, flowing in the wake of ... something. The Trell faced the High Priest. ‘Iskaral Pust, are there enkar’al living in this swamp?’

The small man’s eyes were wide. He licked his lips, inadvertently collecting the smeared remains of a mosquito with his tongue, drawing it inward. ‘I have no idea,’ he said, then wiped his nose with the back of his hand, looking like a child caught out in some horrible crime. ‘We should go back, Mappo Runt. This was a mistake.’ He cocked his head. ‘Does he believe me? How can he not? It’s been five days! We've not crossed this
arm of swamp, this northward tendril, no, we've walked its length! Enkar'al? Gods below, they eat people! Was
that an enkar'al? I wish! But oh no. If only. Quick, blessed genius, come up with something else to say!' He
scratched the white stubble on his chin, then brightened. 'It's Mogora's fault! It was her idea! All of this!'

Mappo looked about. A northerly arm of marshland? They had cut westward to find it, the first hint that
something was awry, but Mappo had not been thinking clearly back then. He was not even certain the fog had
lifted from his spirit in the time since. Yet now he began to feel something, a stirring of the embers, the flicker
of anger. He faced right, set out.

'Where are you going?' Iskaral demanded, hastening to catch up, the mule braying a complaint.

The Trell did not bother replying. He was fighting the desire to wring the little man's scrawny neck.

A short while later the ground perceptibly rose, becoming drier, and open pockets of sunlit glades appeared
ahead, walled beyond by stands of birch.

In the clearing directly ahead, half-sitting half-leaning on a boulder, was a woman. Tall, her skin the colour
of fine ash, long black hair hanging loose and straight. She wore chain armour, glinting silver, over a grey,
hooded shirt, and leggings of pale, supple leather. High boots fashioned from some black-scaled creature rose
to her knees. Two baskethiked rapiers adorned her belt.

She was eating an apple, its skin the deep hue of blood.

Her eyes were large, black, with elongated epicanthic folds tilting upward at the corners, and they were fixed
on Mappo with something like languid disdain and mild amusement. 'Oh,' she murmured, 'Ardata's hand in this,
I see. Healed by the Queen of Spiders – you foster dangerous alliances, Guardian.' Her free hand pressed
against her lips, eyes widening. 'How rude of me! Guardian no longer. How should you be called now, Mappo
Runt? Discarded One?' She tossed the apple to one side, then straightened. 'We have much to talk about, you
and I.'

'I do not know you,' the Trell replied.

'My name is Spite.'

'Oh,' said Iskaral Pust, 'now that's fitting, since I hate you already.'

'Allies need not be friends,' she replied, gaze flicking with contempt to the High Priest. Her eyes narrowed
momentarily on the mule, then she said, 'I am without friends and I seek no friendships.'

'With a name like Spite, is it any wonder?'

'Iskaral Pust, the Hounds have done well in disposing of Dejim Nebrahl. Or, rather, I begin to comprehend
the subtle game they have played, given the proximity of the Deragoth. Your master is clever. I give him that.'

'My master,' hissed Iskaral Pust, 'has no need to fashion an alliance with you.'

She smiled, and it was, Mappo judged, a most beautiful smile. 'High Priest, from you and your master, I seek
nothing.' Her eyes returned once more to rest upon the Trell. 'You, Discarded One, have need of me. We shall
close together, you and I. The services of the Magi of Shadow are no longer required.'

'You'll not get rid of me so easily,' Iskaral Pust said, his sudden smile, intended to be unctuous, sadly marred
by the mosquito carcass squished against one snaggled, crooked incisor. 'Oh no, I will be as a leech, hidden
beneath a fold in your clothing, eagerly engorging upon your very lifeblood. I shall be the fanged bat hanging
beneath your udder, lapping lapping lapping your sweet exudence. I shall be the fly who buzzes straight into
your ear, there to make a new home with a full larder at my beck and call. I shall be the mosquito—'

'Crushed by your flapping lips, High Priest,' Spite said wearily, dismissing him. 'Discarded One, the coast is
but half a league distant. There is a fishing village, sadly devoid of life now, but that will not impede us at all.'

Mappo did not move. 'What cause have I,' he asked, 'to ally myself with you?'
'You shall need the knowledge I possess, Mappo Runt, for I was one of the Nameless Ones who freed Dejim Nebrahl, with the aim of slaying you, so that the new Guardian could take your place at Icarium's side. It may surprise you,'

she added, 'that I am pleased the T'rolbarahl failed in the former task. I am outlawed from the Nameless Ones, a fact that gives me no small amount of satisfaction, if not pleasure. Would you know what the Nameless Ones intend? Would you know Icarium's fate?'

He stared at her. Then asked, 'What awaits us in the village?'

'A ship. Provisioned and crewed, in a manner of speaking. To pursue our quarry, we must cross half the world, Mappo Runt.'

'Don't listen to her!'

'Be quiet, Iskaral Pust,' Mappo said in a growl. 'Or take your leave of us.'

'Fool! Very well, it is clear to me that my presence in your foul company is not only necessary, but essential! But you, Spite, be on your guard! I will permit no betrayal of this bold, honourable warrior! And watch your words, lest their unleashing haunt him unto madness!'

'If he has withstood yours this long, priest,' she said, 'then he is proof to all madness.'

'You, woman, would be wise to be silent.'

She smiled.

Mappo sighed. Ah, Pust, would that you heeded your own admonishments ...

The boy was nine years old. He had been ill for a time, days and nights unmeasured, recalled only in blurred visions, the pain-filled eyes of his parents, the strange calculation in those of his two younger sisters, as if they had begun contemplating life without an older brother, a life freed of the torments and teasings and, as demanded, his stolid reliability in the face of the other, equally cruel children in the village.

And then there had been a second time, one he was able to imagine distinct, walled on all sides, roofed in black night where stars swam like boatmen spiders across wellwater. In this time, this chamber, the boy was entirely alone, woken only by the needs of thirst, finding a bucket beside his bed, filled with silty water, and the wood and horn ladle his mother used only on feast-nights. Waking, conjuring the strength to reach out and collect that ladle, dipping it into the bucket, struggling with the water's weight, drawing the tepid fluid in through cracked lips, to ease a mouth hot and dry as the bowl of a kiln.

One day he awoke yet again, and knew himself in the third time. Though weak, he was able to crawl from the bed, to lift the bucket and drink down the last of the water, coughing at its soupy consistency, tasting the flat grit of the silts. Hunger's nest in his belly was now filled with broken eggs, and tiny claws and beaks nipped at his insides.

A long, exhausting journey brought him outside, blinking in the harsh sunlight – so harsh and bright he could not see. There were voices all around him, filling the street, floating down from the roofs, high-pitched and in a language he had never heard before. Laughter, excitement, yet these sounds chilled him.

He needed more water. He needed to defeat this brightness, so that he could see once more. Discover the source of these carnival sounds – had a caravan arrived in the village? A troop of actors, singers and musicians?

Did no-one see him? Here on his hands and knees, the fever gone, his life returned to him?

He was nudged on one side and his groping hand reached out and found the shoulder and nape of a dog. The animal's wet nose slipped along his upper arm. This was one of the healthier dogs, he judged, his hand finding a thick layer of fat over the muscle of the shoulder, then, moving down, the huge swell of the beast's belly. He now heard other dogs, gathering, pressing close, squirming with pleasure at the touch of his hands. They were
all fat. Had there been a feast? The slaughter of a herd?

Vision returned, with a clarity he had never before experienced. Lifting his head, he looked round.

The chorus of voices came from birds. Rooks, pigeons, vultures bounding down the dusty street, screeching at the bluff rushes from the village's dogs, who remained possessive of the remains of bodies here and there, mostly little more than bones and sun-blackened tendons, skulls broken open by canine jaws, the insides licked clean.

The boy rose to his feet, tottering with sudden dizziness that was a long time in passing. Eventually, he was able to turn and look back at his family's house, trying to recall what he had seen when crawling through the rooms. Nothing. No-one.

The dogs circled him, all seeming desperate to make him their master, tails wagging, stepping side to side as their spines twisted back and forth, ears flicking up at his every gesture, noses prodding his hands. They were fat, the boy realized, because they had eaten everyone.

For they had died. His mother, his father, his sisters, everyone else in the village. The dogs, owned by all and by none and living a life of suffering, of vicious hunger and rivalries, had all fed unto indolence. Their joy came from full bellies, all rivalry forgotten now. The boy understood in this something profound. A child's delusions stripped back, revealing the truths of the world.

He began wandering.

Some time later he found himself at the crossroads just beyond the northernmost homestead, standing in the midst of his newly adopted pets. A cairn of stones had been raised in the very centre of the conjoined roads and tracks.

His hunger had passed. Looking down at himself, he saw how thin he had become, and saw too the strange purplish nodules thickening his joints, wrist, elbow, knee and ankle, not in the least painful. Repositories, it seemed, for some other strength.

The cairn's message was plain to him, for it had been raised by a shepherd and he had tended enough flocks in his day. It told him to go north, up into the hills. It told him that sanctuary awaited him there. There had been survivors, then. That they had left him behind was understandable — against the bluetongue fever nothing could be done. A soul lived or a soul died of its own resolve, or lack thereof.

The boy saw that no herds remained on the hillsides. Wolves had come down, perhaps, uncontested; or the other villagers had driven the beasts with them. After all, a sanctuary would have such needs as food and water, milk and cheese.

He set off on the north trail, the dogs accompanying him.

They were happy, he saw. Pleased that he now led them.

And the sun overhead, that had been blinding, was blinding no longer. The boy had come to and now crossed a threshold, into the fourth and final time. He knew not when it would end.

With languid eyes, Felisin Younger stared at the scrawny youth who had been brought in by the Unmanned Acolytes. Just one more lost survivor looking to her for meaning, guidance, for something to believe in that could not be crushed down and swept away by ill winds.

He was a Carrier – the swellings at his joints told her that. Likely, he had infected the rest of his village. The nodes had suppurated, poisoning the air, and everyone else had died. He had arrived at the gates of the city that morning, in the company of twelve half-wild dogs. A Carrier, but here, in this place, that was not cause for banishment. Indeed, the very opposite. Kulat would take the boy under his wing, for teaching in the ways of pilgrimage, for this would be his new calling, to carry plague across the world, and so, among the survivors in his wake, gather yet more adherents to the new religion. Faith in the Broken, the Scarred, the Unmanned – all manner of sects were being formed, membership defined by the damage the plague had delivered to each
survivor. Rarest and most precious among them, the Carriers.

All that Kulat had predicted was coming to pass. Survivors arrived, at first a trickle, then by the hundred, drawn here, guided by the hand of a god. They began excavating the long-buried city, making for themselves homes amidst the ghosts of long-dead denizens who still haunted the rooms, the hallways and the streets, silent and motionless, spectres witnessing a rebirth, on their faint, blurred faces a riot of expressions ranging from dismay to horror. How the living could terrify the dead.

Herders arrived with huge flocks, sheep and goats, the long-limbed cattle called eraga that most had believed extinct for a thousand years – Kulat said that wild herds had been found in the hills – and here the dogs recollected what they had been bred for in the first place and now fended the beasts against the wolves and the grey eagles that could lift a newborn calf in their talons.

Artisans had arrived and had begun producing images that had been born in their sickness, in their fevers: the God in Chains, the multitudes of the Broken and the Scarred and the Unmanned. Images on pottery, on walls painted in the ancient mix of eraga blood and red ochre, stone statues for the Carriers. Fabrics woven with large knots of wool to represent the nodules, scenes of fever patterns of colour surrounding central images of Felisin herself, Sha'ik Reborn, the deliverer of the true Apocalypse.

She did not know what to make of all this. She was left bewildered again and again by what she witnessed, every gesture of worship and adoration. The horror of physical disfigurement assailed her on all sides, until she felt numb, drugged insensate. Suffering had become its own language, life itself defined as punishment and imprisonment. And this is my flock.

Her followers had, thus far, answered her every need but one, and that was the growing sexual desire, reflecting the changes overtaking her body, the shape of womanhood, the start of blood between her legs, and the new hunger feeding her dreams of succour. She could not yearn for the touch of slaves, for slavery was what these people willingly embraced, here and now, in this place they called Hanar Ara, the City of the Fallen.

Around a mouthful of stones, Kulat said, 'And this is the problem, Highness.'

She blinked. She hadn't been listening. 'What? What is the problem?'

'This Carrier, who arrived but this morning from the southwest track. With his dogs that answer only to him.'

She regarded Kulat, the old bastard who confessed sexually fraught dreams of wine as if the utterance was itself more pleasure than he could bear, as if confession made him drunk. 'Explain.'

Kulat sucked at the stones in his mouth, swallowed spit, then gestured. 'Look upon the buds, Highness, the buds of disease, the Many Mouths of Bluetongue. They are shrinking. They have dried up and are fading. He has said as much. They have grown smaller. He is a Carrier who shall, one day, cease being a Carrier. This child shall lose his usefulness.'

Usefulness. She looked upon him again, more carefully this time, and saw a hard, angular face older than its years, clear eyes, a frame that needed more flesh and would likely find it once again, now that he had food to eat. A boy still young, who would grow into a man. 'He shall reside in the palace,' she said.

Kulat's eyes widened. 'Highness—'

'I have spoken. The Open Wing, with the courtyard and stables, where he can keep his dogs—'

'Highness, there are plans for converting the Open Wing into your own private garden—'

'Do not interrupt me again, Kulat. I have spoken.'

My own private garden. The thought now amused her, as she reached for her goblet of wine. Yes, and we shall see how it grows.

So carried on her unspoken thoughts, Felisin saw nothing of Kulat's sudden dark look, the moment before he bowed and turned away.
The boy had a name, but she would give him a new name. One better suited to her vision of the future. After a moment, she smiled. Yes, she would name him Crokus.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

An old man past soldiering his rivets green, his eyes rimmed in rust, stood as if heaved awake from slaughter's pit, back-cut from broken flight when young blades chased him from the field. He looks like a promise only fools could dream unfurled, the banners of glory gesticulating in the wind over his head, stripped like ghosts, skulls stow in, lips flapping, their open mouths mute.

'Oh harken to me,' cries he atop his imagined summit, 'and I shall speak – of riches and rewards, of my greatness, my face once young like these I see before me – harken!'

While here I sit at the Tapu's table, grease-fingered with skewered meat, cracked goblet pearled in the hot sun, the wine watered to make, in the alliance of thin and thick, both passing palatable. As near as an arm's reach from this rabbler, this ravelling trumpeter who once might have stood shield-locked at my side, red-hued, masked drunk, coarse with fear, in the moment before he broke— broke and ran— and now he would call a new generation to war, to battle-clamour, and why? Well, why – all because he once ran, but listen: a soldier who ran once ever runs, and this, honoured magistrate, is the reason— the sole reason I say— for my knife finding his back. He was a soldier whose words heaved me awake.

'Bedura's Defence' in *The Slaying of King Qualin Tros of Bellid* transcribed as song by Fisher, Malaz City, last year of Laseen's Reign

Within an aura redolent and reminiscent of a crypt, Noto Boil, company cutter, Kartoolian by birth and once priest of Soliel, long, wispy, colourless hair plucked like strands of web by the wind, his skin the hue of tanned goat leather, stood like a bent sapling and picked at his green-furred teeth with a fish spine. It had been a habit of his for so long that he had worn round holes between each tooth, and the gums had receded far back, making his smile skeletal.

He had smiled but once thus far, by way of greeting, and for Ganoes Paran, that had been once too many.

At the moment, the healer seemed at best pensive, at worst distracted by boredom. 'I cannot say for certain, Captain Kindly,' the man finally said.

'About what?'

A flicker of the eyes, grey floating in yellow murk. 'Well, you had a question for me, did you not?'

'No,' Paran replied, 'I had for you an order.'

'Yes, of course, that is what I meant.'

'I commanded you to step aside.'

'The High Fist is very ill, Captain. It will avail you nothing to disturb his dying. More pointedly, you might well become infected with the dread contagion.'

'No, I won't. And it is his dying that I intend to do something about. For now, however, I wish to see him. That is all.'

'Captain Sweetcreek has—'

'Captain Sweetcreek is no longer in command, cutter. I am. Now get out of my way before I reassign you to irrigating horse bowels, and given the poor quality of the feed they have been provided of late ...'

Noto Boil examined the fish spine in his hand. 'I will make note of this in my company log, Captain Kindly. As the Host's ranking healer, there is some question regarding chain of command at the moment. After all,
under normal circumstances I far outrank captains—'

'These are not normal circumstances. I'm losing my patience here.'

An expression of mild distaste. 'Yes, I have first-hand knowledge of what happens when you lose patience, no matter how unjust the situation. It fell to me, I remind you, to heal Captain Sweetcreek's fractured cheekbone.' The man stepped to one side of the entrance. 'Please, Captain, be welcome within.'

Sighing, Paran strode past the cutter, pulled aside the flap and entered the tent.

Gloom, the air hot and thick with heavy incense that could only just mask the foul reek of sickness. In this first chamber were four cots, each occupied by a company commander, only two of whom were familiar to Paran. All slept or were unconscious, limbs twisted in their sweatstained blankets, necks swollen by infection, each drawn breath a thin wheeze like some ghastly chorus. Shaken, the captain moved past them and entered the tent's back chamber, where there was but one occupant.

In the grainy, crepuscular air, Paran stared down at the figure in the cot. His first thought was that Dujek Onearm was already dead. An aged, bloodless face marred by dark purple blotches, eyes crusted shut by mucus. The man's tongue, the colour of Aren Steel, was so swollen it had forced open his mouth, splitting the parched lips. A healer – probably Noto Boil – had packed Dujek's neck in a mixture of mould, ash and clay, which had since dried, looking like a slave collar.

After a long moment, Paran heard Dujek draw breath, the sound uneven, catching again and again in faint convulsions of his chest. The meagre air then hissed back out in a rattling whistle.

_Gods below, this man will not last the night._

The captain realized that his lips had gone numb, and he was having trouble focusing. _This damned incense, it's d'bayang._ He stood for another half-dozen heartbeats, looking down on the shrunken, frail figure of the Malazan Empire's greatest living general, then he turned about and strode from the chamber.

Two steps across the outer room and a hoarse voice halted him.

'Who in Hood's name are you?'

Paran faced the woman who had spoken. She was propped up on her bed, enough to allow her a level gaze on the captain. Dark-skinned, her complexion lacking the weathered lines of desert life, her eyes large and very dark. Stringy, sweat-plastered black hair, cut short yet nonetheless betraying a natural wave, surrounded her round face, which sickness had drawn, making her eyes seem deeper, more hollow.

'Captain Kindly—'

'By the Abyss you are. I served under Kindly in Nathilog.'

'Well, that's discouraging news. And you are?'

'Fist Rythe Bude.'

'One of Dujek's recent promotions, then, for I have never heard of you. Nor can I fathom where you hail from.'

'Shal-Morzinn.'

Paran frowned. 'West of Nemil?'

'Southwest.'

'How did you come to be in Nathilog, Fist?'

'By the Three, give me some water, damn you.'
Paran looked round until he found a bladder, which he brought to her side.

‘You’re a fool,’ she said. ‘Coming in here. Now you will die with the rest of us. You’ll have to pour it into my mouth.’

He removed the stopper, then leaned closer.

She closed her remarkable, luminous eyes and tilted her head back, mouth opening. The weals on her neck were cracked, leaking clear fluid as thick as tears. Squeezing the bladder, he watched the water stream into her mouth.

She swallowed frantically, gasped then coughed.

He pulled the bladder away. ‘Enough?’

She managed a nod, coughed again, then swore in some unknown language. ‘This damned smoke,’ she added in Malazan. ‘Numbs the throat so you can’t even tell when you’re swallowing. Every time I close my eyes, d’bayang dreams rush upon me like the Red Winds.’

He stood, looking down upon her.

‘I left Shal-Morzinn ... in haste. On a Blue Moranth trader. Money for passage ran out in a town called Pitch, on the Genabarrii coast. From there I made it to Nathilog, and with a belly too empty to let me think straight, I signed up.’

‘Where had you intended to go?’

She made a face. ‘As far as my coin would take me, fool. Crossing the Three is not a recipe for a long life. Blessings to Oponn’s kiss, they didn’t come after me.’

‘The Three?’

‘The rulers of Shal-Morzinn ... for the past thousand years. You seemed to recognize the empire’s name, which is more than most.’

‘I know nothing beyond the name itself, which is found on certain Malazan maps.’

She croaked a laugh. ‘Malazans. Knew enough to make their first visit their last.’

‘I wasn’t aware we’d visited at all,’ Paran said.

‘The Emperor. And Dancer. The imperial flagship, Twist. Gods, that craft alone was sufficient to give the Three pause. Normally, they annihilate strangers as a matter of course – we trade with no-one, not even Nemil. The Three despise outsiders. Were they so inclined they would have conquered the entire continent by now, including Seven Cities.’

‘Not expansionists, then. No wonder no-one’s heard of them.’

‘More water.’

He complied.

When she’d finished coughing, she met his eyes. ‘You never told me – who are you in truth?’

‘Captain Ganoes Paran.’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Not yet.’

‘All right. So why the lie?’
'Dujek decommissioned me. Officially, I am without rank.'

'Then what in Hood's name are you doing here?'

He smiled. 'That's a long story. At the moment, I have one thing I need to do, and that is, repay a debt. I owe Dujek that much. Besides, it's not good to have a goddess loose in the mortal realm, especially one who delights in misery.'

'They all delight in misery.'

'Yes, well.'

She bared a row of even teeth, stained by sickness. 'Captain, do you think, had we known Poliel was in the temple, we would have gone in at all? You, on the other hand, don't have that excuse. Leaving me to conclude that you have lost your mind.'

'Captain Sweetcreek certainly agrees with you, Fist,' Paran said, setting the bladder down. 'I must take my leave. I would appreciate it, Fist Rythe Bude, if you refer to me as Captain Kindly.' He walked towards the tent's exit.

'Ganoes Paran.'

Something in her tone turned him round even as he reached for the flap.

'Burn my corpse,' she said. 'Ideally, fill my lungs with oil, so that my chest bursts, thus freeing to flight my ravaged soul. It's how it's done in Shal-Morzinn.'

He hesitated, then nodded.

Outside, he found the cutter Noto Boil still standing at his station, examining the bloodied point of the fish spine a moment before slipping it back into his mouth.

'Captain Kindly,' the man said in greeting. 'The outrider Hurlochel was just here, looking for you. From him, I gather you intend something ... rash.'

'Cutter, when the alternative is simply waiting for them to die, I will accept the risk of doing something rash.'

'I see. How, then, have you planned this assault of yours? Given that you shall face the Grey Goddess herself. I doubt even your reputation will suffice in compelling the soldiers to assail the Grand Temple of Poliel. Indeed, I doubt you will get them to even so much as enter G'danisban.'

'I'm not taking any soldiers, cutter.'

A sage nod from the gaunt man. 'Ah, an army of one, then, is it? Granted,' he added, eyeing Paran speculatively, 'I have heard tales of your extraordinary ... ferocity. Is it true you once dangled a Falah'd over the edge of his palace's tower balcony? Even though he was an ally of the empire at the time. What was his crime again? Oh yes, a clash of colours in his attire, on the first day of the Emperor's Festival. What were those colours he had the effrontery to wear?'

Paran studied the man for a moment, then he smiled. 'Blue and green.'

'But those colours do not clash, Captain.'

'I never claimed good judgement in aesthetic matters, cutter. Now, what were we talking about? Oh yes, my army of one. Indeed. I intend to lead but one man. Together, the two of us shall attack the Grey Goddess, with the aim of driving her from this realm.'

'You chose wisely, I think,' Noto Boil said. 'Given what awaits Hurlochel, he displayed impressive calm a few moments ago.'

'And well he should,' Paran said, 'since he's not coming with me. You are.'
The fish spine speared through the cutter's upper lip. A look of agony supplanted disbelief. He tore the offending needle from his lip and flung it away, then brought up both hands to clench against the pain. His eyes looked ready to clamber from their sockets.

Paran patted the man on the shoulder. 'Get that seen to, will you? We depart in half a bell, cutter.'

He sat on a kit chest, settled back slowly, until the give of the tent wall ceased, then stretched out his legs. 'I should be half-drunk right now,' he said, 'given what I'm about to do.'

Hurlochel seemed unable to muster a smile. 'Please, Captain. We should decamp. Cut our losses. I urge you to abandon this course of action, which will do naught but result in the death of yet another good soldier, not to mention an irritating but competent company cutter.'

'Ah, yes. Noto Boil. Once priest to Soliel, sister goddess of Poliel.'

'Priest no longer, Captain. Disavowed hold no weight with the ascendant so abandoned.'

'Soliel. Mistress of Healing, Beneficence, the Goddess that Weeps Healing Tears. She must have let loose an ocean of them by now, don't you think?'

'Is it wise to mock her at this threshold, Captain?'

'Why not? How has her infamous, unceasing sorrow for the plight of mortals done them any good, any at all, Hurlochel? It's easy to weep when staying far away, doing nothing. When you take credit for every survivor out there – those whose own spirits fought the battle, whose own spirits refused to yield to Hood's embrace.' He sneered up at the tent roof. 'It's the so-called friendly, sympathetic gods who have the most to answer for.' Paran glared at the man standing before him. 'Hood knows, the other ones are straightforward and damned clear on their own infancy – grant them that. But to proffer succour, salvation and all the rest, whilst leaving true fate to chance and chance alone – damn me, Hurlochel, to that they will give answer!'

The outrider's eyes were wide, unblinking.

Paran looked away. 'Sorry. Some thoughts I'd do better to keep to myself. It's a longstanding fault of mine, alas.'

'Captain. For a moment there ... your eyes ... they ... flared. Like a beast's.'

Paran studied the man. 'Did they now?'

'I'd swear it with one heel on Hood's own foreskin, Captain.'

Ganoes Paran pushed himself to his feet. 'Relay these orders to the officers. This army marches in four days. In three days' time, I want them in full kit, dressed out with weapons bared for inspection, ready at noon. And when we depart, I want to leave this camp clean, every latrine filled in, the refuse burned.' He faced Hurlochel. 'Get these soldiers busy – they're rotting from the inside out. Do you have all that, Hurlochel?'

The outrider smiled, then repeated Paran's orders word for word.

'Good. Be sure to impress on the officers that these days of lying round moping and bitching are at an end. Tell them the order of march will place to the lead post the most presentable company – everyone else eats their dust.'

'Captain, where do we march?'

'No idea. I'll worry about that then.'

'What of the High Fist and the others in that tent?'

'Chances are, they won't be up to much for a while. In the meantime—'
'In the meantime, you command the Host, sir.'

'Aye, I do.'

Hurlochel's sudden salute was sharp, then he pivoted and strode from the tent.

Paran stared after him. *Fine, at least someone's damned pleased about it.*

A short time later, he and Noto Boil sat atop their horses at the camp's edge, looking downslope and across the flat killing-ground to the city's walls, its bleached-limestone facing a mass of scrawls, painted symbols, hand-prints, skeletal figures. This close, there should have been sounds rising from the other side of those walls, the haze of dust and smoke overhead, and the huge gate should be locked open for a steady stream of traders and hawkers, drovers and work crews. Soldiers should be visible in the windows of the gate's flanking square towers.

The only movement came from flocks of pigeons lifting into view then dipping back down, fitful and frantic as an armada of kites rejected by storm-winds; and from the bluetinted desert starlings and croaking crows lined up like some nightmare army on the battlements.

'Captain,' the cutter said, the fish spine once more jutting from between his lips – the hole it had made earlier just above those lips was a red, slightly puckered spot, smeared like a popped pimple – 'you believe me capable of assaulting all that is anathema to me?'

'I thought you were disavowed,' Paran said.

'My point precisely. I cannot even so much as call upon Soliel for her benign protection. Perhaps your eyes are blind to the truth, but I tell you, Captain, I can see the air rolling up behind those walls – it is the breath of chaos. Currents swirl, heave – even to look upon them, as I do now, makes me ill. We shall die, you and I, not ten paces in from the gate.'

Paran checked the sword at his belt, then adjusted his helm's strap. 'I am not as blind as you believe me to be, cutter.' He studied the city for a moment, then gathered his reins. 'Ride close to my side, Noto Boil.'

'Captain, the gate looks closed, locked tight – we are not welcome.'

'Never mind the damned gate,' Paran said. 'Are you ready?'

The man turned wild eyes upon him. 'No,' he said in a high voice, 'I am not.'

'Let's get this over with,' Paran said, nudging his horse into motion.

Noto Boil spared one last look over his shoulder, and saw soldiers standing, watching, gathered in their hundreds. 'Gods,' he whispered, 'why am I not among them right now?'

Then he moved to catch up to Captain Kindly, who had once dangled an innocent man from a tower's edge. *And now does it all over again – to me!*

She had once been sent out to hunt down her younger brother, tracking him through half the city – oh, he'd known she was after him, known that she was the one they'd send, the only one capable of closing a hand on one scrawny ankle, dragging him back, then shaking him until his brain rattled inside his skull. He'd led her a wild trail that night. Ten years old and already completely out of control, eyes bright as marbles polished in a mouthful of spit, the white smile more wicked than a wolf's snarl, all gangly limbs and cavorting malice.

He had been collecting ... things. In secret. Strands of hair, nail clippings, a rotted tooth. Something, it turned out, from everyone in the entire extended family. Fortytwo, if one counted four-month-old Minarala – and he had, the little bastard. A madness less imaginative might have settled for a host of horrid dolls, upon which he could deliver minor but chronic torment to feed his insatiable evil, but not her brother, who clearly believed himself destined for vast infamy. Not content with dolls fashioned in likenesses, he had constructed, from twine, sticks, straw, wool and horn, a tiny flock of forty-two sheep. Penned in a kraal of sticks assembled on the
floor of the estate’s attic. Then, from one of his own milk teeth, newly plucked from his mouth, he made for himself the likeness of a wolf fang and then, with tatters of fur, the wolf to which it belonged, of a scale to permit it to devour a sheep-doll in a single gulp.

In skeins of demented magic, he had set his wolf among the flock.

Screams and wails in the night, in household after household, unleashed from terrifying nightmares steeped in the reek of panic and lanolin, of clopping hoofs and surges of desperate, hopeless flight. Nips and buffets from the huge roaring wolf, the beast toying with every one of them – oh, she would remember the torment for a long, long time.

In the course of the following day, as uncles, aunts, nephews and the like gathered, all pale and trembling, and as the revelation arrived that one and all had shared their night of terror, few were slow in realizing the source of their nightmares – of course he had already lit out, off to one of his countless bolt-holes in the city. Where he would hide until such time as the fury and outrage should pass.

For the crimes committed by children, all fugue eventually faded, as concern rose in its stead. For most children, normal children; but not for Ben Adaephon Delat, who had gone too far. Again.

And so Torahaval Delat had been dispatched to track down her brother, and to deliver upon him an appropriate punishment. Such as, she had considered at the time, flaying him alive. Sheep, were they? Well, she carried in her pack the wolf doll, and with that she intended most dreadful torture. Though nowhere near as talented as her younger brother, and admittedly far less imaginative, she had managed to fashion a leash of sorts for the creature, and now, no matter where her brother went, she could follow.

He was able to stay ahead of her for most of a day and the following night, until a bell before dawn when, on a rooftop in the Prelid Quarter of Aren, she caught up with him, holding in her hands the wolf doll, gripping the back legs and pulling them wide.

The boy, running flat out one moment, flat on his face the next. Squealing and laughing, and, even as she stumbled, that laughter stung so that she gave those legs an extra twist.

And, screaming, fell onto the pebbled roof, her hips filling with agony.

Her brother shrieked as well, yet could not stop laughing.

She had not looked too closely at the wolf doll, and now, gasping and wincing, she sought to do so. The gloom was reluctant to yield, but at last she made out the beast’s bound-up body beneath the tatter of fur – her underclothes – the ones that had disappeared from the clothesline a week earlier – knotted and wrapped tight around some solid core, the nature of which she chose not to deliberate overmuch.

He’d known she would come after him. Had known she’d find his stash of dolls in the attic. Had known she would make use of the wolf doll, his own anima that he had so carelessly left behind. He’d known … everything.

That night, in the darkness before dawn, Torahaval decided that she would hate him, for ever more. Passionately, a hatred fierce enough to scour the earth in its entirety.

It’s easy to hate the clever ones, even if they happen to be kin. Perhaps especially then.

There was no clear path from that recollection to her life now, to this moment, with the singular exception of the sensation that she was trapped inside a nightmare; one from which, unlike that other nightmare all those years ago, she would never awaken.

Her brother was not there, laughing and gasping, then finally, convulsed with glee on the rooftop, releasing the sorcery within the wolf doll. Making the pain go away. Her brother, dead or alive – by now more probably dead – was very far away. And she wished, with all her heart, that it wasn’t so.

Mumbling like a drunk beggar, Bridthok sat before the stained granite-topped table to her right, his long-nailed fingers pushing the strange assortment of gold and silver coins back and forth as he sought to force upon
them some means of categorization, a task at which he was clearly failing. The vast chests of coinage in Poliel's temple were bottomless – not figuratively but literally, they had discovered. And to reach down into the ice-cold darkness was to close hands on frost-rimed gold and silver, in all manner of currency. Stamped bars, studded teeth, holed spheres, torcs and rings, rolled bolts of gold-threaded silk small enough to fit in the palm of one hand, and coins of all sorts: square, triangular, crescent, holed, tubular, along with intricate folding boxes, chains, beads, spools, honeycomb wafers and ingots. Not one of which was familiar to any of them gathered here – trapped here – in the G’danisban temple with its mad, horrendous goddess. Torahaval had no idea there were so many languages in the world, such as she saw inscribed upon much of the currency. Letters like tiny images, letters proceeding diagonally, or vertically, or in spiral patterns, some letters little more than patterns of dots.

From other realms, Bridthok insisted. The more mundane coins could be found in the eastern chamber behind the altar, an entire room heaped with the damned things. An empire's treasury in that room alone, the man claimed, and perhaps he was right. With the first rumour of plague, the coffers of Poliel filled to overflowing. But it was the alien coinage that most interested the old man. It had since become Bridthok's obsession, this Cataloguing of Realms that he claimed would be his final glory of scholarship.

A strange contrast, this academic bent, in a man for whom ambition and lust for power seemed everything, the very reason for drawing breath, the cage in which his murderous heart paced.

He had loosed more rumours of his death than anyone she had ever known, a new one every year or so, to keep the many hunters from his trail, he claimed. She suspected he simply took pleasure in the challenge of invention. Among the fools – her co-conspirators – gathered here, Bridthok was perhaps the most fascinating. Neither Septhune Anabhin nor Sradal Purthu encouraged her, in matters of trust or respect. And Sribin, well, Sribin was no longer even recognizable.

The fate, it seemed, of those whom the Grey Goddess took as mortal lover. And when she tired of the rotted, moaning thing that had once been Sribin, the bitch would select another. From her dwindling store of terrified prisoners. Male, female, adult, child, it mattered naught to Poliel.

Bridthok insisted the cult of Sha'ik was reborn, invigorated beyond – far beyond – all that had gone before. Somewhere, out there, was the City of the Fallen, and a new Sha'ik, and the Grey Goddess was harvesting for her a broken legion of the mad, for whom all that was mortal belonged to misery and grief, the twin offspring of Poliel's womb. And, grey in miasma and chaos, blurred by distance, there lurked the Crippled God, twisted and cackling in his chains, ever drawing tighter this foul alliance.

What knew Torahaval of wars among the gods? She did not even care, beyond the deathly repercussions in her own world, her own life.

Her younger brother had long ago fallen one way; and she another, and now all hope of escape was gone.

Bridthok's mumbling ceased in a sudden gasp. He started in his chair, head lifting, eyes widening.

A tremor ran through Torahaval Delat. 'What is it?' she demanded.

The old man rose from behind the table. 'She summons us.'

I too must be mad – what is there left in life to love? Why do I still grip the edge, when the Abyss offers everything I now yearn for? Oblivion. An end. Gods ... an end. 'More than that, Bridthok,' she said. 'You look ... aghast.'

Saying nothing and not meeting her eye, he headed out into the hallway. Cursing under her breath, Torahaval followed.

Once, long ago, her brother – no more than four, perhaps five years old at the time, long before the evil within him had fully grown into itself – had woken screaming in the night, and she had run to his bedside to comfort him. In child words, he described his nightmare. He had died, yet walked the world still, for he had forgotten something. Forgotten, and no matter what he did, no recollection was possible. And so his corpse wandered, everywhere, with ever the same question on his lips, a question delivered to every single person
cursed to cross his path. *What? What have I forgotten?*

It had been hard to reconcile that shivering, wide-eyed child hiding in her arms that night with the conniving trickster of only a few years later.

Perhaps, she now thought as she trailed Bridthok and the train of his flapping, threadbare robes, perhaps in the interval of those few years, Adaephon Delat had remembered what it was he had forgotten. Perhaps it was nothing more than what a corpse still striding the mortal world could not help but forget.

*How to live.*

'I thought daytime was supposed to be for sleeping,' Bottle muttered as his sergeant tugged on his arm yet again. The shade of the boulder he had been curled up beside was, the soldier told himself, the only reason he was still alive. This day had been the hottest yet. Insects crawling on stone slabs had cooked halfway across, shells popping like seeds. No-one moved, no-one said a thing. Thirst and visions of water obsessed the entire troop. Bottle had eventually fallen into a sleep that still pulled at him with torpid, heavy hands.

If only Fiddler would damned well leave him alone.

'Come with me, Bottle. Up. On your feet.'

'If you've found a cask of spring water, Sergeant, then I'm yours. Otherwise ...'

Fiddler lifted him upright, then dragged him along. Stumbling, his tongue feeling like a knot of leather strips, Bottle was barely aware of the path underfoot. Away from the road, among wind-sculpted rocks, winding this way and that. Half-blinded by the glare, it was a moment before he realized that they had stopped, were standing on a clearing of flat sand, surrounded by boulders, and there were two figures awaiting them.

Bottle felt his heart tighten in his chest. The one seated cross-legged opposite was Quick Ben. To his right squatted the assassin Kalam, his dark face glistening, worn black gloves on his hands and the elongated handles of his twin long-knives jutting out from beneath his arms. The man looked ready to kill something, although Bottle suspected that was his normal expression.

Quick Ben's eyes were fixed on him, languid yet dangerous, like a leopard playing with a maimed hare. But there was something else in that regard, Bottle suspected. Something not quite hidden. *Fear?*

After a moment of locked gazes, Bottle's attention was drawn to the collection of dolls perched in the sand before the wizard. Professional interest helped push down his own fear, for the time being, at least. Involuntarily, he leaned forward.

'It's an old art,' Quick Ben said. 'But you know that, don't you, soldier?'

'You're at an impasse,' Bottle said.

The wizard's brows lifted, and he shot Kalam an unreadable glance before clearing his throat and saying, 'Aye, I am. How did you see it? And how so ... quickly?'

Bottle shrugged.

Quick Ben scowled at an amused grunt from Fiddler. 'All right, you damned imp, any suggestions on what to do about it?'

Bottle ran a hand through the grimy stubble of his hair. 'Tell me what you're trying to do.'

'What I'm trying to do, soldier, is none of your damned business!'

Sighing, Bottle settled onto the sand, assuming a posture to match that of the man opposite him. He studied the figures, then pointed to one. 'Who's she?'

Quick Ben started. 'I didn't know it was a "she".'
'First one you set down, I'd hazard. You probably woke from a bad dream, all confused, but knowing something was wrong, something somewhere, and this one – this woman – she's your link to it. Family, I'd hazard. Mother? Daughter? Sister? Sister, yes. She's been thinking about you. A lot, lately. Look at the skein of shadow lines around her, like she was standing in a thatch of grass, only there ain't no grass nearby, so that skein belongs to something else.'

'Hood squeeze my balls,' Quick Ben hissed, eyes now darting among the figures on the sand. He seemed to have forgotten his belligerence. 'Torahaval? What in the name of the Abyss has she got herself into now? And how come not one of the others can reach a single shadow towards her?'

Bottle scratched at his beard, fingernails trapping a nit. He pulled it loose and flicked it away.

Kalam started, then cursed. 'Watch that!'

'Sorry.' Bottle pointed at one doll, wrapped in black silks. The shadow the doll cast seemed to reveal two projections of some kind, like crows perched on each shoulder. 'That's Apsalar, yes? She's part of this, all right, though not at the moment. I think her path was meant to cross your sister's, only it never happened. So, there was intent, unfulfilled, and be glad for that. That one's Cotillion and aye, he's dancing his infernal dance all right, but his only role was in starting the pebble from the hilltop – how it rolled and what it picked up on the way down he left to the fates. Still, you're right in choosing the House of Shadows. Was that instinct? Never mind. Here's your problem.' He pointed at another doll, this one hooded and cloaked entirely in gauze-thin black linen.

Quick Ben blinked, then frowned. 'Hardly. That's Shadowthrone, and he's central to this. It's all got to do with him and, damn you, Bottle, that's more than instinct!'

'Oh, he's central all right, but see how his shadow doesn't reach?'

'I know it doesn't reach! But that's where he stands, damn you!'

Bottle reached out and collected the doll.

Snarling, Quick Ben half rose, but Fiddler's hand snapped out, pushed the wizard back down.

'Get that paw off me, sapper,' the wizard said, his tone low, even.

'I warned you,' the sergeant said, 'didn't I?' He withdrew his hand, and Quick Ben settled back as if something much heavier had just landed on his shoulders.

In the meantime, Bottle was busy reworking the doll. Bending the wires within the arms and legs. For his own efforts, he rarely used wire – too expensive – but in this case they made his reconfiguring the doll much easier. Finally satisfied, he set it back, in precisely the same position as before.

No-one spoke, all eyes fixed on the reconfigured Shadowthrone – now on all fours, right foreleg and left rear leg raised, the entire form pitched far forward, impossibly balanced. The shadow stretching out to within a finger's breadth of the figure that was Torahaval Delat.

Shadowthrone ... now something else ...

Kalam whispered, 'Still not touching ...'

Bottle settled back, crossing his arms as he lay down on the sand. 'Wait,' he said, then closed his eyes, and a moment later was asleep once more.

Crouched close at Quick Ben's side, Fiddler let out a long breath.

The wizard pulled his stare from the reconfigured Shadowthrone, his eyes bright as he looked over at the sapper. 'He was half asleep, Fid.'

The sergeant shrugged.
'No,' the wizard said, 'you don't understand. Half asleep. Someone's with him. Was with him, I mean. Do you have any idea how far back sympathetic magic like this goes? To the very beginning. To that glimmer, that first glimmer, Fid. The birth of awareness. Are you understanding me?'

'As clear as the moon lately,' Fiddler said, scowling.

'The Eres'al, the Tall Ones – before a single human walked this world. Before the Imass, before even the K'Chain Che'Malle. Fiddler, Eres was here. Now. Herself. With him:

The sapper looked back down at the doll of Shadowthrone. Four-legged now, frozen in its headlong rush – and the shadow it cast did not belong, did not fit at all. For the head was broad, the snout prominent and wide, jaws opened but wrapped about something. And whatever that thing was, it slithered and squirmed like a trapped snake.

_What in Hood's name? Oh. Oh, wait ..._

Atop a large boulder that had sheared, creating an inclined surface, Apsalar was lying flat on her stomach, watching the proceedings in the clearing twenty-odd paces distant. Disturbing conversations, those, especially that last part, about the Eres. _Just another hoary ancient better left alone._ That soldier, Bottle, needed watching.

Torahaval Delat ... one of the names on that spy's – Mebra's – list in Ehlitan. Quick Ben's sister. Well, that was indeed unfortunate, since it seemed that both Cotillion and Shadowthrone wanted the woman dead, and they usually got what they wanted. Thanks to me ... and people like me. The gods place knives into our mortal hands, and need do nothing more.

She studied Quick Ben, gauging his growing agitation, and began to suspect that the wizard knew something of the extremity that his sister now found herself in. Knew, and, in the thickness of blood that bound kin no matter how estranged, the foolish man had decided to do something about it.

Apsalar waited no longer, allowing herself to slide back down the flat rock, landing lightly in thick wind-blowen sand, well in shadow and thoroughly out of sight from anyone. She adjusted her clothes, scanned the level ground around her, then drew from folds in her clothing two daggers, one into each hand.

There was music in death. Actors and musicians knew this as true. And, for this moment, so too did Apsalar.

To a chorus of woe no-one else could hear, the woman in black began the Shadow Dance.

Telorast and Curdle, who had been hiding in a fissure near the flat-topped boulder, now edged forward.

'She's gone into her own world,' Curdle said, nonetheless whispering, her skeletal head bobbing and weaving, tail flicking with unease. Before them, Not-Apsalar danced, so infused with shadows she was barely visible. Barely in this world at all.

'Never cross this one, Curdle,' Telorast hissed. 'Never.'

'Wasn't planning to. Not like you.'

'Not me. Besides, the doom's come upon us – what are we going to do?'

'Don't know.'

'I say we cause trouble, Curdle.'

Tiny jaws clacked. 'I like that.'

Quick Ben rose suddenly. 'I've got no choice,' he said.

Kalam swore, then said, 'I hate it when you say that, Quick.'
The wizard drew out another doll, this one trailing long threads. He set it down a forearm’s reach from the others, then looked over and nodded to Kalam.

Scowling, the assassin unsheathed one of his long-knives and stabbed it point-first into the sand.

‘Not the otataral one, idiot.’

‘Sorry.’ Kalam withdrew the weapon and resheathed it, then drew out the other knife. A second stab into the sand.

Quick Ben knelt, carefully gathering the threads and leading them over to the long-knife’s grip, where he fashioned knots, joining the doll to the weapon. ‘See these go taut—’

‘I grab the knife and pull you back here. I know, Quick, this ain’t the first time, remember?’

‘Right. Sorry.’

The wizard settled back into his cross-legged position.

‘Hold on,’ Fiddler said in a growl. ‘What’s going on here? You ain’t planning something stupid, are you? You are. Damn you, Quick—’

‘Be quiet,’ the wizard said, closing his eyes. ‘Me and Shadowthrone,’ he whispered, ‘we’re old friends.’ Then he smiled.

In the clearing, Kalam fixed his gaze on the doll that was now the only link between Quick Ben and his soul. ‘He’s gone, Fid. Don’t say nothing, I need to concentrate. Those strings could go tight at any time, slow, so slow you can’t even see it happen, but suddenly ...’

‘He should’ve waited,’ Fiddler said. ‘I wasn’t finished saying what I was planning on saying, and he just goes. Kal, I got a bad feeling. Tell me Quick and Shadowthrone really are old friends. Kalam? Tell me Quick wasn’t being sarcastic’

The assassin flicked a momentary look up at the sapper, then licked his lips, returning to his study of the threads. Had they moved? No, not much anyway. ‘He wasn’t being sarcastic, Fid.’

‘Good.’

‘No, more sardonic, I think.’

‘Not good. Listen, can you pull him out right now? I think you should—’

‘Quiet, damn you! I need to watch. I need to concentrate.’ Fid’s got a bad feeling. Shit.

Paran and Noto Boil rode up and halted in the shadow cast by the city wall. The captain dismounted and stepped up to the battered façade. With his dagger he etched a broad, arched line, beginning on his left at the wall’s base, then up, over – taking two paces – and down again, ending at the right-side base. In the centre he slashed a pattern, then stepped back, slipping the knife into its scabbard.

Remounting the horse, he gathered the reins and said, ‘Follow me.’

And he rode forward. His horse tossed its head and stamped its forelegs a moment before plunging into, and through, the wall. They emerged moments later onto a litter-strewn street. The faces of empty, lifeless buildings, windows stove in. A place of devastation, a place where civilization had crumbled, revealing at last its appallingly weak foundations. Picked white bones lay scattered here and there. A glutted rat wobbled its way along the wall’s gutter.

After a long moment, the healer appeared, leading his mount by the reins. ‘My horse,’ he said, ‘is not nearly as stupid as yours, Captain. Alas.’
'Just less experienced,' Paran said, looking round. 'Get back in the saddle. We may be alone for the moment, but that will not last.'

'Gods below,' Noto Boil hissed, scrambling back onto his horse. 'What has happened here?'

'You did not accompany the first group?'

They rode slowly onto the gate avenue, then in towards the heart of G'danisban.

'Dujek's foray? No, of course not. And how I wish the High Fist was still in command.'

_Me too._ 'The Grand Temple is near the central square – where is Solid's Temple?'

'Soliel? Captain Kindly, I cannot enter that place – not ever again.'

'How did you come to be disavowed, Boil?'

_Noto Boil, sir. There was a disagreement ... of a political nature. It may be that the nefarious, incestuous, nepotistic quagmire of a priest's life well suits the majority of its adherents. Unfortunately, I discovered too late that I could not adapt to such an existence. You must understand, actual worship was the least among daily priorities. I made the error of objecting to this unnatural, nay, unholy inversion._

'Very noble of you,' Paran remarked. 'Oddly enough, I heard a different tale about your priestly demise. More specifically, you lost a power struggle at the temple in Kartool. Something about the disposition of the treasury.'

'Clearly, such events are open to interpretation. Tell me, Captain, since you can walk through walls thicker than a man is tall, do you possess magical sensitivities as well? Can you feel the foul hunger in the air? It is hateful. It wants us, our flesh, where it can take root and suck from us every essence of health. This is Poliel's breath, and even now it begins to claim us.'

'We are not alone, cutter.'

'No. I would be surprised if we were. She will spare her followers, her carriers. She will—'

'Quiet,' Paran said, reining in. 'I meant, we are not alone right now.'

Eyes darting, Noto Boil scanned the immediate area. 'There,' he whispered, pointing towards an alley mouth.

They watched as a young woman stepped out from the shadows of the alley. She was naked, frighteningly thin, her eyes dark, large and luminous. Her lips were cracked and split, her hair wild and braided in filth. An urchin who had survived in the streets, a harvester of the discarded, and yet ...

'Not a carrier,' Paran said in a murmur. 'I see about her ... purest health.'

Noto Boil nodded. 'Aye. In spite of her apparent condition. Captain Kindly, this child has been chosen ... by Solid.'

'I take it, not something you even thought possible, back when you were a priest.'

The cutter simply shook his head.

The girl came closer. 'Malazans,' she said, her voice rasping as if from lack of use. 'Once. Years — a year? Once, there were other Malazans. One of them pretended he was a Gral, but I saw the armour under the robes, I saw the sigil of the Bridgeburners, from where I hid beneath a wagon. I was young, but not too young. They saved me, those Malazans. They drew away the hunters. They saved me.'

Paran cleared his throat. 'And so now Soliel chooses you ... to help us.'

Noto Boil said, 'For she has always blessed those who repay kindness.' The cutter's voice was tremulous with wonder. 'Soliel,' he whispered, 'forgive me.'
‘There are hunters,’ the girl said. ‘Coming. They know you are here. Strangers, enemies to the goddess. Their leader holds great hatred, for all things. Bone-scarred, broke-faced, he feeds on the pain he delivers. Come with me—’

‘Thank you,’ Paran said, cutting in, ‘but no. Know that your warning is welcome, but I intend to meet these hunters. I intend to have them lead me to the Grey Goddess.

‘Brokeface will not permit it. He will kill you, and your horse. Your horse first, for he hates such creatures.’

Noto Boil hissed. ‘Captain, please – this is an offer from Soliel—’

‘The offer I expect from Soliel,’ Paran said, tone hardening, ‘will come later. One goddess at a time.’ He readied his horse under him, then hesitated, glanced over at the cutter. ‘Go with her, then. We will meet up at the entrance to the Grand Temple.

‘Captain, what is it you expect of me?’

‘Me? Nothing. What I expect is for Soliel to make use of you, but not as she has done this child here. I expect something a lot more than that.’ Paran nudged his mount forward. ‘And,’ he added amidst clumping hoofs, ‘I won’t take no for an answer.’

Noto Boil watched the madman ride off, up the main avenue, then the healer swung his horse until facing the girl. He drew the fish spine from his mouth and tucked it behind an ear. Then cleared his throat. ‘Goddess ... child. I have no wish to die, but I must point out, that man does not speak for me. Should you smite him down for his disrespect, I most certainly will not see in that anything unjust or undeserving. In fact—’

‘Be quiet, mortal,’ the girl said in a much older voice. ‘In that man the entire world hangs in balance, and I shall not be for ever known as the one responsible for altering that condition. In any way whatsoever. Now, prepare to ride – I shall lead, but I shall not once wait for you should you lose the way.

‘I thought you offered to guide me—’

‘Of lesser priority now,’ she said, smirking. ‘Inverted in a most unholy fashion, you might say. No, what I seek now is to witness. Do you understand? To witness!’ And with that the girl spun round and sped off.

Swearing, the cutter drove heels into his mount's flanks, hard on the girl's trail.

Paran rode at a canter down the main avenue that seemed more a processional route into a necropolis than G'danisban's central artery, until he saw ahead a mob of figures fronted by a single man – in his hands a farmer's scythe from which dangled a blood-crusted horse-tail. The motley army – perhaps thirty or forty in all – looked as if they had been recruited from a paupers' burial pit. Covered in sores and weals, limbs twisted, faces slack, the eyes glittering with madness. Some carried swords, others butcher's cleavers and knives, or spears, shepherd's crooks or stout branches. Most seemed barely able to stand.

Such was not the case with their leader, the one the girl had called Brokeface. The man's visage was indeed pinched misshapen, flesh and bones folded in at right lower jaw, then across the face, diagonally, to the right cheekbone. He had been bitten, the captain realized, by a horse.

... your horse first. For he hates such creatures ...

In that ruined face, the eyes, misaligned in the sunken pits of their sockets, burned bright as they fixed on Paran's own. Something like a smile appeared on the collapsed cave of the man's mouth.

‘Her breath is not sweet enough for you? You are strong to so resist her. She would know, first, who you are. Before,’ his smile twisted further, ‘before we kill you.’

‘The Grey Goddess does not know who I am,’ Paran said, ‘for this reason. From her, I have turned away. From me she can compel nothing.’
Brokeface flinched. 'There is a beast ... in your eyes. Reveal yourself, Malazan. You are not as the others.'

'Tell her,' Paran said, 'I come to make an offering.'

The head cocked to one side. 'You seek to appease the Grey Goddess?'

'In a manner of speaking. But I should tell you, we have very little time.'

'Very little? Why?'

'Take me to her and I will explain. But quickly.'

'She does not fear you.'

'Good.'

The man studied Paran for a moment longer, then he gestured with his scythe. 'Follow, then.'

There had been plenty of altars before which she had knelt over the years, and from them, one and all, Torahaval Delat had discovered something she now held to be true. All that is worshipped is but a reflection of the worshipper. A single god, no matter how benign, is tortured into a multitude of masks, each shaped by the secret desires, hungers, fears and joys of the individual mortal, who but plays a game of obsequious approbation.

Believers lunged into belief. The faithful drowned in their faith.

And there was another truth, one that seemed on the surface to contradict the first one. The gentler and kinder the god, the more harsh and cruel its worshippers, for they hold to their conviction with taut certainty, febrile in its extremity, and so cannot abide dissenters. They will kill, they will torture, in that god's name. And see in themselves no conflict, no matter how bloodstained their hands.

Torahaval's hands were bloodstained, figuratively now but once most literally. Driven to fill some vast, empty space in her soul, she had lunged, she had drowned; she had looked for some external hand of salvation – seeking what she could not find in herself. And, whether benign and love-swollen or brutal and painful, every god's touch had felt the same to her – barely sensed through the numbed obsession that was her need.

She had stumbled onto this present path the same way she had stumbled onto so many others, yet this time, it seemed there could be no going back. Every alternative, every choice, had vanished before her eyes. The first strands of the web had been spun more than fourteen months ago, in her chosen home city Karashimesh, on the shores of the inland Karas Sea – a web she had since, in a kind of lustful wilfulness, allowed to close ever tighter.

The sweet lure from the Grey Goddess, in spirit now the poisoned lover of the Chained One – the seduction of the flawed had proved so very inviting. And deadly. For us both. This was, she realized as she trailed Bridthok down the Aisle of Glory leading to the transept, no more than the spreading of legs before an inevitable, half-invited rape. Regret would come later if at all.

Perhaps, then, a most appropriate end.

*For this foolish woman, who never learned how to live.*

The power of the Grey Goddess swirled in thick tendrils through the battered-down doorway, so virulent as to rot stone.

Awaiting Bridthok and Torahaval at the threshold were the remaining acolytes of this desperate faith. Septhune Anabhin of Omari; and Sradal Purthu, who had fled Y'Ghatan a year ago after a failed attempt to kill that Malazan bitch, Dunsparrow. Both looked shrunken, now, some essence of their souls drained away, dissolving in the miasma like salt in water. Pained terror in their eyes as both turned to watch Bridthok and Torahaval arrive.
'Sribin is dead,' Septhune whispered. 'She will now choose another.'

And so she did.

Invisible, a hand huge and clawed – more fingers than could be insanely conceived – closed about Torahaval's chest, spears of agony sinking deep. A choked gasp burst from her throat and she staggered forward, pushing through the others, all of whom shrank back, gazes swimming with relief and pity – the relief far outweighing the pity. Hatred for them flashed through Torahaval, even as she staggered into the altar chamber; eyes burning in the acid fog of pestilence she lifted her head, and looked upon Poliel.

And saw the hunger that was desire.

The pain expanded, filled her body – then subsided as the clawed hand withdrew, the crusted talons pulling loose.

Torahaval fell to her knees, slid helplessly in her own sweat that had pooled on the mosaic floor beneath her.

Ware what you ask for. Ware what you seek.

The sound of horse hoofs, coming from the Aisle of Glory, getting louder.

A rider comes. A rider? What – who dares this – gods below, thank you, whoever you are. Thank you. She still clung to the edge. A few breaths more, a few more ...

Sneering, Brokeface pushed past the cowering priests at the threshold. Paran scanned the three withered, trembling figures, and frowned as they each in turn knelt at the touch of his regard, heads bowing.

'What ails them?' he asked.

Brokeface's laugh hacked in the grainy air. 'Well said, stranger. You have cold iron in your spine, I'll give you that.'

Idiot. I wasn't trying to be funny.

'Get off that damned horse,' Brokeface said, blocking the doorway. He licked his misshapen lips, both hands shifting on the shaft of the scythe.

'Not a chance,' Paran said. 'I know how you take care of horses.'

'You cannot ride into the altar chamber!'

'Clear the way,' Paran said. 'This beast does not bother biting – it prefers to kick and stamp. Delights in the sound of breaking bones, in fact.'

As the horse, nostrils flared, stepped closer to the doorway, Brokeface flinched, edged back. Then he bared his crooked teeth and hissed, 'Can't you feel her wrath? Her outrage? Oh, you foolish man!'

'Can she feel mine?'

Paran ducked as his horse crossed the threshold. He straightened a moment later. A woman writhed on the tiles to his left, her dark skin streaked in sweat, her long limbs trembling as the plague-fouled air stroked and slipped round her, languid as a lover's caress.

Beyond this woman rose a dais atop three broad, shallow steps on which were scattered the broken fragments of the altar stone. Centred on the dais, where the altar had once stood, was a throne fashioned of twisted, malformed bones. Commanding this seat, a figure radiating such power that her form was barely discernible. Long limbs, suppurating with venom, a bared chest androgynous in its lack of definition, its shrunk frailty; the legs that extended outward seemed to possess too many joints, and the feet were three-toed and taloned, raptorial yet as large as those of an enkar'al. Poliel's eyes were but the faintest of sparks, blurred and damp at the centre of black bowls. Her mouth, broad and the lips cracked and oozing, curled now into a smile.
'Soletaken,' she said in a thin voice, 'do not frighten me. I had thought, for a moment ... but no, you are nothing to me.'

'Goddess,' Paran said, settling back on his horse, 'I remain turned away. The choice is mine, not yours, and so you see only what I will you to see.'

'Who are you? What are you?'

'In normal circumstances, Poliel, I am but an arbiter. I have come to make an offering.'

'You understand, then,' the Grey Goddess said, 'the truth beneath the veil. Blood was their path. And so we choose to poison it.'

Paran frowned, then he shrugged and reached into the folds of his shirt. 'Here is my gift,' he said. Then hesitated. 'I regret, Poliel, that these circumstances ... are not normal.'

The Grey Goddess said, 'I do not understand—'

'Catch!' A small, gleaming object flashed from his hand. She raised hers in defence.

A whispering, strangely thin sound marked the impact. Impaling her hand, a shard of metal. Otataral.

The goddess convulsed, a terrible, animal scream bursting from her throat, ripping the air. Chaotic power, shredding into tatters and spinning away, waves of grey fire charging like unleashed creatures of rage, mosaic tiles exploding in their wake.

On a bridling, skittish horse, Paran watched the conflagration of agony, and wondered, of a sudden, whether he had made a mistake.

He looked down at the mortal woman, curled up on the floor. Then at her fragmented shadow, slashed through by ... nothing. Well, I knew that much. Time's nearly up.

A different throne, this one so faint as to be nothing more than the hint of slivered shadows, sketched across planes of dirty ice – oddly changed, Quick Ben decided, from the last time he had seen it.

As was the thin, ghostly god reclining on that throne. Oh, the hood was the same, ever hiding the face, and the gnarled black hand still perched on the knotted top of the bent walking stick – the perch of a scavenger, like a one-legged vulture – and emanating from the apparition that was Shadowthrone, like some oversweet incense reaching out to brush the wizard's senses, a cloying, infuriating ... smugness. Nothing unusual in all of that. Even so, there was ... something ... 'Delat,' the god murmured, as if tasting every letter of the name with sweet satisfaction.

'Vere not enemies,' Quick Ben said, 'not any longer, Shadowthrone. You cannot be blind to that.'

'Ah but you wish me blind, Delat! Yes yes yes, you do. Blind to the past – to every betrayal, every lie, every vicious insult you have delivered foul as spit at my feet!' 'Circumstances change.'

'Indeed they do!' The wizard could feel sweat trickling beneath his clothes. Something here was ... what? Was very wrong.

'Do you know,' Quick Ben asked, 'why I am here?'
'She has earned no mercy, wizard. Not even from you.'

'I am her brother.'

'There are rituals to sever such ties,' Shadowthrone said, 'and your sister has done them all!'

'Done them all? No, tried them all. There are threads that such rituals cannot touch. I made certain of that. I would not be here otherwise.'

A snort. 'Threads. Such as those you take greatest pleasure in spinning, Adaephon Delat? Of course. It is your finest talent, the weaving of impossible skeins.' The hooded head seemed to wag from side to side as Shadowthrone chanted, 'Nets and snares and traps, lines and hooks and bait, nets and snares and—' Then he leaned forward. 'Tell me, why should your sister be spared? And how – truly, how – do you imagine that I have the power to save her? She is not mine, is she? She's not here in Shadow Keep, is she?' He cocked his head. 'Oh my. Even now she draws her last few breaths ... as the mortal lover of the Grey Goddess – what, pray tell, do you expect me to do?'

Quick Ben stared. The Grey Goddess? Poliel? Oh, Torahaval... 'Wait,' he said, 'Bottle confirmed it – more than instinct – you are involved. Right now, wherever they are, it has something to do with you!'

A spasmodic cackle from Shadowthrone, enough to make the god's thin, insubstantial limbs convulse momentarily. 'You owe me, Adaephon Delat! Acknowledge this and I will send you to her! This instant! Accept the debt!'

Dammit. First Kalam and now me. You bastard, Shadowthrone –

'All right! I owe you! I accept the debt!'

The Shadow God gestured, a lazy wave of one hand.

And Quick Ben vanished.

Alone once again, Shadowthrone settled back in his throne. 'So fraught,' he whispered. 'So ... careless, unmindful of this vast, echoing, mostly empty hall. Poor man. Poor, poor man. Ah, what's this I find in my hand?' He looked over to see a short-handled scythe now gripped and poised before him. The god narrowed his gaze, looked about in the gloomy air, then said, 'Well, look at these! Threads! Worse than cobwebs, these! Getting everywhere – grossly indicative of sloppy ... housekeeping. No, they won't do, won't do at all.' He swept the scythe's blade through the sorcerous tendrils, watched as they spun away into nothingness. 'There now,' he said, smiling, 'I feel more hygienic already.'

Throttled awake by gloved hands at his throat, he flailed about, then was dragged to his knees. Kalam's face thrust close to his own, and in that face, Bottle saw pure terror.

'The threads!' the assassin snarled.

Bottle pushed the man's hands away, scanned the sandy tableau, then grunted. 'Cut clean, I'd say.'

Standing nearby, Fiddler said, 'Go get him, Bottle! Find him – bring him back!'

The young soldier stared at the two men. 'What? How am I supposed to do that? He should never have gone in the first place!' Bottle crawled over to stare at the wizard's blank visage. 'Gone,' he confirmed. 'Straight into Shadowthrone's lair – what was he thinking?'

'Bottle!'

'Oh,' the soldier added, something else catching his gaze, 'look at that – what's she up to, I wonder?'

Kalam pushed Bottle aside and fell to his hands and knees, glaring down at the dolls. Then he shot upright. 'Apsalar! Where is she?'

Fiddler groaned. 'No, not again.'
The assassin had both of his long-knives in his hands. 'Hood take her – where is that bitch?'

Bottle, bemused, simply shrugged as the two men chose directions at random and headed off. *Idiots. This is what they get, though, isn't it? For telling nobody nothing! About anything!* He looked back down at the dolls. *Oh my, this is going to be interesting, isn't it ...?*

'The fool's gone and killed himself,' Captain Sweetcreek said. 'And he took our best healer with him – right through Hood's damned gate!'

Hurlochel stood with crossed arms. 'I don't think—'

'Listen to me,' Sweetcreek snapped, her corporal Futhgar at her side nodding emphatically as she continued. 'I'm now in command, and there's not a single damned thing in this whole damned world that's going to change —'

She never finished that sentence, as a shriek rang out from the north side of the camp, then the air split with thunderous howls – so close, so loud that Hurlochel felt as if his skull was cracking open. Ducking, he spun round to see, cartwheeling above tent-roofs, a soldier, his weapon whipping away – and now the sudden snap of guy-ropes, the earth trembling underfoot—

And a monstrous, black, blurred shape appeared, racing like lightning over the ground – straight for them.

A wave of charged air struck the three like a battering ram a moment before the beast reached them. Hurlochel, all breath driven from his lungs, flew through the air, landing hard on one shoulder, then rolling – caught a glimpse of Captain Sweetcreek tossed to one side, limp as a rag doll, and Futhgar seeming to vanish into the dirt as the midnight creature simply ran right over the hapless man—

*The Hound's eyes—*

Other beasts, bursting through the camp – horses screaming, soldiers shrieking in terror, wagons flung aside before waves of power – and Hurlochel saw one creature – *no, impossible—*

The world darkened alarmingly as he lay in a heap, paralysed, desperate to draw a breath. The spasm clutching his chest loosed suddenly and sheer joy followed the sweet dusty air down into his lungs.

Nearby, the captain was coughing, on her hands and knees, spitting blood.

From Futhgar, a single piteous groan.

Pushing himself upright, Hurlochel turned – saw the Hounds reach the wall of G'danisban – and stared, eyes wide, as a huge section of that massive barrier *exploded,* stone and brick facing shooting skyward above a billowing cloud of dust – then the concussion rolled over them—

A horse galloped past, eyes white with terror—

'Not us!' Sweetcreek gasped, crawling over. 'Thank the gods – just passing through – just—' She began coughing again.

On watery legs, Hurlochel sank down onto his knees. 'It made no sense,' he whispered, shaking his head, as buildings in the city beyond rocked and blew apart—

'What?'

He looked across at Sweetcreek. *You don't understand – I looked into that black beast's eyes, woman! I saw ... I saw —'*

'What?'

*I saw pure terror—*
The earth rumbled anew. A resurgence of screams – and he turned, even as five huge shapes appeared, tearing wide, relentless paths through the encamped army – big, bigger than – oh, gods below—

‘He said to wait—’ Noto Boil began, then wailed as his horse flinched so hard he would later swear he heard bones breaking, then the beast wheeled from the temple entrance and bolted, peeling the cutter from its back like a wood shaving.

He landed awkwardly, felt and heard ribs crack, the pain vanishing before a more pressing distress, that being the fish spine lodged halfway down his throat.

Choking, sky darkening, eyes bulging—

Then the girl hovering over him. Frowning for a lifetime.

Stupid stupid stupid—

Before she reached into his gaping mouth, then gently withdrew the spine.

Whimpering behind that first delicious breath, Noto Boil closed his eyes, becoming aware once again that those indrawn breaths in fact delivered stabbing agony across his entire chest. He opened tear-filled eyes.

The girl still loomed over him, but her attention was, it seemed, elsewhere. Not even towards the temple entrance – but down the main avenue.

Where someone was pounding infernal drums, the thunder making the cobbles shiver and jump beneath him – causing yet more pain –

And this day started so well ...

‘Not Soletaken,’ Paran was saying to the goddess writhing on her throne, the pierced hand and its otataral spike pinning her here, to this realm, to this dreadful extremity, ‘not Soletaken at all, although it might at first seem so. Alas, Poliel, more complicated than that. My outrider’s comment earlier, regarding my eyes – well, that was sufficient, and from those howls we just heard, it turns out the timing is about right.’

The captain glanced down once more at the woman on the tiles. Unconscious, perhaps dead. He didn’t think the Hounds would bother with her. Gathering the reins, he straightened in his saddle. ‘I can’t stay, I’m afraid. But let me leave you with this: you made a terrible mistake. Fortunately, you won’t have long to regret it.’

Concussions in the city, coming ever closer.

‘Mess with mortals, Poliel,’ he said, wheeling his horse round, ‘and you pay.’

The man named Brokeface – who had once possessed another name, another life – cowered to one side of the altar chamber’s entranceway. The three priests had fled back down the hallway. He was, for the moment, alone. So very alone. All over again. A poor soldier of the rebellion, young and so proud back then – shattered in one single moment.

A Gral horse, a breath thick with the reek of wet grass, teeth like chisels driving down through flesh, through bone, taking everything away. He had become an unwelcome mirror to ugliness, for every face turning upon his own had twisted in revulsion, or worse, morbid fascination. And new fears had sunk deep, hungry roots into his soul, flinching terrors that ever drove him forward, seeking to witness pain and suffering in others, seeking to make of his misery a legion, soldiers to a new cause, each as broken as he.

Poliel had arrived, like a gift – and now that bastard had killed her, was killing her even now – taking everything away. Again.

Horse hoofs skidded on tiles and he shrank back further as the rider and his mount passed through the
doorway, the beast lifting from trot to canter down the wide corridor.

Brokeface stared after them with hatred in his eyes.

Lost. All lost.

He looked into the altar chamber—

Quick Ben landed cat-like; then, in the cascade of virulent agony sloughing from the imprisoned goddess not three paces to his right, he collapsed onto his stomach, hands over his head. OK, very funny, Shadowthrone. He turned his head and saw Torahaval, lying motionless an arm's reach to his left.

Poor girl – I should never have tormented her so. But ... show me a merciful child and I will truly avow a belief in miracles, and I'll throw in my back-pay besides. It was her over-sensitivity that done her in. Still, what's life without a few thousand regrets?

There was otataral in this room. He needed to collect her and drag her clear, back outside. Not so hard, once he was out of this chaotic madhouse. So, it turned out – to his astonishment – that Shadowthrone had played it true.

It was then that he heard the howl of the Hounds, in thundering echo from the hallway.

Paran emerged from the tunnel then sawed his horse hard to the left, narrowly avoiding Shan – the huge black beast plunging past, straight into the Grand Temple. Rood followed, then Baran – and in Baran's enormous jaws a hissing, reptilian panther, seeking to slow its captor down with unsheathed talons scoring the cobbles, to no avail. In their wake, Blind and Gear.

As Gear raced into the temple, the Hound loosed a howl, a sound savage with glee – as of some long-awaited vengeance moments from consummation.

Paran stared after them for a moment, then saw Noto Boil, lying down, the nameless girl hovering over him. 'For Hood's sake,' he snapped. 'There's no time for that – get him on his feet. Soliel, we're now going to your temple. Boil, where in the Abyss is your horse?'

Straightening, the girl looked back up the street. 'My sister's death approaches,' she said.

The captain followed her gaze. And saw the first of the Deragoth.

Oh, I started all this, didn't I?

Behind them the temple shook to a massive, wallcracking concussion.

'Time to go!'

Quick Ben grasped his sister by the hood of her robe, began dragging her towards the back of the chamber, already realizing it was pointless. The Hounds had come for him, and he was in a chamber suffused with otataral.

Shadowthrone never played fair, and the wizard had to admit he'd been outwitted this time. And this time's about to be my last—

He heard claws rushing closer down the hallway and looked up—

Brokeface stared at the charging beast. A demon. A thing of beauty, of purity. And for him, there was nothing else, nothing left. Yes, let beauty slay me.

He stepped into the creature's path—
And was shouldered aside, hard enough to crack his head against the wall, momentarily stunning him. He lost his footing and fell on his backside—darkness, swirling, billowing shadows—

Even as the demon loomed above him, he saw another figure, lithe, clothed entirely in black, knife-blades slashing out, cutting deep along the beast’s right shoulder.

The demon shrieked—pain, outrage—as, skidding, it twisted round to face this new attacker.

Who was no longer there, who was somehow now on its opposite side, limbs weaving, every motion strangely blurred to Brokeface’s wide, staring eyes. The knives licked out once more. Flinching back, the demon came up against the wall opposite, ember eyes flaring.

From down the hallway, more demons were approaching, yet slowing their ferocious pace, claws clattering—

As the figure moved suddenly among them. The gleam of the blades, now red, seemed to dance in the air, here, there, wheeling motion from the figure, arms writhing like serpents; and with matching grace, he saw a foot lash out, connect with a beast’s head—which was as big as a horse’s, only wider—and that head snapped round at the impact, shoulders following, then torso, twisting round in strange elegance as the entire demon was lifted into the air, backend now vertical, head down, in time to meet the side wall.

Where bricks exploded, the wall crumbling, caving in to some room beyond, the demon’s body following into the cloud of dust.

Wild, crowded confusion in the hallway, and suddenly the figure stood motionless at Brokeface’s side, daggers still out, dripping blood.

A woman, black-haired, now blocking the doorway.

Skittering sounds along the tiles, and he looked down to see two small, bird-like skeletons flanking her. Their snouts were open and hissing sounds emerged from those empty throats. Spiny tails lashed back and forth. One darted forward, a single hop, head dipping—

And the gathered demons flinched back.

Another reptilian hiss, this one louder—coming from a creature trapped in one demon’s jaws. Brokeface saw in its terrible eyes a deathly fear, rising to panic—

The woman spoke quietly, clearly addressing Brokeface: ‘Follow the wizard and his sister—they found a bolt-hole behind the dais—enough time, I think, to make good their escape. And yours, if you go now.’

‘I don’t want to,’ he said, unable to keep from weeping. ‘I just want to die.’

That turned her gaze from the demons facing her.

He looked up into exquisite, elongated eyes, black as ebony. And in her face, there was no mirror, no twist of revulsion. No, naught but a simple regard, and then, something that might have been…sorrow.

‘Go to the Temple of Soliel,’ she said.

‘She is ever turned away—’

‘Not today she isn’t. Not with Ganoes Paran holding her by the scruff of her neck. Go. Be healed.’

This was impossible, but how could he deny her?

‘Hurry, I don’t know how Curdle and Telorast are managing this threat, and there’s no telling how long it will last—’

Even as she said those words, a bellowing roar came from further down the hallway, and the demons bunched close before the threshold, yelping in desperate frenzy.
'That's it,' she murmured, lifting her knives.

Brokeface leapt to his feet and ran into the altar chamber.

Disbelief. Quick Ben could not understand what had held the Hounds up – he'd caught sounds, of fighting, fierce, snapping snarls, squeals of pain, and in one glance back, moments before carrying Torahaval through the back passage, he'd thought he'd seen ... something. Someone, ghostly in shadows, commanding the threshold.

Whatever this chance clash, it had purchased his life. And his sister's. Currency Quick Ben would not squander.

Throwing Torahaval over his shoulder, he entered the narrow corridor and ran as fast as he could manage.

Before too long he heard someone in pursuit. Swearing, Quick Ben swung round, the motion crunching Torahaval's head against a wall – at which she moaned.

A man, his face deformed – no, horse-bitten, the wizard realized – rushed to close. 'I will help you,' he said. 'Quickly! Doom comes into this temple!'

Had it been this man facing down the Hounds? No matter. 'Take her legs then, friend. As soon as we're off sanctified ground, we can get the Hood out of here—'

As the Hounds gathered to rush Apsalar, she sheathed her knives and said, 'Curdle, Telorast, stop your hissing. Time to leave.'

'You're no fun, Not-Apsalar!' Curdle cried.

'No she isn't, is she?' Telorast said, head bobbing in vague threat motions, that were now proving less effective.

'Where is she?' Curdle demanded.

'Gone!'

'Without us!'

'After her!'

Poliel, Grey Goddess of pestilence, of disease and suffering, was trapped in her own tortured nightmare. All strength gone, all will bled away. The shard of deadly otataral impaling her hand, she sat on her throne, convulsions racking her.

Betrayals, too many betrayals – the Crippled God's power had fled, abandoning her – and that unknown mortal, that cold-eyed murderer, who had understood nothing. In whose name? For whose liberation was this war being fought? The damned fool.

What curse was it, in the end, to see flaws unveiled, to see the twisted malice of mortals dragged to the surface, exposed to day's light? Who among these followers did not ever seek, wilful or mindless, the purity of self-destruction? In obsession they took death into themselves, but that was but a paltry reflection of the death they delivered upon the land, the water, the very air. Self-destruction making victim the entire world.

Apocalypse is rarely sudden; no, among these mortals, it creeps slow, yet inevitable, relentless in its thorough obliteration of life, of health, of beauty.

Diseased minds and foul souls had drawn her into this world; for the sake of the land, for the chance that it might heal in the absence of its cruellest inflicters of pain and degradation, she sought to expunge them in the breath of plague – no more deserving a fate was imaginable – for all that, she would now die.
She railed. Betrayal!

Five Hounds of Shadow entered the chamber.

Her death. Shadowthrone, you fool.

A Hound flung something from its mouth, something that skidded, spitting and writhing, up against the first step of the dais.

Even in her agony, a core of clarity remained within Poliel. She looked down, seeking to comprehend – even as the Hounds fled the room, round the dais, into the priest-hole – comprehend this cowering, scaled panther, one limb swollen with infection, its back legs and hips crushed – it could not flee. The Hounds had abandoned it here – why?

Ah, to share my fate.

A final thought, meekly satisfying in itself, as the Deragoth arrived, bristling with rage and hunger, Elder as any god, deprived of one quarry, but content to kill what remained.

A broken T'rolbarahl, shrieking its terror and fury.

A broken goddess, who had sought to heal Burn. For such was the true purpose of fever, such was the cold arbiter of disease. Only humans, she reminded herself – her last thought – only humans centre salvation solely upon themselves.

And then the Deragoth, the first enslavers of humanity, were upon her.

'She's a carrier now,' Brokeface said, 'and more. No longer protected, the plague runs wild within her, no matter what happens to Poliel. Once begun, these things follow their own course. Please,' he added as he watched the man attempt to awaken Torahaval, 'come with me.'

The stranger looked up with helpless eyes. 'Come? Where?'

'The Temple of Soliel.'

'That indifferent bitch—'

'Please,' Brokeface insisted. 'You will see. I cannot help but believe her words.'

'Whose words?'

'It's not far. She must be healed.' And he reached down once more, collecting the woman's legs. 'As before. It's not far.'

The man nodded.

Behind them, a single shriek rose from the temple, piercing enough to send fissures rippling through the building's thick walls, dust snapping out from the cracks. Groaning sounds pushed up from beneath them as foundations buckled, tugging at the surrounding streets.

'We must hurry away!' Brokeface said.

Dismounting, dragging a stumbling, gasping Noto Boil with one hand, Paran kicked down the doors to the Temple of Soliel – a modest but most satisfying burst of power that was sufficient, he trusted, to apprise the Sweet Goddess of his present frame of mind.

The girl slipped past him as he crossed the threshold and cast him a surprisingly delighted glance as she hurried ahead to the central chamber.
On the corridor's walls, paintings of figures kneeling, heads bowed in blessing, beseeching or despair – likely the latter with this damned goddess, Paran decided. Depending in folds from the arched ceiling were funeral shrouds, no doubt intended to prepare worshippers for the worst.

They reached the central chamber even as the ground shook – the Grand Temple was collapsing. Paran pulled Noto Boil to his side, then pushed him stumbling towards the altar. *With luck it'll bury the damned Deragoth. But I'm not holding my breath.*

He drew out a card and tossed it onto the floor. *'Soliel, you are summoned.'*

The girl, who had been standing to the right of the altar, suddenly sagged, then looked up, blinking owlishly. Her smile broadened.

Paran vowed, then, that he would seek to recall every detail of the goddess's upon her enforced appearance, so exquisite her bridling fury. She stood behind the altar, as androgynous as her now-dead sister, her long fingers – so perfect for closing eyelids over unseeing eyes – clutching, forming fists at her side, as she said in a grating voice, *'You have made a terrible mistake—'*

*I'm not finished yet,' he replied. 'Unleash your power, Soliel. Begin the healing. You can start with Noto Boil here, in whom you shall place a residue of your power, sufficient in strength and duration to effect the healing of the afflicted in the encamped army outside the city. Once you are done with him, others will arrive, Poliel's cast-offs. Heal them as well, and send them out—' His voice hardened. 'Seven Cities has suffered enough, Soliel'*

She seemed to study him for a long moment, then she shrugged. *'Very well. As for suffering, I leave that to you, and through no choice of mine.'*

Paran frowned, then turned at a surprised shout from behind them.

The captain blinked, and grinned. *'Quick Ben!'*

The wizard and Brokeface were dragging a woman between them – the one he had last seen in the altar chamber of the Grand Temple – and all at once, Paran understood. Then, immediately thereafter, realized that he understood ... nothing.

Quick Ben looked up at the altar and his eyes narrowed. *'That her? Hood's breath, I never thought ... never mind. Ganoes Paran, this was all by your hand? Did you know the Hounds were for me?'

'Not entirely, although I see how you might think that way. You bargained with Shadowthrone, didn't you? For,' he gestured at the unconscious woman, 'her.'*

The wizard scowled. *'My sister.'*

'*He has released the Deragoth,' Soliel said, harsh and accusory. 'They tore her apart!'

Quick Ben's sister moaned, tried gathering her legs under her.

'Shit,' the wizard muttered. 'I'd better leave. Back to the others. Before she comes round.'*

Paran sighed and crossed his arms. *'Really, Quick—'*

'You more than anybody should know about a sister's wrath!' the wizard snapped, stepping away. He glanced over at Brokeface, who stood, transfixed, staring up at Soliel. 'Go on,' he said. 'You were right. Go to her.'*

With a faint whimper, Brokeface stumbled forward.

Paran watched as Quick Ben opened a warren.

The wizard hesitated, looked over at the captain. *'Ganoes,' he said, 'tell me something.'*

'*What?*
‘Tavore. Can we trust her?’

The question felt like a slap, stinging, sudden. He blinked, studied the man, then said, ‘Tavore will do, wizard, what needs to be done.’

‘To suit her or her soldiers?’ Quick Ben demanded.

‘For her, friend, there is no distinction.’

Their gazes locked for a moment longer, then the wizard sighed. ‘I owe you a tankard of ale when it’s all over.’

‘I will hold you to it, Quick.’

The wizard flashed that memorable, infuriating grin, and vanished into the portal.

As it whispered shut behind him, the woman, his sister, lifted herself to her hands and knees. Her hair hung down, obscuring her face, but Paran could hear her clearly as she said, ‘There was a wolf.’

He cocked his head. ‘A Hound of Shadow.’

‘A wolf,’ she said again. ‘The loveliest, sweetest wolf in the world …’

Quick Ben opened his eyes and looked around.

Bottle sat across from him, the only one present in the clearing. From somewhere nearby there was shouting, angry, sounds of rising violence. ‘Nicely done,’ Bottle said. ‘Shadowthrone threw you right into their path, so much of you that, had the Hounds caught you, I’d now be burying this carcass of yours. You used his warren to get here. Very nice – a thread must’ve survived, wizard, one even Shadowthrone didn’t see.’

‘What’s going on?’

The soldier shrugged. ‘Old argument, I think. Kalam and Fiddler found Apsalar – with blood on her knives. They figure you’re dead, you see, though why—’

Quick Ben was already on his feet. And running.

The scene he came upon moments later was poised on the very edge of disaster. Kalam was advancing on Apsalar, his long-knives out, the otataral blade in the lead position. Fiddler stood to one side, looking both angry and helpless.

And Apsalar. She simply faced the burly, menacing assassin. No knives in her hands and something like resignation in her expression.

‘Kalam!’

The man whirled, as did Fiddler.

‘Quick!’ the sapper shouted. ‘We found her! Blood on the blades – and you—’

‘Enough of all that,’ the wizard said. ‘Back away from her, Kalam.’

The assassin shrugged, then scabbarded his weapons. ‘She wasn’t big on explanations,’ he said in a frustrated growl. ‘As usual. And I would swear, Quick, she was wanting this—’

‘Wanting what?’ he demanded. ‘Did she have her knives out? Is she in a fighting stance, Kalam? Is she not a Shadow Dancer? You damned idiot!’ He glared at Apsalar, and in a lower voice, added, ‘What she wants … ain’t for us to give …’

Boots on stones sounded behind him, and Quick Ben swung round to see Bottle, at his side Captain Faradan Sort.
'There you all are,' the captain said, clearly struggling to keep her curiosity in check. 'We're about to march. With luck, we'll reach the Fourteenth this night. Sinn seems to think so, anyway.'

'That's good news,' Quick Ben said. 'Lead on, Captain, we're right with you.'

Yet he held back, until Apsalar walked past him, then he reached out and brushed her sleeved arm.

She looked over.

Quick Ben hesitated, then nodded and said, 'I know it was you, Apsalar. Thank you.'

'Wizard,' she said, 'I have no idea what you are talking about.'

He let her go. No, what she wants ain't for us to give. She wants to die.

Layered in dust, wan with exhaustion, Cotillion strode into the throne room, then paused.

The Hounds were gathered before the Shadow Throne, two lying down, panting hard, tongues lolling. Shan paced in a circle, the black beast twitching, its flanks slashed and dripping blood. And, Cotillion realized, there were wounds on the others as well.

On the throne sat Shadowthrone, his form blurred as if within a roiling storm-cloud. 'Look at them,' he said in a low, menacing voice. 'Look well, Cotillion.'

'The Deragoth?'

'No, not the Deragoth.'

'No, I suppose not. Those look like knife cuts.'

'I had him. Then I lost him.'

'Had who?'

'That horrid little thousand-faced wizard, that's who!' A shadowy hand lifted, long fingers curling. 'I had him, here in this very palm, like a melting piece of ice.' A sudden snarl, the god tilting forward on the throne. 'It's all your fault!'

Cotillion blinked. 'Hold on, I didn't attack the Hounds!'

'That's what you think!'

'What is that supposed to mean?' Cotillion demanded.

The other hand joined the first one, hovering, clutching the air in spasmodic, trembling rage. Then another snarl – and the god vanished.

Cotillion looked down at Baran, reached out towards the beast.

At a low growl, he snatched his hand back. 'I didn't!' he shouted.

The Hounds, one and all staring at him, did not look convinced.

Dusk muted the dust in the air above the camp as Captain Ganoes Paran – leading his horse – and the cutter Noto Boil, and the girl – whose name was Naval D'natha – climbed the slope and passed through the first line of pickets.

The entire camp looked as if it had been struck by a freak storm. Soldiers worked on repairing tents, re-spooling ropes, carrying stretchers. Horses loose from their paddocks still wandered about, too skittish to permit anyone close enough to take their bits.
'The Hounds,' Paran said. 'They came through here. As did, I suspect, the Deragoth. Damned unfortunate – I hope there weren't too many injuries.'

Noto Boil glanced over at him, then sneered. 'Captain Kindly? You have deceived us. Ganoes Paran, a name to be found on the List of the Fallen in Dujek's own logs.'

'A name with too many questions hanging off it, cutter.'

'Do you realize, Captain, that the two remaining Malazan armies in Seven Cities are commanded by brother and sister? For the moment at least. Once Dujek's back on his feet—'

'A moment,' Paran said.

Hurlochel and Sweetcreek were standing outside the command tent. Both had seen Paran and his companions.

Something in the outrider's face ...

They reached them. 'Hurlochel?' Paran asked.

The man looked down.

Sweetcreek cleared her throat. 'High Fist Dujek Onearm died two bells ago, Captain Paran.'

'As for suffering, I leave that to you, and through no choice of mine.'

She had known. Soliel had already known.

Sweetcreek was still talking, '... fever broke a short while ago. They're conscious, they've been told who you are – Ganoes Paran, are you listening to me? They've read Dujek's logs – every officer among us has read them. It was required. Do you understand? The vote was unanimous. We have proclaimed you High Fist. This is now your army.'

She had known.

All he had done here ... too late.

_Dujek Onearm is dead._
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The privileged waifs are here now, preening behind hired armies, and the legless once-soldier who leans crooked against a wall like a toppled, broken statue— writ on his empty palm the warning that even armies cannot eat gold— but these civil younglings cannot see so far and for their own children, the future's road is already picked clean, cobbles pried free to build rough walls and decrepit wastrel shelters, yet this is a wealthy world still heaving its blood-streaked treasures at their silken feet – they are here now, the faces of civilization and oh how we fallen fools yearn to be among them, fellow feasters at the bottomless trough. What is to come of this? I rest crooked, hard stone at my back, and this lone coin settling in my hand has a face— some ancient waif privileged in his time, who once hid behind armies, yes, until – until those armies awoke one day with empty bellies – such pride, such hauteur! Look on the road! From this civil strait I would run, and run – if only I had not fought, defending that mindless devourer of tomorrow, if only I had legs— so watch them pass, beneath their parasols and the starving multitudes are growing sullen, now eyeing me in their avid hunger— I would run, yes, if only I had legs.

In the Last Days of the First Empire
Sogruntes

A single strand of black sand, four hundred paces long, broke the unrelieved basalt ruin of the coastline. That strip was now obscured beneath ramps, equipment, horses and soldiers; and the broad loader skiffs rocked through the shallows on their heavy draw-lines out to the anchored transports crowding the bay. For three days the Fourteenth Army had been embarking, making their escape from this diseased land.

Fist Keneb watched the seeming chaos down below for a moment longer, then, drawing his cloak tighter about himself against the fierce north sea's wind, he turned about and made his way back to the skeletal remnants of the encampment.

There were problems – almost too many to consider. The mood among the soldiers was a complex mixture of relief, bitterness, anger and despondency. Keneb had seriously begun to fear mutiny during the wait for the fleet – the embers of frustration fanned by dwindling supplies of food and water. It was likely the lack of options that had kept the army tractable, if sullen – word from every city and settlement west, east and south had been of plague. Bluetongue, ferocious in its virulence, sparing no-one. The only escape was with the fleet.

Keneb could understand something of the soldiers' sentiments. The Fourteenth's heart had been cut out at Y'Ghatan. It was extraordinary how a mere handful of veterans could prove the lifeblood of thousands, especially when, to the Fist's eyes, they had done nothing to earn such regard.

Perhaps survival alone had been sufficiently heroic. Survival, until Y'Ghatan. In any case, there was a palpable absence in the army, a hole at the core, gnawing its way outward.

Compounding all this, the command was growing increasingly divided – for we have our own core of rot. Tene Baralta. The Red Blade ... who lasts for his own death. There were no healers in the Fourteenth skilled enough to erase the terrible damage to Baralta's visage; it would take High Denul to regenerate the man's lost eye and forearm, and that was a talent growing ever rarer – at least in the Malazan Empire. If only Tene had also lost the capacity for speech. Every word from him was bitter with poison, a burgeoning hatred for all things, beginning with himself.

Approaching the Adjunct's command tent, Keneb saw Nether exit, her expression dark, bridling. The cattle-dog Bent appeared, lumbering towards her – then, sensing her state of mind, the huge scarred beast halted, ostensibly to scratch itself, and moments later was distracted by the Hengese lapdog Roach. The two trundled off.

Drawing a deep breath, Keneb walked up to the young Wickan witch. 'I take it,' he said, 'the Adjunct was not pleased with your report.'
She glared at him. 'It is not our fault, Fist. This plague seethes through the warrens. We have lost all contact with Dujek and the Host; ever since they arrived outside G'danisban. And as for Pearl,' she crossed her arms, 'we cannot track him – he is gone and that is that. Besides, if the fool wants to brave the warrens it's not for us to retrieve his bones.'

The only thing worse than a Claw in camp was the sudden, inexplicable vanishing of that selfsame Claw. Not that there was anything that could be done about it. Keneb asked, 'How many days has it been, then, since you were able to speak with High Fist Dujek?'

The young Wickan looked away, her arms still crossed. 'Since before Y'Ghatan.'

Keneb's brows rose. That long? Adjunct, you tell us so little. 'What of Admiral Nok – have his mages had better luck?'

'Worse,' she snapped. 'At least we're on land.'

'For now,' he said, eyeing her.

Nether scowled. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, except ... a frown like that can become permanent – you're too young to have such deep creases there—'

Snarling, the witch stalked off.

Keneb stared after her a moment, then, shrugging, he turned and entered the command tent.

The canvas walls still reeked of smoke, a grim reminder of Y'Ghatan. The map-table remained – not yet loaded out onto the transports – and around it, despite the fact that the tabletop was bare – stood the Adjunct, Blistig and Admiral Nok.

'Fist Keneb,' Tavore said.

'Two more days, I should think,' he replied, unclasping his cloak now that he was out of the wind.

The Admiral had been speaking, it seemed, for he cleared his throat and said, 'I still believe, Adjunct, that there is nothing untoward to the command. The Empress sees no further need for the Fourteenth's presence here. There is also the matter of the plague – you have managed to keep it from your troops thus far, true enough, but that will not last. Particularly once your stores run out and you are forced to forage.'

Blistig grunted sourly. 'No harvest this year. Apart from abandoned livestock there ain't much to forage – we'd have no choice but to march to a city.'

'Precisely,' said the Admiral.

Keneb glanced at Tavore. 'Forgive me, Adjunct—'

'After I sent you out to gauge the loading of troops, the subject of command structure was concluded, to the satisfaction of all.' A certain dryness to that, and Blistig snorted. Tavore continued, 'Admiral Nok has finally relayed to us the command of the Empress, that we are to return to Unta. The difficulty before us now lies in deciding our return route.'

Keneb blinked. 'Why, east and then south, of course. The other way would take—'

'Longer, yes,' Nok interrupted. 'Nonetheless, at this time of year, we would be aided by currents and prevailing winds. Granted, the course is less well charted, and most of our maps for the western coast of this continent are derived from foreign sources, making their reliability open to challenge.' He rubbed at his weathered, lined face. 'All of that is, alas, not relevant. The issue is the plague. Adjunct, we have sought one port after another on our way to this rendezvous, and not one was safe to enter. Our own supplies are perilously low.'
Blistig asked, 'So where do you believe we can resupply anywhere west of here, Admiral?'

'Sepik, to begin with. The island is remote, sufficiently so that I believe it remains plague-free. South of that, there is Nemil, and a number of lesser kingdoms all the way down to Shal-Morzinn. From the southern tip of the continent the journey down to the northwest coast of Quon Tali is in fact shorter than the Falar lanes. Once we have cleared the risk that is Drift Avalii we will find ourselves in the Genii Straits, with the coast of Dal Hon to our north. At that time the currents will once again be with us.'

'All very well,' Blistig said in a growl, 'but what happens if Nemil and those other "lesser kingdoms" decide they're not interested in selling us food and fresh water?'

'We shall have to convince them,' the Adjunct said, 'by whatever means necessary.'

'Let's hope it's not by the sword.'

As soon as Blistig said that his regret was obvious – the statement should have sounded reasonable; instead, it simply revealed the man's lack of confidence in the Adjunct's army.

She was regarding her Fist now, expressionless, yet a certain chill crept into the chamber, filling the silence.

On Admiral Nok's face, a look of disappointment. Then he reached for his sealskin cloak. 'I must return now to my flagship. Thrice on our journey here, the outrider escorts sighted an unknown fleet to the north. No doubt the sightings were mutual but no closer contact occurred, so I believe it poses no threat to us.'

'A fleet,' Keneb said. 'Nemil?'

'Possibly. There was said to be a Meckros city west of Sepik Sea – that report is a few years old. Then again,' he glanced over at the Adjunct as he reached the flap, 'how fast can a floating city move? In any case, Meckros raid and trade, and it may well be that Nemil has dispatched ships to ward them from their coast.'

They watched the Admiral leave.

Blistig said, 'Your pardon, Adjunct—'

'Save your apology,' she cut in, turning away from him. 'One day I shall call upon you, Blistig, to voice it again. But not to me; rather, to your soldiers. Now, please visit Fist Tene Baralta and relay to him the essence of this meeting.'

'He has no interest—'

'His interests do not concern me, Fist Blistig.'

Lips pressed together, the man saluted, then left.

'A moment,' the Adjunct said as Keneb prepared to follow suit. 'How fare the soldiers, Fist?'

He hesitated, then said, 'For the most part, Adjunct, they are relieved.'

'I am not surprised,' she said.

'Shall I inform them that we are returning home?'

She half-smiled. 'I have no doubt the rumour is already among them. By all means, Fist. There is no reason to keep it a secret.'

'Unta,' Keneb mused, 'my wife and children are likely there. Of course, it stands to reason that the Fourteenth will not stay long in Unta.'

'True. Our ranks will be refilled.'

'And then?'
She shrugged. 'Korel, I expect. Nok thinks the assault on Theft will be renewed.'

It was a moment before Keneb realized that she did not believe a word she was saying to him. Why not Korel! What might Laseen have in store for us, if not another campaign? What does Tavore suspect? He hid his confusion by fumbling over the cloak's clasps for a few heartbeats.

When he glanced up again, the Adjunct seemed to be staring at one of the tent's mottled walls.

Standing, always standing – he could not recall ever having seen her seated, except on a horse. 'Adjunct?'

She started, then nodded and said, 'You are dismissed, Keneb.'

He felt like a coward as he made his way outside, angry at his own sense of relief. Still, a new unease now plagued him. Unta. His wife. What was, is no longer. I'm old enough to know the truth of that. Things change. We change—

'Make it three days.'

Keneb blinked, looked down to see Grub, flanked by Bent and Roach. The huge cattle-dog's attention was fixed elsewhere – southeastward – while the lapdog sniffed at one of Grub's worn moccasins, where the child's big toe protruded from a split in the upper seam. 'Make what three days, Grub?'

'Until we leave. Three days.' The boy wiped his nose.

'Dig into one of the spare kits,' Keneb said, 'and find some warmer clothes, Grub. This sea is a cold one, and it's going to get colder yet.'

'I'm fine. My nose runs, but so does Bent's, so does Roach's. We're fine. Three days.'

'We'll be gone in two.'

'No. It has to be three days, or we will never get anywhere. We'll die in the sea, two days after we leave Sepik Island.'

A chill rippled through the Fist. 'How did you know we were headed west, Grub?'

The boy looked down, watched as Roach licked clean his big toe. 'Sepik, but that will be bad. Nemil will be good. Then bad. And after that, we find friends, twice. And then we end up where it all started, and that will be very bad. But that's when she realizes everything, almost everything, I mean, enough of everything to be enough. And the big man with the cut hands says yes.' He looked up, eyes bright. 'I found a bone whistle and I'm keeping it for him because he'll want it back. We're off to collect seashells!'

With that all three ran off, down towards the beach.

*Three days, not two. Or we all die.* 'Don't worry, Grub,' he said in a whisper, 'not all grown-ups are stupid.'

Lieutenant Pores looked down at the soldier's collection. 'What in Hood's name are these?'

'Bones, sir,' the woman replied. 'Bird bones. They was coming out of the cliff – look, they're hard as rock – we're going to add them to our collection, us heavies, I mean.

Hanfeno, he's drilling holes in 'em – the others, I mean, we got hundreds. You want us to make you some, sir?'

'Give me a few,' he said, reaching out.

She dropped into his hand two leg bones, each the length of his thumb, then another that looked like a knuckle, slightly broader than his own. 'You idiot. This one's not from a bird.'

'Well I don't know, sir. Could be a skull?'
'It's solid.'

'A woodpecker?'

'Go back to your squad, Senny. When are you on the ramp?'

'Looks like tomorrow now, sir. Fist Keneb's soldiers got delayed – he pulled half of 'em back off, it was complete chaos! There's no figuring officers, uh, sir.'

A wave sent the woman scurrying. Lieutenant Pores nestled the small bones into his palm, closing his fingers over to hold them in place, then he walked back to where Captain Kindly stood beside the four trunks that comprised his camp kit. Two retainers were busy repacking one of the trunks, and Pores saw, arranged on a camel-hair blanket, an assortment of combs – two dozen, maybe more, no two alike. Bone, shell, antler, tortoiseshell, ivory, wood, slate, silver, gold and blood-copper. Clearly, they had been collected over years of travel, the captain's sojourn as a soldier laid out, the succession of cultures, the tribes and peoples he had either befriended or annihilated. Even so … Pores frowned. Combs? Kindly was mostly bald.

The captain was instructing his retainers on how to pack the items. '... those cotton buds, and the goat wool or whatever you call it. Each one, and carefully – if I find a scratch, a nick or a broken tooth I will have no choice but to kill you both. Ah, Lieutenant, I trust you are now fully recovered from your wounds? Good. What's wrong, man? Are you choking?'

Gagging, his face reddening, Pores waited until Kindly stepped closer, then he let loose a cough, loud and bursting and from his right hand – held before his mouth – three bones were spat out to clunk and bounce on the ground. Pores drew in a deep breath, shook his head and cleared his throat.

'Apologies, Captain,' he said in a rasp. 'Some broken bones still in me, I guess. Been wanting to come out for a while now.'

'Well,' Kindly said, 'are you done?'

'Yes sir.'

The two retainers were staring at the bones. One reached over and collected the knuckle.

Pores wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. 'That was some cough, wasn't it? I'd swear someone punched me in the gut.'

The retainer reached over with the knuckle. 'He left you this, Lieutenant.'

'Ah, thank you, soldier.'

'If you think any of this is amusing, Lieutenant,' Kindly said. 'You are mistaken. Now, explain to me this damned delay'

'I can't, Captain. Fist Keneb's soldiers, some kind of recall. There doesn't seem to be a reasonable explanation.'

'Typical. Armies are run by fools. If I had an army you'd see things done differently. I can't abide lazy soldiers. I've personally killed more lazy soldiers than enemies of the empire. If this was my army, Lieutenant, we would have been on those ships in two days flat, and anybody still on shore by then we'd leave behind, stripped naked with only a crust of bread in their hands and the order to march to Quon Tali.'

'Across the sea.'

'I'm glad we're understood. Now, stand here and guard my kit, Lieutenant. I must find my fellow captains Madan'tul Rada and Ruthan Gudd – they're complete idiots but I mean to fix that.'

Pores watched his captain walk away, then he looked back down at the retainers and smiled. 'Now wouldn't that be something? High Fist Kindly, commanding all the Malazan armies.'
'Leastways,' one of the men said, 'we'd always know what we was up to.'

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. 'You would like Kindly doing your thinking for you?'

'I'm a soldier, ain't I?'

'And what if I told you Captain Kindly was insane?'

'You be testing us? Anyway, don't matter if'n he is or not, so long as he knows what he's doing and he keeps telling us what we're supposed to be doing.' He nudged his companion, 'Ain't that right, Thikburd?'

'Right enough,' the other mumbled, examining one of the combs.

'The Malazan soldier is trained to think,' Pores said. 'That tradition has been with us since Kellanved and Dassem Ultor. Have you forgotten that?'

'No, sir, we ain't. There's thinkin' and there's thinkin' and that's jus' the way it is. Soldiers do one kind and leaders do the other. Ain't good the two gettin' mixed up.'

'Must make life easy for you.'

A nod. 'Aye, sir, that it does.'

'If your friend scratches that comb he's admiring, Captain Kindly will kill you both.'

'Thikburd! Put that down!'

'But it's pretty!'

'So's a mouthful of teeth and you want to keep yours, don't ya?'

*And with soldiers like these, we won an empire.*

The horses were past their prime, but they would have to do. A lone mule would carry the bulk of their supplies, including the wrapped corpse of Heboric Ghost Hands. The beasts stood waiting on the east end of the main street, tails flicking to fend off the flies, already enervated by the heat, although it was but mid-morning.

Barathol Mekhar made one last adjustment to his weapons belt, bemused to find that he'd put on weight in his midriff, then he squinted over as Cutter and Scillara emerged from the inn and made their way towards the horses.

The woman's conversation with the two Jessas had been an admirable display of brevity, devoid of advice and ending with a most perfunctory thanks. So, the baby was now the youngest resident of this forgotten hamlet. The girl would grow up playing with scorpions, rhizan and meer rats, her horizons seemingly limitless, the sun overhead the harsh, blinding and brutal face of a god. But all in all, she would be safe, and loved.

The blacksmith noted a figure nearby, hovering in the shadow of a doorway. *Ah, well, at least someone will miss us.* Feeling oddly sad, Barathol made his way over to the others.

'Your horse will collapse under you,' Cutter said. 'It's too old and you're too big, Barathol. That axe alone would stagger a mule.'

'Who's that standing over there?' Scillara asked.

'Chaur.' The blacksmith swung himself onto his horse, the beast side-stepping beneath him as he settled his weight in the saddle. 'Come to see us off, I expect. Mount up, you two.'

'This is the hottest part of the day,' Cutter said. 'It seems we're always travelling through the worst this damned land can throw at us.'

'We will reach a spring by dusk,' Barathol said, 'when we'll all need it most. We lie over there, until the
following dusk, because the next leg of the journey will be a long one.'

They set out on the road, that quickly became a track. A short while later, Scillara said, 'We have company, Barathol.'

Glancing back, they saw Chaur, carrying a canvas bundle against his chest. There was a dogged expression on his sweaty face.

Sighing, the blacksmith halted his horse.

'Can you convince him to go home?' Scillara asked.

'Not likely,' Barathol admitted. 'Simple and stubborn – that's a miserable combination.' He slipped down to the ground and walked back to the huge young man. 'Here, Chaur, let's tie your kit to the mule's pack.'

Smiling, Chaur handed it over.

'We have a long way to go, Chaur. And for the next few days at least, you will have to walk – do you understand? Now, let's see what you're wearing on your feet – Hood's breath—'

'He's barefoot!' Cutter said, incredulous.

'Chaur,' Barathol tried to explain, 'this track is nothing but sharp stones and hot sand.'

'There's some thick bhederin hide in our kit,' Scillara said, lighting her pipe, 'somewhere. Tonight I can make him sandals. Unless you want us to stop right now.'

The blacksmith unslung his axe, then crouched and began pulling at his boots. 'Since I'll be riding, he can wear these until then.'

Cutter watched as Chaur struggled to pull on Barathol's boots. Most men, he knew, would have left Chaur to his fate. Just a child in a giant's body, after all, foolish and mostly useless, a burden. In fact, most men would have beaten the simpleton until he fled back to the hamlet – a beating for Chaur's own good, and in some ways very nearly justifiable. But this blacksmith ... he hardly seemed the mass murderer he was purported to be. The betrayer of Aren, the man who assassinated a Fist. And now, their escort to the coast.

Cutter found himself oddly comforted by that notion. Kalam's cousin ... assassinations must run in the family. That huge double-bladed axe hardly seemed an assassin's weapon. He considered asking Barathol – getting from him his version of what had happened at Aren all those years ago – but the blacksmith was a reluctant conversationalist, and besides, if he had his secrets he was within his right to hold on to them. The way I hold on to mine.

They set out again, Chaur trailing, stumbling every now and then as if unfamiliar with footwear of any kind. But he was smiling.

'Darn these leaking tits,' Scillara said beside him.

Cutter stared over at her, not knowing how he should reply to that particular complaint.

'And I'm running out of rustleaf, too.'

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'What have you to be sorry about?'

'Well, it took me so long to recover from my wounds.'

'Cutter, you had your guts wrapped round your ankles – how do you feel, by the way?'

'Uncomfortable, but I never was much of a rider. I grew up in a city, after all. Alleys, rooftops, taverns, estate
balconies, that was my world before all this. Gods below, I do miss Darujhistan. You would love it, Scillara—'

'You must be mad. I don't remember cities. It's all desert and dried-up hills for me. Tents and mud-brick hovels.'

'There are caverns of gas beneath Darujhistan, and that gas is piped up to light the streets with this beautiful blue fire. It's the most magnificent city in the world, Scillara—'

'Then why did you ever leave it?'

Cutter fell silent.

'All right,' she said after a moment, 'how about this? We're taking Heboric's body ... where, precisely?'

'Otataral Island.'

'It's a big island, Cutter. Any place in particular?'

'Heboric spoke of the desert, four or five days north and west of Dosin Pali. He said there's a giant temple there, or at least the statue from one.'

'So you were listening, after all.'

'Sometimes he got lucid, yes. Something he called the Jade, a power both gift and curse ... and he wanted to give it back. Somehow.'

'Since he's now dead,' Scillara asked, 'how do you expect him to do anything like returning power to some statue? Cutter, how do we find a statue in the middle of a desert? You might want to consider that whatever Heboric wanted doesn't mean anything any more. The T'lan Imass killed him, and so Treach needs to find a new Destriant, and if Heboric had any other kind of power, it must have dissipated by now, or followed him through Hood's Gate – either way, there is nothing we can do about it.'

'His hands are solid now, Scillara.'

She started. 'What?'

'Solid jade – not pure, filled with ... imperfections. Flaws, particles buried deep inside. Like they were flecked with ash, or dirt.'

'You examined his corpse?'

Cutter nodded.

'Why?'

'Greyfrog came back to life ...'

'So you thought the old man might do the same.'

'It was a possibility, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen. He's mummifying – and fast.'

Barathol Mekhar spoke: 'His funeral shroud was soaked in salt water then packed in even more salt, Cutter. Keeps the maggots out. A fist-sized bundle of rags was pushed into the back of his throat, and a few other places besides. The old practice was to remove the intestines, but the locals have since grown lazier – there were arts involved. Skills, mostly forgotten. What's done is to dry out the corpse as quickly as possible.'

Cutter glanced at Scillara, then shrugged. 'Heboric was chosen by a god.'

'But he failed that god,' she replied.

'They were T'lan Imass!'
A flow of smoke accompanied Scillara's words as she said, 'Next time we get swarmed by flies, we'll know what's coming.' She met his eyes. 'Look, Cutter, there's just us, now. You and me, and until the coast, Barathol. If you want to drop Heboric's body off on the island, that's fine. If those jade hands are still alive, they can crawl back to their master on their own. We just bury the body above the tideline and leave it at that.'

'And then?'

'Darujhistan. I think I want to see this magnificent city of yours. You said rooftops and alleys – what were you there? A thief? Must have been. Who else knows alleys and rooftops? So, you can teach me the ways of a thief, Cutter. I'll follow in your shadow. Hood knows, stealing what we can from this insane world makes as much sense as anything else.'

Cutter looked away. 'It's not good,' he said, 'following anyone's shadow. There's better people there ... for you to get along with. Murillio, maybe, or even Coll.'

'Will I one day discover,' she asked, 'that you've just insulted me?'

'No! Of course not. I like Murillio! And Coil's a Councilman. He owns an estate and everything.'

Barathol said, 'Ever seen an animal led to slaughter, Cutter?'

'What do you mean?'

But the big man simply shook his head.

After repacking her pipe, Scillara settled back in her saddle, a small measure of mercy silencing, for the moment at least, her baiting of Cutter. Mercy and, she admitted, Barathol's subtle warning to ease up on the young man.

That old killer was a sharp one.

It wasn't that she held anything against Cutter. The very opposite, in fact. That small glimmer of enthusiasm – when he spoke of Darujhistan – had surprised her. Cutter was reaching out to the comfort of old memories, suggesting to her that he was suffering from loneliness. That woman who left him. The one for whom he departed Darujhistan in the first place, I suspect. Loneliness, then, and a certain loss of purpose, now that Heboric was dead and Felisin Younger stolen away. Maybe there was some guilt thrown in – he'd failed in protecting Felisin, after all, failed in protecting Scillara too, for that matter – not that she was the kind to hold such a thing against him. They'd been T'lan Imass, for Hood's sake.

But Cutter, being young and being a man, would see it differently. A multitude of swords that he would happily fall on, with a nudge from the wrong person. A person who mattered to him. Better to keep him away from such notions, and a little flirtation on her part, yielding charming confusion on his, should suffice.

She hoped he would consider her advice on burying Heboric. She'd had enough of deserts. Thoughts of a city lit by blue fire, a place filled with people, none of whom expected anything of her, and the possibility of new friends – with Cutter at her side – were in truth rather enticing. A new adventure, and a civilized one at that. Exotic foods, plenty of rustleaf ...

She had wondered, briefly, if the absence of regret or sorrow within her at the surrendering of the child she had carried inside all those months was truly indicative of some essential lack of morality in her soul, some kind of flaw that would bring horror into the eyes of mothers, grandmothers and even little girls as they looked upon her. But such thoughts had not lasted long. The truth of the matter was, she didn't care what other people thought, and if most of them saw that as a threat to ... whatever ... to their view on how things should be ... well, that was just too bad, wasn't it? As if her very existence could lure others into a life of acts without consequence.

Now that's a laugh, isn't it? The most deadly seducers are the ones encouraging conformity. If you can only feel safe when everybody else feels, thinks and looks the same as you, then you're a Hood-damned coward ... not to mention a vicious tyrant in the making.
'So, Barathol Mekhar, what awaits you on the coast?'

'Probably plague,' he said.

'Oh now that's a pleasant thought. And if you survive that?'

He shrugged. 'A ship, going somewhere else. I've never been to Genabackis. Nor Falar.'

'If you go to Falar,' Scillara said, 'or empire-held Genabackis, your old crimes might catch up with you.'

'They've caught up with me before.'

'So, either you're indifferent to your own death, Barathol, or your confidence is supreme and unassailable. Which is it?'

'Take your pick.'

_A sharp one. I won't get any rise from him, no point in trying. 'What do you think it will be like, crossing an ocean?'

'Like a desert,' Cutter said, 'only wetter.'

She probably should have glared at him for that, but she had to admit, it was a good answer. _All right, so maybe they're both sharp, in their own ways. I think I'm going to enjoy this journey._

They rode the track, the heat and sunlight burgeoning into a conflagration, and in their wake clumped Chaur, still smiling.

The Jaghut Ganath stood looking into the chasm. The sorcerous weaving she had set upon this ... intrusion had shattered. She did not need to descend that vast fissure, nor enter the buried sky keep itself, to know the cause of that shattering. Draconean blood had been spilled, although that in itself was not enough. The chaos between the warrens had also been unleashed, and it had devoured Omtose Phellack as boiling water does ice.

Yet her sense of the sequence of events necessary for such a thing to happen remained clouded, as if time itself had been twisted within that once-floating fortress. There was outrage locked in the very bedrock, and now, a most peculiar imposition of ... order.

She wished for companions here, at her side. Cynnigig, especially. And Phyrlis. As it was, in this place, alone as she was, she felt oddly vulnerable.

Perhaps most of all, would that Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck, was with me. A surprisingly formidable human. A little too prone to take risks, however, and there was something here that invited a certain caution. She would need to heal this – there could be no doubt of that. Still ...

Ganath pulled her unhuman gaze from the dark fissure – in time to see, flowing across the flat rock to either side, and behind her, a swarm of shadows – and now figures, huge, reptilian, all closing in on where she stood.

She cried out, her warren of Omtose Phellack rising within her, an instinctive response to panic, as the creatures closed.

There was no escape – no time—

Heavy mattocks slashed down, chopping through flesh, then bone. The blows drove her to the ground amidst gushes of her own blood. She saw before her the edge of the chasm, sought to reach out towards it. To drag herself over it, and fall – a better death—

Massive clawed feet, scaled, wrapped in strips of thick hide, kicking up dust close to her face. Unable to move, feeling her life drain away, she watched as that dust settled in a dull patina over the pool of her blood, coating it like the thinnest skin. Too much dirt, the blood wouldn't like that, it would sicken with all that dirt.
She needed to clean it. She needed to gather it up, somehow pour it back into her body, back in through these gaping wounds, and hope that her heart would burn clean every drop.

But now even her heart was failing, and blood was spattering, filled with froth, from her nose and mouth.

She understood, suddenly, that strange sense of order. K'Chain Che'Malle, a recollection stirred to life once more, after all this time. They had returned, then. But not the truly chaotic ones. No, not the Long-Tails. These were the others, servants of machines, of order in all its brutality. Nah'Ruk.

They had returned. Why?

The pool of blood was sinking down into the white, chalky dust where furrows had been carved by talons, and into these furrows the rest of the blood drained in turgid rivulets. The inexorable laws of erosion, writ small, and yet ... yes, I suppose, most poignant.

She was cold, and that felt good. Comforting. She was, after all, a Jaghut.

And now I leave.

The woman stood facing landwards, strangely alert. Mappo Runt rubbed at his face, driven to exhaustion by Iskaral Pust's manic tirade at the crew of the broad-beamed caravel as they scurried about with what seemed a complete absence of reason: through the rigging, bounding wild over the deck and clinging – with frantic screams – to various precarious perches here and there. Yet somehow the small but seaworthy trader craft was full before the wind, cutting clean on a northeasterly course.

A crew – an entire crew – of bhok'arala. It should have been impossible. It most certainly was absurd. Yet these creatures had been awaiting them in their no-doubt purloined craft, anchored offshore, when Mappo, Iskaral, his mule, and the woman named Spite pushed through the last of the brush and reached the broken rocks of the coast.

And not just some random collection of the ape-like, pointy-eared beasts, but – as Iskaral's shriek of fury announced – the High Priest's very own menagerie, the once-residents of his cliff-side fastness league upon league eastward, at the rim of the distant Raraku Sea. How they had come to be here, with this caravel, was a mystery, and one unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

Heaps of fruit and shellfish had crowded the midship deck, fussed over like votive offerings when the three travellers drew the dinghy – rowed ashore to greet them by a half-dozen bhok'arala – alongside the ship and clambered aboard. To find – adding to Mappo's bemusement – that Iskaral Pust's black-eyed mule had somehow preceded them.

Since then there had been chaos.

If bhok'arala could possess faith in a god, then their god had just arrived, in the dubious personage of Iskaral Pust, and the endless mewling, chittering, dancing about the High Priest was clearly driving Pust mad. Or, madder than he already was.

Spite had watched in amusement for a time, ignoring Mappo's questions – How did this come to be here? Where will they be taking us? Are we in truth still pursuing Icarium? No answers.

And now, as the coastline crawled past, pitching and rolling on their right, the tall woman stood, her balance impressive, and stared with narrowed eyes to the south.

'What is wrong?' Mappo asked, not expecting an answer.

She surprised him. 'A murder. There are godless ones walking the sands of Seven Cities once again. I believe I understand the nature of this alliance. Complexities abound, of course, and you are but a Trell, a hut-dwelling herder.'

'Who understands nothing of complexities, aye. Even so, explain. What alliance? Who are the godless ones?'
‘That hardly matters, and serves little by way of explanation. It falls to the nature of gods, Mappo Runt. And of faith.’

‘I'm listening.’

‘If one asserts a distinction between the gifts from a god and the mortal, mundane world in which exists the believer,’ she said, ‘then this is as an open door to true godlessness. To the religion of disbelief, if you will.’ She glanced over, sauntered closer. ‘Ah, already I see you frowning in confusion—’

‘I frown at the implications of such a distinction, Spite.’

‘Truly? Well, I am surprised. Pleasantly so. You must understand this, then. To speak of war among the gods, it is not simply a matter of, say, this goddess here scratching out the eyes of that god over there. Nor, even, of an army of acolytes from this temple marching upon an army from the temple across the street. A war among the gods is not fought with thunderbolts and earthquakes, although of course it is possible – but improbable – that it could come to that. The war in question, then, is messy, the battle-lines muddied, unclear, and even the central combatants struggle to comprehend what constitutes a weapon, what wounds and what is harmless. And worse still, to wield such weapons proves as likely to harm the wielder as the foe.’

‘Fanaticism breeds fanaticism, aye,’ Mappo said, nodding. ‘“In proclamation, one defines his enemy for his enemy.”’

She smiled her dazzling smile. ‘A quote? From whom?’

‘Kellanved, the founding emperor of the Malazan Empire.’

‘Indeed, you grasp the essence of my meaning. Now, the nature of fanaticism can be likened to that of a tree – many branches, but one tap-root.’

‘Inequity.’

‘Or at least the comprehension of and the faith in, whether such inequity is but imagined or exists in truth. More often than not, of course, such inequity does exist, and it is the poison that breeds the darkest fruit. Mundane wealth is usually built upon bones, piled high and packed deep. Alas, the holders of that wealth misapprehend the nature of their reward, and so are often blithely indifferent in their ostentatious display of their wealth. The misapprehension is this: that those who do not possess wealth all yearn to, and so seek likeness, and this yearning occludes all feelings of resentment, exploitation and, most relevantly, injustice. To some extent they are right, but mostly they are woefully wrong. When wealth ascends to a point where the majority of the poor finally comprehend that it is, for each of them, unattainable, then all civility collapses, and anarchy prevails. Now, I was speaking of war among the gods. Do you grasp the connection, Mappo Runt?’

‘Not entirely.’

‘I appreciate your honesty, Trell. Consider this: when inequity burgeons into violent conflagration, the gods themselves are helpless. The gods cease to lead – they can but follow, dragged by the will of their worshipers. Now, suppose gods to be essentially moral entities – that is, possessing and indeed manifestly representing a particular ethos – well, then, such moral considerations become the first victim in the war. Unless that god chooses to defend him or herself from his or her own believers. Allies, enemies? What relevance such primitive, simplistic notions in that scenario, Mappo Runt?’

The Trell gazed out at the heaving waves, this tireless succession born of distant convulsions, the broken tug of tides, hard and bitter winds and all that moved in the world. And yet, staring long enough, this simple undulating motion ... mesmerizing. ‘We are,’ he said, ‘as the soil and the sea.’

‘Another quote?’

He shrugged. ‘Driven by unseen forces, forever in motion, even when we stand still.’ He struggled against a surge of despair. ‘For all that the contestants proclaim that they are but soldiers of their god ...’

‘All that they do in that god’s name is at its core profoundly godless.’
'And the truly godless – such as you spoke of earlier – cannot but see such blasphemers as allies.'

She studied him until he grew uneasy, then she said, 'What drives Icarium to fight?'

'When under control, it is ... inequity. Injustice.'

'And when out of control?'

'Then ... nothing.'

'And the difference between the two is one of magnitude.'

He glanced away once more. 'And of motivation.'

'Are you sure? Even if inequity, in triggering his violence, then ascends, crossing no obvious threshold, into all-destroying annihilation? Mappo Trell, I believe motivations prove, ultimately, irrelevant. Slaughter is slaughter. Upon either side of the battlefield the face grins with blunt stupidity, even as smoke fills the sky from horizon to horizon, even as crops wither and die, even as sweet land turns to salt. Inequity ends, Trell, when no-one and no thing is left standing. Perhaps,' she added, 'this is Icarium's true purpose, why the Nameless Ones seek to unleash him. It is, after all, one sure way to end this war.'

Mappo Trell stared at her, then said, 'Next time we speak like this, Spite, you can tell me your reasons for opposing the Nameless Ones. For helping me.'

She smiled at him. 'Ah, you begin to doubt our alliance?'

'How can I not?'

'Such is war among the gods, Trell.'

'We are not gods.'

'We are their hands, their feet, wayward and wilful. We fight for reasons that are, for the most part, essentially nonsensical, even when the justification seems plain and straightforward. Two kingdoms, one upriver, one down river. The kingdom downriver sees the water arrive befouled and sickly, filled with silts and sewage. The kingdom upriver, being on higher land, sees its desperate efforts at irrigation failing, as the topsoil is swept away each time the rains come to the highlands beyond. The two kingdoms quarrel, until there is war. The downriver kingdom marches, terrible battles are fought, cities are burned to the ground, citizens enslaved, fields salted and made barren. Ditches and dykes are broken. In the end, only the downriver kingdom remains. But the erosion does not cease. Indeed, now that there is no irrigation occurring upriver, the waters rush down in full flood, distempered and wild, and they carry lime and salt that settles on the fields and poisons the remaining soil. There is starvation, disease, and the desert closes in on all sides. The once victorious leaders are cast down. Estates are looted. Brigands rove unchecked, and within a single generation there are no kingdoms, neither upriver nor downriver. Was the justification valid? Of course. Did that validity defend the victors against their own annihilation? Of course not.

'A civilization at war chooses only the most obvious enemy, and often also the one perceived, at first, to be the most easily defeatable. But that enemy is not the true enemy, nor is it the gravest threat to that civilization. Thus, a civilization at war often chooses the wrong enemy. Tell me, Mappo Runt, for my two hypothetical kingdoms, where hid the truest threat?'

He shook his head.

'Yes, difficult to answer, because the threats were many, seemingly disconnected, and they appeared, disappeared then reappeared over a long period of time. The game that was hunted to extinction, the forests that were cut down, the goats that were loosed into the hills, the very irrigation ditches that were dug. And yet more: the surplus of food, the burgeoning population and its accumulating wastes. And then diseases, soils blown or washed away; and kings – one after another – who could or would do nothing, or indeed saw nothing untoward beyond their fanatical focus upon the ones they sought to blame.
'Alas,' she said, leaning now on the rail, her face to the wind, 'there is nothing simple in seeking to oppose such a host of threats. First, one must recognize them, and to achieve that one must think in the long term; and then one must discern the intricate linkages that exist between all things, the manner in which one problem feeds into another. From there, one must devise solutions and finally, one must motivate the population into concerted effort, and not just one's own population, but that of the neighbouring kingdoms, all of whom are participating in the slow self-destruction. Tell me, can you imagine such a leader ever coming to power? Or staying there for long? Me neither. The hoarders of wealth will band together to destroy such a man or woman. Besides, it is much easier to create an enemy and wage war, although why such hoarders of wealth actually believe that they would survive such a war is beyond me. But they do, again and again. Indeed, it seems they believe they will outlive civilization itself.'

'You propose little hope for civilization, Spite.'

'Oh, my lack of hope extends far beyond mere civilization. The Trell were pastoralists, yes? You managed the half-wild bhederin herds of the Masai Plains. Actually, a fairly successful way of living, all things considered.'

'Until the traders and settlers came.'

'Yes, those who coveted your land, driven as they were by enterprise or the wasting of their own lands, or the poverty in their cities. Each and all sought a new source of wealth. To achieve it, alas, they first had to destroy your people.'

Iskaral Pust scrambled to the Trell's side. 'Listen to you two! Poets and philosophers! What do you know? You go on and on whilst I am hounded unto exhaustion by these horrible squirming things!'

'Your acolytes, High Priest,' Spite said. 'You are their god. Indicative, I might add, of at least two kinds of absurdity.'

'I'm not impressed by you, woman. If I am their god, why don't they listen to anything I say?'

'Maybe,' Mappo replied, 'they are but waiting for you to say the right thing.'

'Really? And what would that be, you fat oaf?'

'Well, whatever it is they want to hear, of course.'

'She's poisoned you!' The High Priest backed away, eyes wide. He clutched and pulled at what remained of his hair, then whirled about and rushed off towards the cabin. Three bhok'arala – who had been attending him – raced after him, chittering and making tugging gestures above their ears.

Mappo turned back to Spite. 'Where are we going, by the way?'

She smiled at him. 'To start, the Otataral Sea.'

'Why?'

'Isn't this breeze enlivening?'

'It's damned chilly.'

'Yes. Lovely, isn't it?'

A vast oblong pit, lined with slabs of limestone, then walls of brick, rising to form a domed roof, the single entrance ramped and framed in limestone, including a massive lintel stone on which the imperial symbol had been etched above the name Dujek Onearm, and his title, High Fist. Within the barrow lanterns had been set out to aid in drying the freshly plastered walls.

Just outside; in a broad, shallow bowl half-filled with slimy clay, basked a large toad, blinking sleepy eyes as it watched its companion, the imperial artist, Ormulogun, mixing paints. Oils by the dozen, each with specific
qualities; and pigments culled from crushed minerals, duck eggs, dried inks from sea-creatures, leaves and roots and berries; and jars of other mediums: egg whites from turtles, snakes, vultures; masticated grubs, gull brains, cat urine, dog drool, the snot of pimps—

All right, the toad reflected, perhaps not the snot of pimps, although given the baffling arcanum of artists, one could never be certain. It was enough to know that people who delved into such materials were mostly mad, if not to start with, then invariably so after years spent handling such toxins.

And yet, this fool Ormulogun, somehow he persisted, with his stained hands, his stained lips from pointing the brushes, his stained beard from that bizarre sputtering technique when the pigments were chewed in a mouthful of spit and Hood knew what else, his stained nose from when paint-smeared fingers prodded, scratched and explored, his stained breeches from—

'I know what you're thinking, Gumble,' Ormulogun said.

'Indeed? Please proceed, then, in describing my present thoughts.'

'The earwax of whores and stained this and stained that, the commentary swiftly descending into the absurd as befits your inability to think without exaggeration and puerile hyperbole. Now, startled as you no doubt are, shift that puny, predictable brain of yours and tell me in turn what I'm thinking. Can you? Hah, I thought not!'

'I tell you, you grubber of pastes, my thoughts were not in the least as you just described in that pathetic paucity of pastiche you dare call communication, such failure being quite unsurprising, since I am the master of language whilst you are little more than an ever-failing student of portraiture bereft of both cogent instruction of craft and, alas, talent.'

'You seek to communicate to the intellectually deaf, do you?'

'Whilst you paint to enlighten the blind. Yes yes,' Gumble sighed, the effort proving alarmingly deflating – alarming even to himself. He quickly drew in another breath. 'We wage our ceaseless war, you and I. What will adorn the walls of the great man's barrow? Why, from you, the usual. Propagandistic pageantry, the politically aligned reaffirmation of the status quo. Heroic deeds in service of the empire, and an even more heroic death, for in this age as in every other, we are in need of our heroes – dead ones, that is. We do not believe in living ones, after all, thanks to you—'

'To me? To me!?'

'The rendition of flaws is your forte, Ormulogun. Oh, consider that statement! I impress even myself with such perfectly resonating irony. Anyway, such flaws in the subject are as poison darts flung into heroism. Your avid attention destroys as it always must—'

'No no, fool, not always. And with me, with Ormulogun the Great, never. Why? Well, it is simple, although not so simple you will ever grasp it – even so, it is this: great art is not simply rendition. Great art is transformation. Great art is exaltation and exaltation is spiritual in the purest, most spiritual sense—'

'As noted earlier,' Gumble drawled, 'comprehensive erudition and brevity eludes the poor man. Besides which, I am certain I have heard that definition of great art before. In some other context, likely accompanied by a pounding of the fist on table- or skull-top, or at the very least a knee in the kidneys. No matter, it all sounds very well. Too bad you so consistently fail to translate it into actuality.'

'I have a mallet with which I could translate you into actuality, Gumble.'

'You would break this exquisite bowl.'

'Aye, I'd shed a few tears over that. But then I'd get better.'

'Dujek Onearm standing outside the shattered gates of Black Coral. Dujek Onearm at the parley with Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake. Dujek Onearm and Tayschrenn outside Pale, the dawn preceding the attack. Three primary walls, three panels, three images.'
'You've looked at my sketchings! Gods how I hate you!'

'There was no need,' Gumble said, 'to do something so crass, not to mention implicitly depressing, as to examine your sketchings.'

Ormulogun quickly gathered up his chosen paints, styli and brushes, then made his way down into the barrow.

Gumble stayed where he was, and thought about eating flies.

Ganoes Paran looked down at the armour laid out on the cot. A High Fist's armour, one sleeve of chain newly attached. The inheritance left a sour, bitter taste in his mouth. Proclamation, was it? As if anything he'd done whilst a soldier could justify such a thing. Every Fist in this army was better qualified to assume command. What could it have been, there in Dujek's logs, to so thoroughly twist, even falsify, Paran's legacy as the captain and commander of the Bridgeburners? He considered finding out for himself, but knew he would do no such thing. He already felt imposter enough without seeing proof of the duplicity before his own eyes. No doubt Dujek had good reasons, likely having to do with protecting, if not elevating, the reputation of House Paran, and thereby implicitly supporting his sister Tavore in her new command of the Fourteenth.

Politics dictated such official logs, of course. As, *I suppose, they will dictate my own entries. Or not. What do I care? Posterity be damned. If this is my army, then so be it. The Empress can always strip me of the command, as she no doubt will when she hears about this field promotion.* In the meantime, he would do as he pleased.

Behind him, Hurlochel cleared his throat, then said, 'High Fist, the Fists may be on their feet, but they're still weak.'

'You mean they're out there standing at attention?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That's ridiculous. Never mind the armour, then.'

They walked to the flap and Hurlochel pulled the canvas aside. Paran strode outside, blinking in sunlight. The entire army stood in formation, standards upright, armour glinting. Directly before him were the Fists, Rythe Bude foremost among them. She was wan, painfully thin in gear that seemed oversized for her frame. She saluted and said, 'High Fist Ganoes Paran, the Host awaits your inspection.'

'Thank you, Fist. How soon will they be ready to march?'

'By dawn tomorrow, High Fist.'

Paran scanned the ranks. Not a sound from them, not even the rustle of armour. They stood like dusty statues. 'And precisely how,' he asked in a whisper, 'am I to live up to this?'

'High Fist,' Hurlochel murmured at his side, 'you rode with one healer into G'danisban and then single-handedly struck down a goddess. Drove her from this realm. You then forced the sister of that goddess to gift a dozen mortals with the power to heal—'

'That power will not last,' Paran said.

'Nonetheless. High Fist, you have killed the plague. Something even Dujek Onearm could not achieve. These soldiers are yours, Ganoes Paran. No matter what the Empress decides.'

*But I don't want a damned army!*

Fist Rythe Bude said, 'Given the losses to disease, High Fist, we are sufficiently supplied to march for six, perhaps seven days, assuming we do not resupply en route. Of course,' she added, 'there are the grain stores in G'danisban, and with the population virtually non-existent—'
'Yes,' Paran cut in. 'Virtually non-existent. Does that not strike you as strange, Fist?'

'The goddess herself—'

'Hurlochel reports that his outriders are seeing people, survivors, heading north and east. A pilgrimage.'

'Yes, High Fist.'

She was wavering, he saw. 'We will follow those pilgrims, Fist,' Paran said. 'We will delay another two days, during which the stores of G'danisban will be used to establish a full resupply – but only if enough remains to sustain the population still in the city. Commandeer wagons and carts as needed. Further, invite those citizens the soldiers come upon to join our train. At the very least, they will find a livelihood accompanying us, and food, water and protection. Now, inform the captains that I will address the troops the morning of our departure – at the consecration and sealing of the barrow. In the meantime, you are all dismissed.'

The Fists saluted. Shouts from the captains stirred the ranks into motion as soldiers relaxed and began splitting up.

_I should have said something to them here and now. Warned them not to expect too much. No, that wouldn't do. What does a new commander say? Especially after the death of a great leader, a true hero? Dammit, Ganoes, you're better off saying nothing. Not now, and not much when we seal the barrow and leave the old man in peace. We're following pilgrims. Why? Because I want to know where they're going, that's why.' That should do. Mentally shrugging, Paran set off. In his wake followed Hurlochel and then, ten paces back, the young G'danii woman Naval D'natha, who was now, it seemed, a part of his entourage.

'High Fist?'

'What is it, Hurlochel?'

'Where are we going?'

'To visit the imperial artist.'

'Oh, him. May I ask why?'

'Why suffer such torment, you mean? Well, I have a request to make of him.'

'High Fist?'

_I need a new Deck of Dragons. 'Is he skilled, do you know?'_ 

'A subject of constant debate, High Fist.'

'Really? Among whom? The soldiers? I find that hard to believe.'

'Ormulogun has, accompanying him everywhere, a critic'

_Oh, the poor man._

The body was lying on the trail, the limbs lacerated, the tanned-hide shirt stiff and black with dried blood. Boatfinder crouched beside it. 'Stonefinder,' he said. 'In the frozen time now. We shared tales.'

'Someone cut off one of his fingers,' Karsa Orlong said. 'The rest of the wounds, they came from torture, except that spear-thrust, beneath the left shoulder blade. See the tracks – the killer stepped out from cover as the man passed – he was not running, but staggering. They but played with him.'

Samar Dev settled a hand on Boatfinder's shoulder, and felt the Anibar trembling with grief. 'How long ago?' she asked Karsa.

The Teblor shrugged. 'It does not matter. They are close.'
She straightened in alarm. 'How close?'

'They have made camp and they are careless with its wastes.' He unslung his flint sword. 'They have more prisoners.'

'How do you know that?'

'I smell their suffering.'

Not possible. Is such a thing possible? She looked round, seeking more obvious signs of all that the Toblakai claimed to know. A peat-filled basin was to their right, a short descent from the bedrock path on which they stood. Greyboled black spruce trees rose from it, leaning this way and that, most of their branches bereft of needles. Glinting strands of spider's web spanned the spaces in between, like scratches on transparent glass. To the left, flattened sprawls of juniper occupied a fold in the bedrock that ran parallel to the trail. Samar frowned.

'What cover?' she asked. 'You said the killer stepped out from cover to drive that spear into the Anibar's back. But there isn't any, Karsa.'

'None that remains,' he said.

Her frown deepened into a scowl. 'Are they swathed in branches and leaves, then?'

'There are other ways of hiding, woman.'

'Such as?'

Karsa shrugged off his fur cloak. 'Sorcery,' he said. 'Wait here.'

Like Hood I will. She set off after Karsa as the Toblakai, sword held before him in both hands, moved forward in a gliding half-run. Four strides later and she had to sprint in an effort to keep up.

The jog, silent, grew swifter. Became lightning fast.

Gasping, she scrambled after the huge warrior, but he was already lost to sight.

At the sound of a sudden shriek to her left, Samar skidded to a halt – Karsa had left the trail somewhere behind her, had plunged into the forest, over jumbled, moss-slick boulders, fallen trees, thick skeins of dead branches – leaving in his wake no sign. More screams.

Heart hammering in her chest, Samar Dev pushed into the stand, clawing aside undergrowth, webs pulling against her before snapping, dust and bark flakes cascading down—

—while the slaughter somewhere ahead continued.

Weapons clashed, iron against stone. The crunch of splintered wood – blurred motion between trees ahead of her, figures running – a body, cartwheeling in a mist of crimson – she reached the edge of the encampment—

—and saw Karsa Orlong – and a half hundred, maybe more, tall grey-skinned warriors, wielding spears, cutlasses, long-knives and axes, now closing in on the Toblakai.

Karsa's path into their midst was marked by a grisly corridor of corpses and fallen, mortally wounded foes.

But there were too many—

The huge flint sword burst into view at the end of a sweeping upswing, amid fragments of bone and thick, whipping threads of gore. Two figures reeled back, a third struck so hard that his moccasined feet flashed up and over at Karsa's eye-level, and, falling back, dragged down the spear-shafts of two more warriors – and into that opening the Toblakai surged, evading a half-dozen thrusts and swings, most of them appearing in his wake, for the giant's speed was extraordinary – no, more, it was appalling.

The two foes, weapons snagged, sought to launch themselves back, beyond the reach of Karsa – but his
sword, lashing out, caught the neck of the one on the left – the head leapt free of the body – then the blade angled down to chop clean through the other warrior's right shoulder, severing the arm.

Karsa's left hand released its grip on his sword, intercepting the shaft of a thrusting spear, then pulling both weapon and wielder close, the hand releasing the haft to snap up and round the man's neck. Fluids burst from the victim's eyes, nose and mouth as the Toblakai crushed that neck as if it were little more than a tube of parchment. A hard push flung the twitching body into the pressing mass, fouling yet more weapons—

Samar Dev could barely track what her eyes saw, for even as Karsa's left hand had moved away from the sword's grip, the blade itself was slashing to the right, batting aside enemy weapons, then wheeling up and over, and, while the warrior's throat was collapsing in that savage clutch, the sword crashed down through an up-flung cutlass and into flesh and bone, shattering clavicle, then a host of ribs—

Tearing the sword loose burst the ribcage, and Samar stared to see the victim's heart, still beating, pitch free of its broken nest, dangling for a moment from torn arteries and veins, before the warrior fell from sight.

Someone was screaming – away from the battle – off to the far left, where there was a shoreline of rocks, and, beyond, open water – a row of low-slung, broad-beamed wooden canoes – and she saw there a woman, slight, golden-haired – a human – casting spells.

Yet whatever sorcery she worked seemed to achieve nothing. Impossibly, Karsa Orlong had somehow carved his way through to the other side of the press, where he spun round, his back to a huge pine, the flint sword almost contemptuous in its batting aside attacks – as the Toblakai paused for a rest.

Samar could not believe what she was seeing.

More shouts now, a single warrior, standing well beyond the jostling mob, bellowing at his companions – who began to draw back, disengaging from Karsa Orlong.

Seeing the Toblakai draw a deep, chest-swelling breath, then raise his sword, Samar Dev yelled, 'Karsa! Wait! Do not attack, damn you!'

The cold glare that met her gaze made Samar flinch.

The giant gestured with the sword. 'See what's left of the Anibar, woman?' His voice was deep in tone, the beat of words like a drum of war.

She nodded, refusing to look once more at the row of prisoners, bound head-down and spread-eagled to wooden frames along the inland edge of the encampment, their naked forms painted red in blood, and before each victim a heap of live embers, filling the air with the stench of burnt hair and meat. Karsa Orlong, she realized, had been driven by rage, yet such fury set no tremble in the huge warrior, the sword was motionless, now, held at the ready, the very stillness of that blade seeming to vow a tide of destruction. 'I know,' she said. 'But listen to me, Karsa. If you kill them all – and I see that you mean to do just that – but listen! If you do, more will come, seeking to find their vanished kin. More will come, Toblakai, and this will never end – until you make a mistake, until there are so many of them that even you cannot hope to prevail. Nor can you be everywhere at once, so more Anibar will die."

'What do you suggest, then, woman?'

She strode forward, ignoring, for the moment, the greyskinned warriors and the yellow-haired witch. 'They fear you now, Karsa, and you must use that fear—' She paused, distracted by a commotion from among the half-tent-half-huts near the beached canoes. Two warriors were dragging someone into view. Another human. His face was swollen by constant beatings, but he seemed otherwise undamaged. Samar Dev studied the new arrival with narrowed eyes, then quickly approached Karsa, lowering her voice to a harsh whisper. 'They now have an interpreter, Karsa. The tattoos on his forearms. He is Taxilian. Listen to me. Quickly. Use that fear. Tell them there are more of your kind, allies to the Anibar, and that you are but the first of a horde, coming in answer to a plea for help. Karsa, tell them to get the Hood off this land!'

'If they leave I cannot kill more of them.'
An argument was going on among the raiders. The warrior who had issued commands was rejecting – in an obvious fashion – the frantic pleas of the yellow-haired human. The Taxilian, held by the arms off to one side, was clearly following the debate, but his face was too mangled to reveal any expression. Samar saw the man’s eyes flick over to her and Karsa, then back to her, and, with slow deliberation, the Taxilian winked.

_Gods below. Good._ She nodded. Then, to spare him any retribution, she averted her gaze, and found herself looking upon a scene of terrible carnage. Figures lay moaning in blood-drenched humus. Broken spear-shafts were everywhere like scattered kindling from an overturned cart. But mostly, there were motionless corpses, severed limbs, exposed bones and spilled intestines.

And Karsa Orlong was barely out of breath.

Were these tall, unhuman strangers such poor fighters? She did not believe so. By their garb, theirs was a warrior society. But many such societies, if stagnant – or isolated – for a long enough period of time, bound their martial arts into ritualized forms and techniques. They would have but one way of fighting, perhaps with a few variations, and would have difficulty adjusting to the unexpected ... _such as a lone Toblakai with an unbreakable flint sword nearly as long as he is tall_ – a Toblakai possessing mind-numbing speed and the cold, detached precision of a natural killer.

And Karsa had said that he had fought this enemy once before.

The commander of the grey-skinned raiders was approaching, the Taxilian being dragged along in his wake, the yellow-haired witch hurrying to come up alongside the leader – who then straight-armed her back a step.

Samar saw the flash of unbridled hatred the small woman directed at the commander's back. There was something dangling from the witch's neck, blackened and oblong – _a severed finger. A witch indeed, of the old arts, the lost ways of spiritual magic – well, not entirely lost, for I have made of that my own speciality, atavistic bitch that I am._ By her hair and heart-shaped features – and those blue eyes – she reminded Samar Dev of the small, mostly subjugated peoples who could be found near the centre of the subcontinent, in such ancient cities as Halaf, Guran and Karashimesh; and as far west as Omari. Some remnant population, perhaps. And yet, her words earlier had been in a language Samar had not recognized.

The commander spoke, clearly addressing the yellow -haired witch, who then in turn relayed his words – in yet another language – to the Taxilian. At that latter exchange, Samar Dev's eyes widened, for she recognized certain words – though she had never before heard them spoken, had only read them, in the most ancient tomes. Remnants, in fact, from the First Empire.

The Taxilian nodded when the witch was done. He faced first Karsa, then Samar Dev, and finally said, 'To which of you should I convey the Preda's words?'

'Why not to both?' Samar responded. 'We can both understand you, Taxilian.'

'Very well. The Preda asks what reason this Tarthenal had for his unwarranted attack on his Merude warriors.'

_Tarthenal? 'Vengeance,'_ Samar Dev said quickly before Karsa Orlong triggered yet another bloody clash. She pointed towards the pathetic forms on the racks at the camp's edge. 'These Anibar, suffering your predations, have called upon their longstanding allies, the Toblakai—'

At that word the yellow-haired witch started, and the Preda's elongated eyes widened slightly.

‘—and this warrior, a lowly hunter among the twentythousand-strong clan of the Toblakai, was, by chance, close by, and so he represents only the beginning of what will be, I am afraid, a most thorough retribution. Assuming the Preda is, of course, foolish enough to await their arrival.'

A certain measure of amusement glittered in the Taxilian's eyes, quickly veiled as he turned to relay Samar's words to the yellow-haired witch.

Whatever she in turn said to the Preda was twice as long as the Taxilian's version.
Preda. Would that be a variation on Predal’atr, I wonder? A unit commander in a legion of the First Empire, Middle Period. Yet ... this makes no sense. These warriors are not even human, after all.

The witch's translation was cut short by a gesture from the Preda, who then spoke once more.

When the Taxilian at last translated, there was something like admiration in his tone. 'The Preda wishes to express his appreciation for this warrior's formidable skills. Further, he enquires if the warrior's desire for vengeance is yet abated.'

'It is not,' Karsa Orlong replied.

The tone was sufficient for the Preda, who spoke again. The yellow-haired witch's expression suddenly closed, and she related his words to the Taxilian in a strangely flat monotone.

*She hides glee.*

Suspicion rose within Samar Dev. *What comes now?*

The Taxilian said, 'The Preda well understands the ... Toblakai's position. Indeed, he empathizes, for the Preda himself abhors what he has been commanded to do, along this entire foreign coastline. Yet he must follow the needs of his Emperor. That said, the Preda will order a complete withdrawal of his Tiste Edur forces, back to the fleet. Is the Toblakai satisfied with this?'

'No.'

The Taxilian nodded at Karsa's blunt reply, as the Preda spoke again.

*Now what?*

'The Preda again has no choice but to follow the commands of his Emperor, a standing order, if you will. The Emperor is the greatest warrior this world has seen, and he ever defends that claim in personal combat. He has faced a thousand or more fighters, drawn from virtually every land, and yet still he lives, triumphant and unvanquished. It is the Emperor's command that his soldiers, no matter where they are, no matter with whom they speak, are to relate the Emperor's challenge. Indeed, the Emperor invites any and every warrior to a duel, always to the death – a duel in which no-one can interfere, no matter the consequences, and all rights of Guest are accorded the challenger. Further, the soldiers of the Emperor are instructed to provide transportation and to meet every need and desire of such warriors who would so face the Emperor in duel.'

More words from the Preda.

A deep chill was settling in Samar Dev, a dread she could not identify – but there was something here ... something vastly wrong.

The Taxilian resumed. 'Thus, if this Toblakai hunter seeks the sweetest vengeance of all, he must face the one who has so commanded that his soldiers inflict atrocities upon all strangers they encounter. Accordingly, the Preda invites the Toblakai – and, if desired, his companion – to be Guest of the Tiste Edur on this, their return journey to the Lether Empire. Do you accept?'

Karsa blinked, then looked down at Samar Dev. 'They invite me to kill their Emperor?'

'It seems so. But, Karsa, there is—'

'Tell the Preda,' the Toblakai said, 'that I accept.'

She saw the commander smile.

The Taxilian said, 'Preda Hanradi Khalag then welcomes you among the Tiste Edur.'

Samar Dev looked back at the bodies lying sprawled through the camp. And *for these fallen kin, Preda Hanradi Khalag, you care nothing? No, gods below, something is very wrong here—*
‘Samar Dev,’ Karsa said, ‘will you stay here?’
She shook her head.
‘Good,’ he grunted. ‘Go get Havok.’
‘Get him yourself, Toblakai.’
The giant grinned. ‘It was worth a try.’

‘Stop looking so damned pleased, Karsa Orlong. I don’t think you have any idea to what you are now bound.
Can you not hear the shackles snapping shut? Chaining you to this ... this absurd challenge and these damned
bloodless Tiste Edur?’

Karsa’s expression darkened. ‘Chains cannot hold me, witch.’

_Fool, they are holding you right now._

Glancing across, she saw the yellow-haired witch appraising Karsa Orlong with avid eyes.

_and what does that mean, I wonder, and why does it frighten me so?_

‘Fist Temul,’ Keneb asked, ‘how does it feel, to be going home?’

The young, tall Wickan – who had recently acquired full-body blue tattooing in the style of the Crow Clan,
an intricate geometric design that made his face look like a portrait fashioned of tesserae – was watching as his
soldiers led their horses onto the ramps down on the strand below. At Keneb’s question he shrugged. ‘Among
my people, I shall face yet again all that I have faced here.’

‘But not alone any more,’ Keneb pointed out. ‘Those warriors down there, they are yours, now.’

‘Are they?’

‘So I was led to understand. They no longer challenge your orders, or your right to command, do they?’

‘I believe,’ Temul said, ‘that most of these Wickans will choose to leave the army once we disembark at Unta.
They will return to their families, and when they are asked to recount their adventures in Seven Cities, they will
say nothing. It is in my mind, Fist Keneb, that my warriors are shamed. Not because of how they have shown
me little respect. No, they are shamed by this army’s list of failures.’ He fixed dark, hard eyes on Keneb. ‘They
are too old, or too young, and both are drawn to glory as if she was a forbidden lover.’

Temul was not one for speeches, and Keneb could not recall ever managing to pull so many words from the
haunted young man. ‘They sought death, then.’

‘Yes. They would join with Coltaine, Bult and the others, in the only way still possible. To die in battle,
against the very same enemy. It is why they crossed the ocean, why they left their villages. They did not expect
ever to return home, and so this final journey, back to Quon Tali, will break them.’

‘Damned fools. Forgive me—’

A bitter smile from Temul as he shook his head. ‘No need for that. They are fools, and even had I wisdom, I
would fail in its sharing.’

From the remnants of the camp behind them, cattle-dogs began howling. Both men turned in surprise. Keneb
glanced over at Temul. ‘What is it? Why—’

‘I don’t know.’

They set off, back towards the camp.
Lieutenant Pores watched Bent race up the track, skirls of dust rising in the dog's wake. He caught a momentary glimpse of wild half-mad eyes above that mangled snout, then the beast was past. So only now we find out that they're terrified of water. Well, good. We can leave the ugly things behind. He squinted towards the file of Wickans and Seti overseeing the loading of their scrawny horses – not many of those animals would survive this journey, he suspected, which made them valuable sources of meat. Anything to liven up the deck-wash and bilge-crud sailors call food. Oh, those horse-warriors might complain, but that wouldn't keep them from lining up with their bowls when the bell tolled.

Kindly had made sure the Adjunct knew, in torrid detail, his displeasure with Fist Keneb's incompetence. There was no question of Kindly lacking courage, or at least raging megalomania. But this time, dammit, the old bastard had had a point. An entire day and half a night had been wasted by Keneb. A Hood-damned kit inspection, presented squad by squad – and right in the middle of boarding assembly – gods, the chaos that ensued. 'Has Keneb lost his mind?' Oh yes, Kindly's first question to the Adjunct, and something in her answering scowl told Pores that the miserable woman had known nothing about any of it, and clearly could not comprehend why Keneb would have ordered such a thing.

Well, no surprise, that, with her moping around in her damned tent doing who knew what with that cold beauty T'amber. Even the Admiral's frustration had been obvious. Word was going through the ranks that Tavore was likely in line for demotion – Y'Ghatan could have been handled better. Every damned soldier turned out to be a tactical genius when it came to that, and more than once Pores had bitten out a chunk of soldier meat for some treasonous comment. It didn't matter that Nok and Tavore were feuding; it didn't matter that Tene Baralta was a seething cauldron of sedition among the officers; it didn't even matter that Pores himself was undecided whether the Adjunct could have done better at Y'Ghatan – the rumours alone were as poisonous as any plague the Grey Goddess could spit out.

He was both looking forward to and dreading boarding the transports, and the long, tedious journey ahead. Bored soldiers were worse than woodworm in the keel – or so the sailors kept saying, as they cast jaded eyes on the dusty, swearing men and women who ascended the ramps only to fall silent, huddling like shorn sheep in the raft-like scuttles as the heave and haul chant rang out over the choppy water. Worse still, seas and oceans were nasty things. Soldiers would face death with nary a blink if they knew they could fight back, maybe even fight their way out of it, but the sea was immune to swinging swords, whistling arrows and shield-walls. And Hood knows, we've been swallowing that lumpy helpless thing enough as it is.

Damned cattle-dogs were all letting loose now.

Now what? Unsure of his own reasons, Pores set off in the direction Bent had gone. East on the track, past the command tent, then the inner ring of pickets, and out towards the latrine trenches – and the lieutenant saw the racing figures of a dozen or so cattle-dogs, their mottled, tanned shapes converging, then circling with wild barking – and on the road, the subjects of their excitement, a troop approaching on foot.

So who in the Queen's name are they? The outriders were all in – he was sure of that – he'd seen the Seti practising heaving their guts up on the ramps – they got seasick standing in a puddle. And the Wickans had already surrendered their mounts to the harried transport crews.

Pores glanced round, saw a soldier leading three horses towards the strand. 'Hey! Hold up there.' He walked over. 'Give me one of those.'

'They ain't saddled, sir.'

'Really? How can you tell?'

The man started pointing at the horse's back—

'Idiot,' Pores said, 'give me those reins, no, those ones.'

'That's the Adjunct's—'

'Thought I recognized it.' He pulled the beast away then vaulted onto its back. Then set off onto the road. The foundling, Grub, was walking out from the camp, at one ankle that yipping mutt that looked like what a cow
would regurgitate after eating a mohair rug. Ignoring them, Pores angled his mount eastward, and kicked it into a canter.

He could already put a name to the one in the lead. Captain Faradan Sort. And there was that High Mage, Quick Ben, and that scary assassin Kalam, and — gods below, but they're all — no, they weren't. Marines! Damned marines!

He heard shouts from the camp behind him now, an alarm being raised outside the command tent.

Pores could not believe his own eyes. Survivors — from the firestorm — that was impossible. Granted, they look rough, half-dead in fact. Like Hood used 'em to clean out his hoary ears. There's Lostara Yil — well, she ain't as bad as the rest—

Lieutenant Pores reined in before Faradan Sort. 'Captain—'

'We need water,' she said, the words barely making it out between chapped, cracked and blistered lips.

Gods, they look awful. Pores wheeled his horse round, nearly slipping off the animal's back in the process. Righting himself, he rode back towards the camp.

As Keneb and Temul reached the main track, thirty paces from the command tent, they saw the Adjunct appear, and, a moment later, Blistig, and then T'amber. Soldiers were shouting something as yet incomprehensible from the eastern end of the camp.

The Adjunct turned towards her two approaching Fists. 'It seems my horse has gone missing.'

Keneb's brows rose. 'Thus the alarms? Adjunct—'

'No, Keneb. A troop has been spotted on the east road.'

'A troop? We're being attacked?'

'I do not think so. Well, accompany me, then. It seems we shall have to walk. And this will permit you, Fist Keneb, to explain the fiasco that occurred regarding the boarding of your company.'

'Adjunct?'

'I find your sudden incompetence unconvincing.'

He glanced across at her. There was the hint of an emotion, there on that plain, drawn visage. A hint, no more, not enough that he could identify it. 'Grub,' he said.

The Adjunct's brows rose. 'I believe you will need to elaborate on that, Fist Keneb.'

'He said we should take an extra day boarding, Adjunct.'

'And this child's advice, a barely literate, half-wild child at that, is sufficient justification for you to confound your Adjunct's instructions?'

'Not normally, no,' Keneb replied. 'It's difficult to explain ... but he knows things. Things he shouldn't, I mean. He knew we were sailing west, for example. He knew our planned ports of call—'

'Hiding behind the command tent,' Blistig said.

'Have you ever seen the boy hide, Blistig? Ever?'

The man scowled. 'Must be he's good at it, then.'

'Adjunct, Grub said we needed to delay one day — or we would all die. At sea. I am beginning to believe—'

She held up a gloved hand, the gesture sharp enough to silence him, and he saw that her eyes were narrowed
now, fixed on what was ahead—

A rider, bareback, coming at full gallop.

'That's Kindly's lieutenant,' Blistig said.

When it became obvious that the man had no intention of slowing down, nor of changing course, everyone quickly moved to the sides of the road.

The lieutenant sketched a hasty salute, barely seen through the dust, as he plunged past, shouting something like: *They need water!*

'And,' Blistig added, waving at clouds of dust as they all set out again, 'that was your horse, Adjunct.'

Keneb looked down the road, blinking to get the grit from his eyes. Figures wavered into view. Indistinct ...

no, that was Faradan Sort ... wasn't it?

'Your deserter is returning,' Blistig said. 'Stupid of her, really, since desertion is punishable by execution. But who are those people behind her? What are they carrying?'

The Adjunct halted suddenly, the motion almost a stagger.

Quick Ben. Kalam. More faces, covered in dust, so white they looked like ghosts – *and so they are. What else could they be?* Fiddler, Gesler, Lostara Yil, Stormy – Keneb saw one familiar, impossible face after another. Sun-ravaged, stumbling, like creatures trapped in delirium. And in their arms, children, dull-eyed, shrunken ...

*The boy knows things ... Grub ...*

And there he stood, flanked by his ecstatic dogs, talking, it seemed, with Sinn.

*Sinn, we'd thought her mad with grief – she'd lost a brother, after all ... lost, and now found again.*

But Faradan Sort had suspected, rightly, that something else had possessed Sinn. A suspicion strong enough to drive her into desertion.

*Gods, we gave up too easily – but no – the city, the firestorm – we waited for days, waited until the whole damned ruin had cooled. We picked through the ashes. No-one could have lived through that.*

The troop arrived to where the Adjunct stood.

Captain Faradan Sort straightened with only a slight waver, then saluted, fist to left side of her chest. 'Adjunct,' she rasped, 'I have taken the liberty of re-forming the squads, pending approval—'

'That approval is Fist Keneb's responsibility,' the Adjunct said, her voice strangely flat. 'Captain, I did not expect to see you again.'

A nod. 'I understand the necessities of maintaining military discipline, Adjunct. And so, I now surrender myself to you. I ask, however, that leniency be granted Sinn – her youth, her state of mind at the time ...'

Horses from up the road. Lieutenant Pores returning, more riders behind him. Bladders filled with water, swinging and bouncing like huge udders. The other riders – healers, one and all, including the Wickans Nil and Nether. Keneb stared at their expressions of growing disbelief as they drew closer.

Fiddler had come forward, a scrawny child sleeping or unconscious in his arms. 'Adjunct,' he said through cracked lips, 'without the captain, digging with her own hands, not one of us trapped under that damned city would have ever left it. We'd be mouldering bones right now.' He stepped closer, but his effort at lowering his voice to a whisper failed, as Keneb heard him say, 'Adjunct, you hang the captain for desertion and you better get a lot more nooses, 'cause we'll leave this miserable world when she does.'

'Sergeant,' the Adjunct said, seemingly unperturbed, 'am I to understand that you and those squads behind
you burrowed beneath Y'Ghatan in the midst of the firestorm, somehow managing not to get cooked in the process, and then dug your way clear?'

Fiddler turned his head and spat blood, then he smiled a chilling, ghastly smile, the flaking lips splitting in twin rows of red, glistening fissures. ‘Aye,’ he said in a rasp, ‘we went hunting ... through the bones of the damned city. And then, with the captain’s help, we crawled outa that grave.’

The Adjunct’s gaze left the ragged man, travelled slowly along the line, the gaunt faces, the deathly eyes staring out from dust-caked faces, the naked, blistered skin. ‘Bonehunters in truth, then.’ She paused, as Pores led his healers forward with their waterskins, then said, ‘Welcome back, soldiers.’
BOOK FOUR

THE BONEHUNTERS
Who will deny that it is our nature to believe the very worst in our fellow kind? Even as cults rose and indeed coalesced into a patronomic worship – not just of Coltaine, the Winged One, the Black Feather, but too of the Chain of Dogs itself – throughout Seven Cities, with shrines seeming to grow from the very wastes along that ill-fated trail, shrines in propitiation to one dead hero after another: Bult, Lull, Mincer, Sormo E'nath, even Baria and Mesker Setral of the Red Blades; and to the Foolish Dog clan, the Weasel clan and of course the Crow and the Seventh Army itself; while at Gelor Ridge, in an ancient monastery overlooking the old battle site, a new cult centred on horses was born – even as this vast fever of veneration gripped Seven Cities, so certain agents in the heart of the Malazan Empire set loose, among the commonry, tales purporting the very opposite: that Coltaine had betrayed the empire; that he had been a renegade, secretly allied with Sha'ik. After all, had the countless refugees simply stayed in their cities, accepting the rebellion's dominion; had they not been dragged out by Coltaine and his bloodthirsty Wickans; and had the Seventh's Mage Cadre leader, Kulp, not so mysteriously disappeared, thus leaving the Malazan Army vulnerable to the sorcerous machinations and indeed manipulations of the Wickan witches and warlocks – had not all this occurred, there would have been no slaughter, no terrible ordeal of crossing half a continent exposed to every predating half-wild tribe in the wastes. And, most heinous of all, Coltaine had then, in league with the traitorous Imperial Historian, Duiker, connived to effect the subsequent betrayal and annihilation of the Aren Army, led by the naive High Fist Pormqual who was the first victim of that dread betrayal. Why else, after all, would those very rebels of Seven Cities take to the worship of such figures, if not seeing in Coltaine and the rest heroic allies ...

... In any case, whether officially approved or otherwise, the persecution of Wickans within the empire flared hot and all-consuming, given such ample fuel ...

The Year of Ten Thousand Lies
Kayessan
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

What is there left to understand? Choice is an illusion. Freedom is conceit. The hands that reach out to guide your every step, your every thought, come not from the gods, for they are no less deluded than we – no, my friends, those hands come to each of us ... from each of us.

You may believe that civilization deafens us with tens of thousands of voices, but listen well to that clamour, for with each renewed burst so disparate and myriad, an ancient force awakens, drawing each noise ever closer, until the chorus forms but two sides, each battling the other. The bloody lines are drawn, fought in the turning away of faces, in the stoppering of ears, the cold denial, and all discourse, at the last, is revealed as futile and worthless.

Will you yet hold, my friends, to the faith that change is within our grasp? That will and reason shall overcome the will of denial?

There is nothing left to understand. This mad whirlpool holds us all in a grasp that cannot be broken; and you with your spears and battle-masks; you with your tears and soft touch; you with the sardonic grin behind which screams fear and self-hatred; even you who stand aside in silent witness to our catastrophe of dissolution, too numb to act – it is all one. You are all one. We are all one.

So now come closer, my friends, and see in this modest cart before you my most precious wares. Elixir of Oblivion, Tincture of Frenzied Dancing, and here, my favourite, Unguent of Male Prowess Unending, where I guarantee your soldier will remain standing through battle after battle ...

Hawker's Harangue,
recounted by Vaylan Winder,
Malaz City, the year the city overflowed with sewage (1123 Burn's Sleep)

Rivulets of water, reeking of urine, trickled down the steps leading to Coop's Hanged Man Inn, one of the score of disreputable taverns in the Docks Quarter of Malaz City that Banaschar, once a priest of D'rek, was now in the habit of frequenting. Whatever details had once existed in his mind to distinguish one such place from another had since faded, the dyke of his resolve rotted through by frustration and a growing panic, poisonous enough to immobilize him – in spirit if not in flesh. And the ensuing deluge was surprisingly comforting, even as the waters rose ever higher.

Little different, he observed as he negotiated the treacherous, mould-slimed steps, from this cursed rain, or so the long-time locals called it, despite the clear sky overhead. Mostly rain comes down, they said, but occasionally it comes up, seeping through the crumbling cobbles of the quarter, transforming such beneath-ground establishments as Coop's into a swampy quagmire, the entrance guarded by a whining cloud of mosquitoes, and the stench of overflowed sewers wafting about so thick the old-timers announce its arrival as they would an actual person miserably named Stink – greeted if not welcomed into already sordid company.

And most sordid was Banaschar's company these days. Veterans who avoided sobriety as if it was a curse; whores who'd long since hawked their hearts of gold – if they'd ever had them in the first place; scrumy youths with a host of appropriately modest ambitions – meanest thug in this skein of fetid streets and alleys; master thief of those few belongings the poor possessed; nastiest backstabber with at least fifty knots on their wrist strings, each knot honouring someone foolish enough to trust them; and of course the usual assortment of bodyguards and muscle whose brains had been deprived of air at some point in their lives; smugglers and would-be smugglers, informants and the imperial spies to whom they informed, spies spying on the spies, hawkers of innumerable substances, users of selfsame substances on their way to the oblivion of the Abyss; and here and there, people for whom no category was possible, since they gave away nothing of their lives, their histories, their secrets.
In a way, Banaschar was one such person, on his better days. Other times, such as this one, he could make no claim to possible – if improbable – grandiosity. This afternoon, then, he had come early to Coop's, with the aim of stretching the night ahead as far as he could, well lubricated of course, which would in turn achieve an overlong and hopefully entirely blissful period of unconsciousness in one of the lice-infested rat-traps above the tavern.

It would be easy, he reflected as he ducked through the doorway and paused just within, blinking in the gloom, easy to think of clamour as a single entity, one sporting countless mouths, and to reckon the din as meaningless as the rush of brown water from a sewer pipe. Yet Banaschar had come to a new appreciation of the vagaries of the noise erupting from human throats. Most spoke to keep from thinking, but others spoke as if casting lifelines even as they drowned in whatever despairing recognition they had arrived at – perhaps during some unwelcome pause, filled with the horror of silence. A few others fit neither category. These were the ones who used the clamour surrounding them as a barrier, creating in its midst a place in which to hide, mute and indifferent, fending off the outside world.

More often than not, Banaschar – who had once been a priest, who had once immersed himself within a drone of voices singing the cadence of prayer and chant – sought out such denizens for the dubious pleasure of their company.

Through the haze of durhang and rustleaf smoke, the acrid black-tail swirls from the lamp wicks, and something that might have been mist gathered just beneath the ceiling, he saw, hunched in a booth along the back wall, a familiar figure. Familiar in the sense that Banaschar had more than a few times shared a table with the man, although Banaschar was ignorant of virtually everything about him, knowing him only as Foreigner.

A foreigner in truth, who spoke Malazan with an accent Banaschar did not recognize – in itself curious since the expriest's travels had been extensive, from Korel to Theft to Mare in the south; from Nathilog to Callows on Genabackis in the east; and, northward, from Falar to Aren to Yath Alban. And in those travels he had met other travellers, hailing from places Banaschar could not even find on any temple map. Nemil, Perish, Shal-Morzin, Elingarth, Torment, Jacuruku and Stratem. Yet this man, whom he now approached, weaving and pushing through the afternoon crowd of sailors and the local murder of veterans, this man had an accent unlike any Banaschar had ever heard.

Yet the truth of things was never as interesting as the mystery preceding the revelation, and Banaschar had come to appreciate his own ignorance. In other matters, after all, he knew far too much – and what had that availed him?

Sliding onto the greasy bench opposite the huge foreigner, the ex-priest released the clasp on his tattered cloak and shrugged free from its folds – once, long ago it seemed now, such lack of consideration for the unsightly creases that would result would have horrified him – but he had done his share since of sleeping in that cloak, senseless on a vomit-spattered floor and, twice, on the cobbles of an alley – correct comportment, alas, had ceased being a moral necessity.

He leaned back now, the rough cloth bunching behind him, as one of Coop's serving wenches arrived with a tankard of Coop's own Leech Swill, a weak, gassy ale that had acquired its name in an appropriately literal fashion. Warranting the now customary affectation of a one-eyed squint into the brass-hued brew before the first mouthful.

The foreigner had glanced up once, upon Banaschar's arrival, punctuating the gesture with a sardonic half-grin before returning his attention to the fired-clay mug of wine in his hands.

'Oh, Jakatakan grapes are all very well,' the ex-priest said, 'it's the local water that turns that wine you like so much into snake's piss.'

'Aye, bad hangovers,' Foreigner said.

'And that is desirable?'

'Aye, it is. Wakes me up again and again through the night, almost every bell, with a pounding skull and a
bladder ready to explode – but if I didn't wake up that bladder _would_ explode. See?"  

Banaschar nodded, glanced round. 'More heads than usual for an afternoon.'  

'You only think that because you ain't been here roun' this time lately. Three transports and an escort come in three nights past, from Korel.'  

The ex-priest studied the other customers a little more carefully this time. 'They talking much?'  

'Sounds it to me.'  

'About the campaign down there?'  

Foreigner shrugged. 'Go ask 'em if you like.'  

'No. Too much effort. The bad thing about asking questions—'  

'Is gettin' answers, aye – you've said that before.'  

'That is another bad thing – the way we all end up saying the same things over and over again.'  

'That's you, not me. And, you're gettin' worse.'  

Banaschar swallowed two mouthfuls, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand. 'Worse. Yes indeed.'  

'Never good,' Foreigner observed, 'seeing a man in a hurry.'  

'It's a race,' Banaschar said. 'Do I reach the edge and plunge over or does my salvation arrive in time? Lay down a few coins on the outcome – I'd suggest the former but that's just between you and me.'  

The huge man – who rarely met anyone's eyes while talking, and whose massive hands and wrists were scarred and puckered with weals – shook his head and said, 'If that salvation's a woman, only a fool would wager agin me.'  

Banaschar grimaced and lifted his tankard. 'A fine idea. Let's toast all the lost loves in the world, friend. What happened to yours or is that too personal a question for this dubious relationship of ours?'  

'You jumped on the wrong stone,' the man said. 'My love ain't lost, an' maybe some days I'd think of swapping places wi' you, but not today. Not yesterday neither, nor the day afore that. Come to think of it—'  

'No need to continue. My salvation is not a woman, or if she was, it wouldn't be because she's a woman, if you understand me.'  

'So, we just had one of them hypothetical conversations?'  

'Learned Malazan from an educated sailor, did you? In any case, hypothetical is the wrong word for what you mean, I think. More like, metaphorical.'  

'You sure of that?'  

'Of course not, but that's not the point, is it? The woman's a broken heart, or maybe just a mud slide you ride until it buries you, until it buries all of us.' Banaschar finished his ale, waved the tankard in the air for a moment, then settled back with a belch. 'Heard about a Napan sailor, drank a keg's worth of Leech Swill, then, standing too close to a lit wick, went and blew off most of his backside. How does that illuminate matters, I wonder?'  

'Momentarily, I'd imagine.'  

Satisfied with that answer, Banaschar said nothing. A server arrived with a pitcher with which she refilled the ex-priest's tankard. He watched her leave, swaying through the press, a woman with things that needed doing.
It was easy to think of an island as isolated – certainly most islanders shared a narrow perspective, a blend of smug arrogance and self-obsession – but the isolation was superficial, a mere conceit. Drain the seas and the rocky ground linking everything was revealed; the followers of D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, understood this well enough. Rumours, attitudes, styles, beliefs rattling chains of conviction, all rolled over the waves as easily as the wind, and those that fitted comfortably soon became to the islanders their own – and indeed, as far as they were concerned, had originated with them in the first place.

There had been a purge, and the air still smelled of ash from the Mouse Quarter, where mobs had descended on the few dislocated Wickan families resident there – stablers, stitchers and riveters of leather tack, weavers of saddle blankets, an old woman who healed dray horses and mules – and had, with appalling zeal, dragged them from their hovels and shacks, children and elders and all in between; then, after looting them of their scant possessions, the mob had set fire to those homes. Herded into the street and surrounded, the Wickans had then been stoned to death.

Coltaine wasn't dead, people said. That entire tale was a lie, as was the more recent rumour that Sha'ik had been killed by the Adjunct. An imposter, it was said, a sacrificial victim to deflect the avenging army. And as for the rebellion itself, well, it had not been crushed. It had simply disappeared, the traitors ducking low once more, weapons sheathed and hidden beneath telaba. True enough, the Adjunct had even now chased down Leoman of the Flails, trapping him in Y'Ghatan, but even that was but a feint. The Red Blades were once more free in Aren, the bones of the betrayed High Fist Pormqual broken and scattered along Aren Way, the grasses already growing thick on the barrows holding Pormqual's betrayed army.

Had not concerned residents of Aren journeyed out to the hill known as The Fall? And there dug holes into the barrow in search of the cursed Coltaine's bones? And Bult's, Mincer's, Lull's? Had they not found nothing? AM lies. The traitors had one and all disappeared, including Duiker, the imperial historian whose betrayal of his Empress – and of the empire itself – was perhaps the foulest moment of them all.

And finally, the latest news. Of a disastrous siege. Of terrible plague in Seven Cities. Disparate, disconnected, yet like pokers thrust into the fire, sending sparks bursting into the dark. And, in whispers harsh with the conviction of truth, Sha'ik Reborn had reappeared, and now called to her more followers.

The last pebbles on the cart.

Down in the Mouse, the mob had acted on its own. The mob needed no leaders, no imperial directives – the mob understood justice, and on this island – this birthplace of the empire – justice was held in red hands. The battered, pulped corpses were dumped in the river, which was too turgid, too thick with sewage and refuse, the culverts beneath the bridges too narrow to carry those bodies through and out into the bay.

And this too was seen as an omen. The ancient sea god had rejected those corpses. Mael, empowered by the enlivening of faith here on the island, would not accept them into the salty bay of Malaz Harbour – what greater proof was needed?

The Emperor's ghost had been seen, in the overgrown yard of the Deadhouse, a ghost feeding on the souls of the slaughtered Wickans.

In the D'rek temples in Jakata and here in Malaz City, the priests and priestesses had vanished, sent out at night, it was whispered, to hunt down the rest of the Wickans left on the island – the ones who'd fled upon hearing of the purge in Malaz City – for the Worm of Autumn herself hungered for Wickan blood.

An army of citizens was said to be massing on the old borders, at the edge of the Wickan Plains on the mainland, and was about to march, with the aim of destroying every last damned betrayer in their squalid, stinking huts. And had the Empress sent out her legions to disperse that army? No, of course not, for she approved.

The Imperial High Mage Tayschrenn was in Malaz City, ensconced in Mock's Hold. What had brought him here? And why so public a visit – the strange sorcerer was legendary for moving unseen, for acting behind the scenes to ensure the health of the empire. He was the very foundation of Laseen's power, after all, her left hand where the right belonged to the Claw. If he was here, it was to oversee—
He is here. Banaschar could feel the bastard, an aura brooding and ominous drifting down from Mock's Hold. Day upon day, night after night. And why? Oh, all you fools.

For the same reason I am here.

Six messengers thus far. Six, all paid enough to be reliable, all swearing afterwards that they had passed the urgent missive on – to the Hold's gate watchman, that bent creature said to be as old as Mock's Hold itself, who had in turn nodded each time, saying he would deliver the missive to the High Mage.

And yet, no reply. No summons.

Someone is intercepting my messages. There can be no other possibility. True, I was coy in what I said – how could I not be? But Tayschrenn would recognize my sigil, and he would understand ... with heart suddenly pounding, cold sweat on the skin, with trembling hands ... he would have understood. Instantly.

Banaschar did not know what to do. The last messenger had been three weeks ago.

'It's that desperate glint in your eye,' the man opposite him said, half-grinning once again, though his gaze slid away as soon as Banaschar focused on him.

'Enamoured, are you?'

'No, but close to curious. Been watching you these weeks. Giving up, but slowly. Most people do that in an instant. Rising from bed, walking to the window, then standing there, motionless, seeing nothing, as inside it all falls down with nary a whisper, nary a cloud of dust to mark its collapse, its vanishing into nothingness.'

'You do better talking and thinking like a damned sailor,' Banaschar said.

'The more I drink, the clearer and steadier I get.'

'That's a bad sign, friend.'

'I collect those. You ain't the only one cursed with waiting.'

'Months!' 

'Years for me,' the man said, dipping into his cup with one blunt finger, fishing out a moth that had landed in the wine.

'Sounds like you're the one who should have given up long ago.'

'Maybe, but I've come to a kind of faith. Not long now, I'd swear it. Not long.'

Banaschar snorted. 'The drowning man converses with the fool, a night to beggar acrobats, jugglers and dancers, come one come all, two silvers buys you endless – and I do mean endless – entertainment.'

'I ain't too unfamiliar with drowning, friend.'

'Meaning?'

'Something tells me, when it comes to fools, you might say the same thing.'

Banaschar looked away. Saw another familiar face, another huge man – shorter than the foreigner opposite but equally as wide, his hairless pate marked with liver spots, scars seaming every part of his body. He was just collecting a tankard of Coop's Old Malazan Dark. The ex-priest raised his voice. 'Hey, Temper! There's room to sit here!' He sidled along the bench, watched as the old yet still formidable man – a veteran without doubt – made his way over.

At least now the conversation could slip back into the meaningless.

Still. Another bastard waiting ... for something. Only, with him, I suspect it'd be a bad thing if it ever arrived.
Somewhere in the vaults of a city far, far away, rotted a wall hanging. Rolled up, home to nesting mice, the genius of the hands that had woven it slowly losing its unwitnessed war to the scurry-beetle grub, tawryn worms and ash moths. Yet, for all that, the darkness of its abandonment hid colours still vibrant here and there, and the scene depicted on that huge tapestry retained enough elements of the narrative that meaning was not lost. It might survive another fifty years before finally surrendering to the ravages of neglect.

The world, Ahlrada Ahn knew, was indifferent to the necessity of preservation. Of histories, of stories layered with meaning and import. It cared nothing for what was forgotten, for memory and knowledge had never been able to halt the endless repetition of wilful stupidity that so bound peoples and civilizations.

The tapestry had once commanded an entire wall, to the right when facing the Obsidian Throne – from which, before the annexation, the High King of Bluerose, Supreme Servant to the Black Winged Lord, had ruled, and flanking the dais, the Council of the Onyx Wizards, all attired in their magnificent cloaks of supple, liquid stone – but no, it was the tapestry that so haunted Ahlrada Ahn.

The narrative began at the end furthest from the throne. Three figures against a midnight background. Three brothers, born in pure Darkness and most cherished by their mother. All cast out, now, although each had come to that in his own time. Andarist, whom she saw as the first betrayer, an accusation all knew was mistaken, yet the knot of falsehoods had closed tight around him and none could pry it loose except Andarist himself – and that he could or would not do. Filled with unbearable grief, he had accepted his banishment, making his final words these: welcome or not, he would continue his guardianship of Mother Dark, in isolation, and in this would be found the measure of his life. Yet even to that promise, she had turned away. His brothers could not but recognize the crime of this, and it was Anomandaris Purake who was first to confront Mother Dark. What words passed between them only they knew, although the dire consequence was witnessed by all – Anomander turned his back on her. He walked away, denying the Darkness in his blood and seeking out, in its stead, the Chaos that ever warred in his veins. Silchas Ruin, the most enigmatic of the brothers, had seemed a man riven by indecision, trapped by impossible efforts at mitigation, at reconciliation, until all constraint was sundered, and so he committed the greatest crime of all. Alliance with Shadow. Even as war broke out among the Tiste – a war that continues unchecked to this day.

There had been victories, defeats, great slaughters, then, in that final gesture of despair, Silchas Ruin and his followers joined with the legions of Shadow and their cruel commander Scabandari – who would come to be known as Bloodeye – in their flight through the gates. To this world. But betrayal ever haunts those three brothers. And so, in the moment of supreme victory against the K’Chain Che’Malle, Silchas Ruin had fallen to Scabandari’s knife, and his followers had in turn fallen to Tiste Edur swords.

Such was the second scene in the tapestry. The betrayal, the slaughter. But that slaughter had not been as thorough as the Edur believed. Tiste Andii had survived – the wounded, the stragglers, the elders and mothers and children left well behind the field of battle. They had witnessed. They had fled.

The third scene portrayed their fraught flight, the desperate defence against their pursuers by four barely grown sorcerers – who would become the founders of the Onyx Order – the victory that gave them respite, enough to make good their escape and, through new unfoldings of magic, elude the hunters and so fashion a sanctuary—

In caves buried beneath mountains on the shore of the inland sea, caves in which grew flowers of sapphire, intricate as roses, from which kingdom, mountains and sea derived their common name. Bluerose, and so, the last and most poignant scene, closest to the throne, closest to my heart.

His people, the few thousand that remained, once more hid in those deep caves, as the tyranny of the Edur raged like madness over all of Lether. A madness that has devoured me.

The Hiroth bireme drummed like thunder in the heaving swells of this fierce north sea the locals called Kokakal, and Ahlrada gripped the rail with both hands as bitter cold spray repeatedly struck his face, as if he was the subject of an enraged god’s wrath. And perhaps he was, and if so, then it was well-earned as far as he was concerned.

He had been born the child of spies, and through generation after generation, his bloodline had dwelt in the
midst of the Tiste Edur, thriving without suspicion in the chaos of the seemingly endless internecine disputes between the tribes. Hannan Mosag had ended that, of course, but by then the Watchers, such as Ahlrada Ahn and others, were well in place, their blood histories thoroughly mixed and inseparable from the Edur.

Bleaches for the skin, the secret gestures of communication shared among the hidden Andii, the subtle manipulations to ensure a presence among eminent gatherings – this was Ahlrada Ahn’s life – and had the tribes remained in their northern fastness, it would have been ... palatable, until such time as he set out on a hunting expedition, from which he would never return – his loss mourned by his adopted tribe, while in truth Ahlrada would have crossed the south edge of the ice wastes, would have walked the countless leagues until he reached Bluerose. Until he came home.

That home was ... not as it had once been. The sanctuary was under siege – true, by an unsuspecting enemy, who as yet knew nothing of the catacombs beneath their feet, but they now ruled, the chosen elites in their positions of supreme power, from which all manner of depravity and cruelty descended. From the Emperor, the foul blood flows down, and down ... No Letherii reign had ever fallen as far as had Rhulad’s and that of his Edur ‘nobles’. Pray that it ends. Pray that, one day, historians will write of this dark period in the history of Letheras as The Nightmare Age, a title of truth to warn the future.

He did not believe it. Not a word of the prayer he had voiced in his head ten thousand times. We saw the path Rhulad would take. Saw it when the Emperor banished his own brother – Gods, I was there, in the Nascent. I was one of the ‘brothers’ of Rhulad, his new extended family of cowering fawners. May the Black Winged Lord preserve me, I watched as the one Edur I admired, the one Edur I respected, was broken down. No, I did more than watch. I added my voice to Rhulad’s ritual shorning of Trull. And Trull’s crime? Why, nothing more than yet one more desperate attempt to bring Rhulad home. Ah, by the Dark Mother herself ... but Ahlrada Ahn had never dared, not once, not even in those early days when Trull struggled to turn the tide, no, he had himself turned away, rejecting every opportunity to unveil words that he knew Trull had needed, and would see and cherish as gifts. I was a coward. My soul fled the risk, and there is no going back.

In the days following Rhulad’s ascension to the Letherii crown, Ahlrada had led a company of Arapay warriors out of Letheras, seeking the trail of the new Emperor’s betrayers – his brother Fear, and that slave Udinaas. They had failed to discover any sign of them, and in that Ahlrada had found some small measure of victory. Rhulad’s rage had nearly resulted in mass executions, Ahlrada and his searchers foremost among them, but the wreckage that remained of Hannan Mosag had managed to impose some control on Rhulad – the Emperor had great need for Tiste Edur warriors, not just in the occupation and rule of the empire, but yet more in the vast expeditions that were even then being planned.

Expeditions such as this one. Had he known what these journeys would entail, Ahlrada might well have elected for the execution Rhulad had been so eager to provide in those early days in Letheras.

Since that time ... all that we have done in his cursed name ...

We follow him – what has that made of us? Oh, Trull, you were right, and not one of us was brave enough to stand at your side when it mattered most.

His memories of Trull Sengar haunted Ahlrada Ahn. No, his memories of everything haunted him, yet they had converged, found focus in one lone, honourable warrior of the Tiste Edur.

He stood on the huge ship, eyes on the tumultuous seas, his face long since grown numb from the icy spray. Whilst in the waters to all sides more ships rolled in the heavy waves, one half of the Third Edur Imperial Fleet seeking a way round this enormous continent. Below decks and in the rigging, on each and every ship, laboured Letherii crews, even the lesser marines. While their overlords did nothing, beyond consuming wine and the endless courses of meals; or took to their sumptuous beds Letherii slave women, and those that they used up, left broken and raving with the poison of Edur seed, were simply flung over the rail for the ever-following huge grey sharks and the pods of yearling dhenrabi.

One half of the fleet in these seas. Commanded by Tomad Sengar, the Emperor’s father.

And how well have we done thus far, dear Tomad? A bare handful of dubious champions, challengers to deliver home and into the cast of your youngest son’s manic gaze.
And let us not forget the fallen kin we have found. Where have they come from? Even they don’t know. Yet do we treat them as long-lost kin? Do our arms open wide for them? No, they are lesser creatures, blood befouled by failure, by destitution. Our gift is contempt, though we proclaim it liberation.

But, I was thinking of champions ... and Rhulad’s insatiable hunger that sends out into this world fleet upon fleet. Tomad. How well have we done?

He thought to their latest Guests, down below, and there was the sense, no more than a whisper in the murk of his rolled-up, rotted, moth-eaten soul, that perhaps, this time, they had found someone truly formidable. Someone who just might make Rhulad choke on his own blood, even more than once ... although, as always, there would come that terrible scream ...  

We are made, and unmade, and so it goes on. For ever.

And I will never see my home.

With eyes the colour of weathered granite, the Letherii Marine Commander, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, known to her soldiers as Twilight, looked down upon the sickly man. The gloomy hold of the ship was fetid and damp, the walkway above the keel smeared with puke and slimy mould. Creaks and thumps filled the air with the impact of every wave against the hull. The muted light of lanterns pitched about, making riotous the shadows. 'Here,' she said. 'Drink this.'

The man looked up, red-rimmed eyes set in a face the hue of whale fat. 'Drink?' Even the word seemed nearly sufficient to double him over yet again, but she saw him struggle mightily against the impulse.

'I speak your language not well,' she said. 'Drink. Two swallows. Wait, then more.'

'I'll not keep it down,' the man said.

'No matter. Two, you feel better. Then more. Sick goes.'

With a trembling hand, he accepted the small patinated glass bottle.

'Ceda make,' Twilight said. 'Made, generations ago. Sick goes.'

He swallowed once, then twice, was motionless for a moment, then he lunged to one side. Spitting, coughing, gasping, then, 'Spirits take me, yes.'

'Better?'

A nod.

'Drink rest. It will stay.'

He did so, then settled back, eyes closed. 'Better. Better, yes.'

'Good. Now, go to him.' She pointed towards the bow, twenty paces further along the walkway, where a figure leaned, huddled against the prow’s uplift. 'Preda Tomad Sengar has doubts. Champion will not survive voyage. Will not eat, drink. Wastes away. Go to him. You claim much, his prowess. We see otherwise. We see only weakness.'

The man lying on the walkway would not meet her eyes, but he slowly sat up, then climbed awkwardly, unevenly to his feet. Legs wide to maintain his balance, he straightened.

Spat into the palms of his hands, rubbed his palms together for a moment, then swept both hands back through his hair.

Taralack Veed met the woman's eyes. 'Now, you are the one looking ill,' he said, frowning. 'What is wrong?' Twilight simply shook her head. 'Go. The Preda must be convinced. Else we throw you both over side.'
The Gral warrior turned about and made his way, crablike, up the walkway. To either side of him, pressed together between crates and casks, were chained figures. Greyskinned like their captors, almost as tall, with many bearing facial traits that revealed Edur blood. Yet, here they were, rotting in their own filth, their dull, owlish gazes following Taralack as he made his way forward.

The Gral crouched before Icarium, reached out a hand to rest it on the warrior's shoulder.

'Icarium flinched at the contact.

'Very friend,' Taralack said in a low voice. 'I know this is not illness of the flesh that so afflicts you. It is illness of the spirit. You must struggle against it, Icarium.'

The Jhag was drawn up, knees to his chest, arms wrapped tight, the position reminding the Gral of the burial style practised by the Ehrlii. For a long moment, there was no response to his words, then a shudder racked the figure curled up before him. 'I cannot do this,' Icarium said, lifting his head to fix despairing eyes upon Taralack. 'I do not wish ... I do not wish to kill anyone!'

Taralack rubbed at his face. Spirits below, that draught from Twilight had done wonders. *I can do this.* Icarium. Look down this walkway. Look upon these filthy creatures – who were told they were being liberated from their oppressors. Who came to believe that in these Edur was their salvation. But no. *Their blood is not pure.* It is muddied – they were slaves! Fallen so far, knowing nothing of their own history, the glory of their past – yes, I know, *what glory?* But look upon them! What manner of demons are these Tiste Edur and their damned empire? To so treat their own kind? Now tell me, Icarium, what have I procured for you? Tell me!'

The warrior's expression was ravaged, horror swimming in his eyes – and something else, a light of wildness. 'For what we witnessed,' the Jhag whispered. 'For what we saw them do ...'

'Venience,' Taralack Veed said, nodding.

Icarium stared at him like a drowning man. 'Venience ...'

'But you will not be given that chance, Icarium. The Preda loses faith in you – in me – and we are in grave peril of being thrown to the sharks—'

'They ask me to kill their emperor, Taralack Veed. It makes no sense—'

'What they ask,' the Gral said, baring his teeth, 'and what you shall deliver, are two entirely different things.'

'Venience,' Icarium said again, as if tasting the word, then he brought both hands to his face. 'No, no, it is not for me. Already too much blood – more can achieve nothing. I will be no different than them!' He reached out suddenly and grasped Taralack, dragging him close. 'Don't you see that? More innocent lives—'

'Innocent? You fool, Icarium – can't you understand? *Innocence is a lie!* None of us is innocent! Not one! Show me one, please, I beg you – show me that I am wrong! He twisted round in the Jhag's iron grip, jabbed a finger towards the huddled forms of the slaves. 'We both witnessed, did we not? Yesterday! Two of those pathetic fools, choking the life out of a third one – all three in chains, Icarium, all three starving, dying! Yet, some old quarrel, some old stupidity, unleashed one last time! Victims? Oh yes, no doubt of that. Innocent? Hah! And may the spirits above and below strike me down if my judgement is false!'

Icarium stared at him, then, slowly, his long fingers relaxed their grip on the Gral's hide shirt.

'My friend,' Taralack said, 'you must eat. You must keep your strength. This empire of the Tiste Edur, it is an abomination, ruled by a madman whose only talent is with a sword, and to that the weak and strong must bow, for such is the cast of the world. To defy the powerful is to invite subjugation and annihilation – you know this, Icarium. Yet you and you alone, friend, possess what is necessary to destroy that abomination. This is what you were born to do. You are the final weapon of justice – do not waver before this flood of inequity. Feed upon what you have witnessed – what we have witnessed – and all that we shall see on the voyage ahead. Feed on it, to fuel the justice within you – until it is blinding with power. Icarium, do not let these terrible Edur defeat you – as they are doing now.'
A voice spoke behind him. Twilight. 'The Preda considers a test. For this warrior.'

Taralack Veed turned, looked up at the woman. 'What do you mean? What sort of test?'

'We fight many wars. We walk paths of Chaos and Shadow.'

The Gral's eyes narrowed. 'We?'

She grimaced. 'The Edur now rule Lether. Where they lead, Letherii must follow. Edur swords make river of blood, and from river of blood, there is river of gold. The loyal have grown rich, so very rich.'

'And the disloyal?'

'They tend the oars. Indebted. It is so.'

'And you, Atri-Preda? Are you loyal?'

She studied him, silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then she said, 'Each champion believes. By their sword the Emperor shall die. What is believed and what is true is not same,' she said, strangely twisting Taralack's own words. 'To what is true, I am loyal. The Preda considers a test.'

'Very well,' the Gral said, then held his breath, dreading a refusal from Icarium. But none came. Ah, that is good.

The woman walked away, armour rustling like coins spilling onto gravel.

Taralack Veed stared after her.

'She hides herself,' Icarium said in a low, sad voice. 'Yet her soul dies from within.'

'Do you believe, my friend,' the Gral said, turning back to the Jhag once more, 'that she alone suffers in silence? That she alone cowers, her honour besieged by what she must do?'

Icarium shook his head.

'Then think of her when your resolve falters, friend. Think of Twilight. And all the others like her.'

A wan smile. 'Yet you say there is no innocence.'

'An observation that does not obviate the demand for justice, Icarium.'

The Jhag's gaze shifted, down and away, and seemed to focus on the slime-laden planks of the hull to his right. 'No,' he whispered in a hollow tone, 'I suppose it doesn't.'

Sweat glistened on the rock walls, as if the pressure of the world had grown unbearable. The man who had just appeared, as if from nowhere, stood motionless for a time, the dark grey of his cloak and hood making him indistinct in the gloom, but the only witnesses to this peculiarity were both indifferent and blind – the maggots writhing in torn, rotting flesh among the sprawl of bodies that stretched before him down the chasm's elongated, rough floor.

The stench was overpowering, and Cotillion could feel himself engulfed in grief-laden familiarity, as if this was the true scent of existence. There had been times – he was almost certain – when he'd known unmitigated joy, but so faded were they to his recollection that he had begun to suspect the fictional conjuring of nostalgia. As with civilizations and their golden ages, so too with people: each individual ever longing for that golden past moment of true peace and wellness.

So often it was rooted in childhood, in a time before the strictures of enlightenment had afflicted the soul, when what had seemed simple unfolded its complexity like the petals of a poison flower, to waft its miasma of decay.
The bodies were of young men and women – too young in truth to be soldiers, although soldiers they had been. Their memories of solace would likely have been scoured from their minds back when, in a place and a world they had once called home, they hung nailed by iron spikes to wooden crosses, uncomprehending of their crimes. Of course there had been no such crimes. And the blood, which they had shed so profusely, had yielded no evidence of its taint, for neither the name of a people nor the hue of their skin, nor indeed the cast of their features, could make life's blood any less pure, or precious.

Wilful fools with murder in their rotted hearts believed otherwise. They divided the dead into innocent victim and the rightfully punished, and knew with unassailable conviction upon which side they themselves stood. With such conviction, the plunging of knives proved so very easy.

Here they had fought hard, he observed as he pushed himself into motion. A pitched battle, then an engaged withdrawal. Proof of superior training, discipline and a fierce unwillingness to yield without exacting a price. The enemy had taken their own fallen away, but for these young dead, the chasm itself was now their crypt. Saved from their crucifixions ... for this.

There had been so many ... pressing tasks. Essential necessities. That we neglected this company, a company we ourselves ensconced here, to defend what we claimed our own. And then, it must have seemed, we abandoned them. And in that grim conclusion they would, he admitted sourly, not be far wrong. But we are assailed on all sides, now. We are in our most desperate moment. Right now ... oh, my fallen friends, I am sorry for this ...

A conceit among the living, that their words could ease the dead. Worse, to voice words seeking forgiveness from those dead. The fallen had but one message to deliver to the living, and it had nothing to do with forgiveness. Remind yourself of that, Cotillion. Be ever mindful of what the dead tell you and everyone else, over and over again.

He heard noises ahead. Muted, a rhythmic rasping sound, like iron edges licking leather, then the soft pad of moccasined feet.

The natural corridor of the chasm narrowed, and blocking the choke-point was a T’lan Imass, sword-point resting on the rock before it, watching Cotillion's approach. Beyond the undead warrior there was the dull yellow glow of lanterns, a passing shadow, another, then a figure stepped into view.

'Stand aside, Ibra Gholan,' Minala said, her eyes on Cotillion.

Her armour was in tatters. A spear-point had punctured chain and leather high on her chest, the left side, just beneath the shoulder. Old blood crusted the edges. One side of her helm's cheek-guard was gone and the area of her face made visible by its absence was swollen and mottled with bruises. Her extraordinary light grey eyes were fixed on Cotillion's own as she moved past the T'lan Imass. 'They arrive through a gate,' she said. 'A warren lit by silver fire.'

'Chaos,' he said. 'Proof of the alliance we had feared would come to pass. Minala, how many attacks have you repulsed?'

'Four.' She hesitated, then reached up and worked her helm loose, lifting it clear. Sweat-matted, filthy black hair snaked down. 'My children ... the losses have been heavy.'

Cotillion could not hold her gaze any longer. Not with that admission.

She went on. 'If not for the T'lan Imass... and Apt, and the Tiste Edur renegade, this damned First Throne would now be in the possession of an army of blood-hungry barbarians.'

'Thus far, then,' Cotillion ventured, 'your attackers have been exclusively Tiste Edur?'

'Yes.' She studied him for a long moment. 'That will not last, will it?'

Cotillion's eyes focused once again on Ibra Gholan.

Minala continued, 'The Edur are but skirmishers, aren't they? And even they have not fully committed
themselves to this cause. Why?

'They are as thinly stretched as we are, Minala.'

'Ahh, then I cannot expect more Aptorians. What of the other demons of your realm, Cotillion? Azalan? Dinal? Can you give us nothing?'

'We can,' he said. 'But not now.'

'When?'

He looked at her. 'When the need is greatest.'

Minala stepped close. 'You bastard. I had thirteen hundred. Now I have four hundred still capable of fighting.' She jabbed a finger towards the area beyond the chokepoint. 'Almost three hundred more lie dying of wounds — and there is nothing I can do for them!'

'Shadowthrone will be informed,' Cotillion said. 'He will come. He will heal your wounded—'

'When?'

The word was nearly a snarl.

'When I leave here,' he replied, 'I am returning directly to Shadowkeep. Minala, I would speak with the others.'

'Who? Why?'

Cotillion frowned, then said, 'The renegade. Your Tiste Edur. I have ... questions.'

'I have never seen such skill with the spear. Trull Sengar kills, and kills, and then, when it is done and he kneels in the blood of the kin he has slain, he weeps.'

'Do they know him?' Cotillion asked. 'Do they call him by name?'

'No. He says they are Den-Ratha, and young. Newly blooded. But he then says, it is only a matter of time. Those Edur that succeed in withdrawing, they must be reporting the presence of an Edur among the defenders of the First Throne. Trull says that one of his own tribe will be among the attackers, and he will be recognized — and it is then, he says, that they will come in force, with warlocks. He says, Cotillion, that he will bring ruin upon us all.'

'Does he contemplate leaving?' Cotillion asked.

She scowled. 'To that he gives no answer. If he did, I would not blame him. And,' she added, 'if he chooses to stay, I may well die with his name the last curse I voice in this world. Or, more likely, the second last name.'

He nodded, understanding. 'Trull Sengar remains, then, out of honour.'

'And that honour spells our doom.'

Cotillion ran a hand through his hair, mildly surprised to discover how long it had grown. I need to find a hair hacker. One trustworthy enough with a blade at my neck. He considered that. Well, is it any wonder gods must do such mundane tasks for themselves? Listen to yourself, Cotillion — your mind would flee from this moment. Meet this woman's courage with your own. The arrival of warlocks among the Tiste Edur will prove a difficult force to counter—'

'We have the bonecaster,' she said. 'As yet he has remained hidden. Inactive. For, like Trull Sengar, he is a lodestone.'

Cotillion nodded. 'Will you lead me in, Minala?'

In answer she turned about and gestured that he follow.
The cavern beyond was a nightmare vision. The air was fetid, thick as that of a slaughterhouse. Dried blood covered the stone floor like a crumbling, pasty carpet. Pale faces – too young by far – turned to look upon Cotillion with ancient eyes drained of all hope. The god saw Apt, the demon’s black hide ribbed with grey, barely healed scars, and crouched at her lone forefoot, Panek, his huge, faceted eye glittering. The forehead above that ridged eye displayed a poorly stitched slice, result of a blow that had peeled back his scalp from just above one side of the eye’s orbital, across to the temple opposite.

Three figures rose, emerging from gloom as they walked towards Cotillion. The Patron God of Assassins halted. Monok Ochem, the clanless T’lan Imass known as Onrack the Broken, and the renegade Tiste Edur, Trail Sengar. I wonder, would these three, along with Ibra Gholan, have been enough? Did we need to fling Minala and her young charges into this horror?

Then, as they drew closer, Cotillion saw Onrack and Trull more clearly. Beaten down, slashed, cut. Half of Onrack’s skeletal head was shorn away. Ribs had caved in from some savage blow, and the upper ridge of his hip, on the left side, had been chopped away, revealing the porous interior of the bone. Trull was without armour, and had clearly entered battle lacking such protection. The majority of his wounds – deep gashes, puncture holes – were on his thighs, beneath the hips and to the outside – signs of a spear-wielder’s style of parrying with the middle-haft of the weapon. The Edur could barely walk, leaning heavily on the battered spear in his hands.

Cotillion found it difficult to meet the Edur’s exhausted, despair-filled eyes. ’When the time comes,’ he said to the grey-skinned warrior, ’help shall arrive.’

Onrack the Broken spoke. ’When they win the First Throne, they will realize the truth. That it is not for them. They can hold it, but they cannot use it. Why, then, Cotillion of Shadow, do these brave mortals surrender their lives here?’

’Perhaps we but provide a feint,’ Monok Ochem said, the bonecaster’s tone as inflectionless as Onrack’s had been.

’No,’ Cotillion said. ’More than that. It is what they would do upon making that discovery. They will unleash the warren of Chaos in this place – in the chamber where resides the First Throne. Monok Ochem, they shall destroy it, and so destroy its power.’

’Is such a deed cause for regret?’ Onrack asked.

Shaken, Cotillion had no reply.

Monok Ochem pivoted to regard Onrack the Broken. ’This one speaks the words of the Unbound. He fights not to defend the First Throne. He fights only to defend Trull Sengar. He alone is the reason the Tiste Edur still lives.’

’This is true,’ Onrack replied. ’I accept no authority other than my own will, the desires I choose to act upon, and the judgements I make for myself. This, Monok Ochem, is the meaning of freedom.’

’Don’t—’ Trull Sengar said, turning away.

’Trull Sengar?’

’No, Onrack. Do you not see? You invite your own annihilation, and all because I do not know what to do, all because I cannot decide – anything. And so here I remain, as chained as I was when you first found me in the Nascent.’

’Trull Sengar,’ Onrack said after a moment, ’you fight to save lives. The lives of these youths here. You stand in their stead, again and again. This is a noble choice. Through you, I discover the gift of fighting in defence of honour, the gift of a cause that is worthy. I am not as I once was. I am not as Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. Expedience is no longer enough. Expedience is the murderer’s lie.’

’For Hood’s sake,’ Cotillion said to Monok Ochem, feeling exasperated, brittle with frustration, ’can you not call upon kin? A few hundred T’lan Imass – there must be some lying around somewhere, doing nothing as is
The empty eyes remained ... empty. 'Cotillion of Shadow. Your companion claimed the First Throne—'

'Then he need only command the T'lan Imass to attend—'

'No. The others journey to a war. A war of self preservation'

'To Hood with Assail!' Cotillion shouted, his voice echoing wildly in the cavern. 'This is nothing but damned pride! You cannot win there! You send clan after clan, all into the same destructive maw! You damned fools – disengage! There is nothing worth fighting for on that miserable nightmare of a continent! Don't you see? Among the Tyrants there, it is nothing but a game!

'It is the nature of my people,' Onrack said – and Cotillion could detect a certain tone in the words, something like vicious irony – 'to believe in their own supreme efficacy. They mean to win that game, Cotillion of Shadow, or greet oblivion. They accept no alternatives. Pride? It is not pride. It is the very reason to exist.'

'We face greater threats—'

'And they do not care,' Onrack cut in. 'This you must understand, Cotillion of Shadow. Once, long ago by mortal standards, now, your companion found the First Throne. He occupied it and so gained command over the T'lan Imass. Even then, it was a tenuous grasp, for the power of the First Throne is ancient. Indeed, its power wanes. Shadowthrone was able to awaken Logros T'lan Imass – a lone army, finding itself still bound to the First Throne's remnant power due to little more than mere proximity. He could not command Kron T'lan Imass, nor Bentract, nor Ifayle, nor the others that remained, for they were too distant. When Shadowthrone last sat upon the First Throne, he was mortal, he was bound to no other aspect. He had not ascended. But now, he is impure, and this impurity ever weakens his command. Cotillion, as your companion loses ever more substance, so too does he lose ... veracity.'

Cotillion stared at the broken warrior, then looked over at Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. 'And these, then,' he said in a low voice, 'represent ... token obedience.'

The bonecaster said, 'We must seek to preserve our own kind, Cotillion of Shadow.'

'And if the First Throne is lost?'

A clattering shrug.

_Gods below. Now, at last, I understand why we lost Logros's undead army in the middle of the Seven Cities campaign. Why they just ... left._ He shifted his gaze back to Onrack the Broken. 'Is it possible,' he asked, 'to restore the power of the First Throne?'

'Say nothing,' Monok Ochem commanded.

Onrack's half-shattered head slowly turned to regard the bonecaster. 'You do not compel me. I am unbound.'

At some silent order, Ibra Gholan lifted his stone weapon and faced Onrack.

Cotillion raised his hands. 'Wait! Onrack, do not answer my question. Let's forget I ever asked it. There's no need for this – haven't we enough enemies as it is?'

'You,' said Monok Ochem to the god, 'are dangerous. You think what must not be thought, you speak aloud what must not be said. You are as a hunter who walks a path no-one else can see. We must consider the implications.' The bonecaster turned away, bony feet scraping as he walked towards the chamber of the First Throne. After a moment, Ibra Gholan lowered his blade and thumped off in Monok Ochem's wake.

Cotillion reached up to run his hand through his hair once again, and found his brow slick with sweat.

'And so,' Trull Sengar said, with a hint of a smile, 'you have taken our measure, Cotillion. And from this visit, we in turn receive equally bitter gifts. Namely, the suggestion that all we do here, in defence of this First Throne, is without meaning. So, do you now elect to withdraw us from this place?' His eyes narrowed on the
god, and the ironic half-smile gave way to ... something else. 'I thought not.'

Perhaps indeed I walk an unseen path – one even I am blind to – but now the necessity of following it could not be greater. 'We will not abandon you,' he said.

'So you claim,' muttered Minala behind him.

Cotillion stepped to one side. 'I have summoned Shadowthrone,' he said to her.

A wry expression. 'Summoned?'

'We grant each other leave to do such things, Minala, as demands dictate.'

'Companions in truth, then. I thought that you were subservient to Shadowthrone, Cotillion. Do you now claim otherwise?'

He managed a smile. 'We are fully aware of each other's complementary talents,' he replied, and left it at that.

'There wasn't enough time,' she said.

'For what?'

'For training. For the years needed ... for them. To grow up. To live.'

He said nothing, for she was right.

'Take them with you,' Minala said. 'Now. I will remain, as will Apt and Panek. Cotillion, please, take them with you.'

'I cannot.'

'Why?'

He glanced over at Onrack. 'Because, Minala, I am not returning to the Realm of Shadow—'

'Wherever you are going,' she said in a suddenly harsh voice, 'it must be better than this!'

'Alas, would that I could make such a promise.'

'He cannot,' said Onrack. 'Minala, he now in truth sets out on an unseen path. It is my belief that we shall not see him again.'

'Thank you for the vote of confidence,' Cotillion said.

'My friend has seen better days,' Trull Sengar said, reaching out to slap Onrack on the back. The thump the blow made was hollow, raising dust, and something clattered down within the warrior's chest. 'Oh,' said the Tiste Edur, 'did that do something bad?'

'No,' Onrack replied. 'The broken point of a spear. It had been lodged in bone.'

'Was it irritating you?'

'Only the modest sound it made when I walked. Thank you, Trull Sengar.'

Cotillion eyed the two. What mortal would call a T'lan Imass friend? And, they fight side by side. I would know more of this Trull Sengar. But, as with so many things lately, there was no time for that. Sighing, he turned, and saw that the youth Panek now guarded the choke-point, in Ibra Gholan's absence.

The god headed that way.

Panek swung to face him. 'I miss him,' he said.

'Who?'
'Edgewalker.'

'Why? I doubt that sack of bones could fight his way out of a birch-bark coffin.'

'Not to fight at our sides, Uncle. We will hold here. Mother worries too much.'

'Which mother?'

A hideous, sharp-toothed smile. 'Both.'

'Why do you miss Edgewalker, then?'

'For his stories.'

'Oh, those.'

'The dragons. The foolish ones, the wise ones, the living ones and the dead ones. If every world were but a place on the board, they would be the game pieces. Yet no single hand directs them. Each is wild, a will unto itself. And then there are the shadows – Edgewalker explained about those – the ones you can't see.'

'He explained, did he? Well, clearly the hoary bastard likes you more than he does me.'

'They all cast shadows, Uncle,' Panek said. 'Into your realm. Every one of them. That's why there's so many ... prisoners.'

Cotillion frowned, then, slowly, inexorably as comprehension dawned, the god's eyes widened.

Trull Sengar watched the god move past Panek, one hand tracking along the stone wall, as if Cotillion were suddenly drunk. 'I wonder what that was all about? You'd think Panek just kneed him between the legs.'

'He'd earn a kiss from me if he did that,' Minala said.

'You're too harsh,' Trull said. 'I feel sorry for Cotillion.'

'Then you're an idiot, but of course I've known the truth of that for months.'

He smiled across at her, said nothing.

Minala now eyed the uneven entrance to the chamber of the First Throne. 'What are they doing in there? They never go in there.'

'Considering implications, I suppose,' Trull said.

'And where's Shadowthrone? He's supposed to be here by now. If we get attacked right now ...'

_We're dead._ Trull leaned more heavily on the spear, to ease the weight on his left leg, which was hurting more – marginally – than his right. _Or at least I am. But that's likely whether or not I get healed, once my kin decide to take this seriously._ He did not understand their half-hearted skirmishing, the tentative probing by the Den-Ratha. And why were they bothering at all? If they hungered for a throne, it would be that of Shadow, not this petrified bone monstrosity they call the First Throne. _But, dunking on it, maybe this does indeed make sense. They have allied themselves with the Crippled God, and with the Unbound T'Ilan Imass who now serve the Chained One. But my Tiste Edur place little weight on alliances with non-Edur. Maybe that's why all they've done thus far is token blood-letting. A single warlock and veteran warriors and this little fête would be over._

And they would come – _they will come, once I am recognized._ Yet he could not hide himself from their eyes; he could not stand back whilst they slaughtered these young humans who knew nothing of life, who were soldiers in name only. These lessons of cruelty and brutality did not belong in what a child needed to learn, in what a child _should_ learn. And a world in which children were subjected to such things was a world in which compassion was a hollow word, its echoes a chorus of mockery and cold contempt.
Four skirmishes. Four, and Minala was now mother to seven hundred destroyed lives, almost half of them facing the mercy of death ... until Shadowthrone appears, with his edged gift, in itself cold and heartless.

'Your face betrays you, Trull Sengar. You are driven to weeping yet again.'

The Edur looked across at Onrack, then over to where Minala now stood with Panek. 'Her rage is her armour, friend. And that is my greatest weakness, that I cannot conjure the same within myself. Instead, I stand here, waiting. For the next attack, for the return of the terrible music – the screams, the pain and the dying, the deafening roar of the futility our battle-lust creates ... with every clash of sword and spear.'

'Yet, you do not surrender,' the T'lan Imass said.

'I cannot.'

'The music you hear in battle is incomplete, Trull Sengar.'

'What do you mean?'

'Even as I stand at your side, I can hear Minala's prayers, whether she is near us or not. Even when she drags wounded and dying children back, away from danger, I hear her. She prays, Trull Sengar, that you do not fall. That you fight on, that the miracle that is you and the spear you wield shall never fail her. Never fail her and her children.'

Trull Sengar turned away.

'Ah,' Onrack said, 'with your tears suddenly loosed, friend, I see my error. Where I sought by my words to instil pride in you, I defeat your own armour and wound you deeply. With despair. I am sorry. There remains so much of what it is to live that I have forgotten.' The battered warrior regarded Trull in silence for a moment, then added, 'Perhaps I can give you something else, something more ... hopeful.'

'Please try,' Trull said in a whisper.

'At times, down in this chasm, I smell something, a presence. It is faint, animal. It ... comforts me, although I do not know why, for I cannot comprehend its source. In those times, Trull Sengar, I feel as if we are being observed. We are being watched by unseen eyes, and in those eyes there is vast compassion.'

'Do you say this only to ease my pain, Onrack?'

'No, I would not so deceive you.'

'What – who does it come from?'

'I do not know – but I have seen that it affects Monok Ochem. Even Ibra Gholan. I sense their disquiet, and this, too, comforts me.'

'Well,' rasped a voice beside them, 'it isn't me.' Shadows coalescing, creating a hunched, hooded shape, wavering indistinct, as if reluctant to commit itself to any particular existence, any single reality.

'Shadowthrone.'

'Healing, yes? Very well. But I have little time. We must hurry, do you understand? Hurry!' Renewed, once again, to face what will come. Would that I had my own prayers. Comforting words in my mind ... to drown out the screams all around me. To drown out my own.

Somewhere down below, Karsa Orlong struggled to calm Havok, and the sudden hammer of hoofs against wood, sending trembles through the deck beneath Samar Dev's feet, indicated that it would be some time before the animal quieted. She did not blame the Jhag horse. The air below was foul, reeking with the sick and the dying, with the sour stench that came from hopelessness.

But we are spared that fate. We are Guests, because my giant companion would kill the Emperor. The fool.
The arrogant, self-obsessed idiot. I should have stayed with Boatfinder, there on that wild shore. I should have then turned around and walked home. She had so wanted this to be a journey of exploration and discovery, the lure of wonders waiting somewhere ahead. Instead, she found herself imprisoned by an empire gone mad with obsession. Self-righteous, seeing its own might as if it was a gift bestowing piety. As if power projected its own ethos, and the capability to do something was justification enough for doing it. The mindset of the street-corner bully, in his head two or three rules by which he guided his own existence, and by which he sought to shape his world. The ones he must fear, the ones he could drive to their knees, and maybe ones he hungered to be like, or ones he lusted after, but even there the relationship was one of power. Samar Dev felt sick with disgust, fighting a tide of tumultuous panic rising within her – and no dry deck beneath her boots could keep her from that sort of drowning.

She had tried to keep out of the way of the human crew who worked the huge ship's sails, and finally found a place where she wouldn't be pushed aside or cursed, at the very prow, holding tight to rat-lines as the waves lifted and dropped the lumbering craft. In a strange way, each plunge that stole her own weight proved satisfying, almost comforting.

Someone came to her side, and she was not surprised to see the blonde, blue-eyed witch. No taller than Samar's shoulder, her arms exposed to reveal the lean, cabled muscles of someone familiar with hard, repetitive work. Indicative as well, she believed, of a particular personality.

Hard-edged, judgemental, perhaps even untrustworthy – muscles like wires were ever stretched taut by some inner extremity, a nervous agitation devoured like fuel, unending in its acrid supply.

'I am named Feather Witch,' the woman said, and Samar Dev noted, with faint surprise, that she was young. 'You understand me words?'

'My words.'

'My words. He teaches not well,' she added.

_She means the Taxilian. It's no surprise. He knows what will happen when he outlives his usefulness._

'You teach me,' Feather Witch said.

Samar Dev reached out and flicked the withered finger hanging from the young woman's neck, eliciting both a flinch and a curse. 'I teach you ... nothing.'

'I make Hanradi Khalag kill you.'

'Then Karsa Orlong kills every damned person on this ship. Except the chained ones.'

Feather Witch, scowling, was clearly struggling to understand, then, with a snarl, she spun round and walked away.

Samar Dev returned her gaze to the heaving seas ahead. A witch indeed, and one that did not play fair with the spirits. One who did not recognize honour. Dangerous. She will ... attempt things. She may even try to kill me, make it look like an accident. There's a chance she will succeed, which means I had better warn Karsa. If die, he will understand that it will have been no accident. And so he will destroy every one of these foul creatures.

Her own thoughts shocked her. Ah, shame on me. I, too, begin to think of Karsa Orlong as a weapon. To be wielded, manipulated, and in the name of some imagined vengeance, no less. But, she suspected, someone or something else was already playing that game. With Karsa Orlong. And it was that mystery she needed to pursue, until she had an answer. And then? Am I not assuming that the Toblakai is unaware of how he is being used? What if he already knows? Think on that, woman ...

All right. He accepts it ... for now. But, whenever he deems it expedient to turn on those unseen manipulators, he will – and they will regret ever having involved themselves in his life. Yes, that well suits Karsa's own arrogance, his unshakeable confidence. In fact, the more I think on it, the more I am convinced that I am right. I've stumbled onto the first steps of the path that will lead me to solving the mystery. Good.
'What in Hood's name did you say to her?'

Startled, Samar Dev looked over, to see the Taxilian arrive at her side. 'Who? What? Oh, her.'

'Be careful,' the man said. He waved a filthy hand in front of his bruised, misshapen face. 'See this? Feather Witch. I dare not fight back. I dare not even defend myself. See it in her eyes – I think she was beaten herself, when a child. That is how these things breed generation after generation.'

'Yes,' Samar said, surprised, 'I believe you are right.'

He managed something like a grin. 'I was foolish enough to be captured, yes, but that does not make me always a fool.'

'What happened?'

'Pilgrimage, of sorts. I paid for passage on a drake – back to Rutu Jelba – trying to flee the plague, and believe me, I paid a lot.'

Samar Dev nodded. Drakes were Tanno pilgrim ships, heavy and stolid and safe against all but the fiercest storms, and on board there would be a Tanno Spiritwalker or at the very least a Tanno Mendicant. No plague could thrive on such a ship – it had been a clever gamble, and drakes were usually half-empty on their return journeys.

'Dawn broke, a mere two days away from Rutu Jelba,' the Taxilian continued, 'and we were surrounded by foreign ships – this fleet. The Spiritwalker sought to communicate, then when it became evident that these Edur viewed us as a prize, to negotiate. Gods below, woman, the sorcery they unleashed upon him! Awful, it sickened the very air. He resisted – a lot longer than they expected, I've since learned – long enough to cause them considerable consternation – but he fell in the end, the poor bastard. The Edur chose one of us, me as it turned out, and cut open the others and flung them to the sharks. They needed a translator, you see.'

'And what, if I may ask, is your profession?'

'Architect, in Taxila. No, not famous. Struggling.' He shrugged. 'A struggle I would willingly embrace right now.'

'You are working deceit when teaching Feather Witch.'

He nodded.

'She knows.'

'Yes, but for the moment she can do nothing about it. This part of the fleet is resupplied – we'll not be heading landward for some time, and as for Seven Cities ships to capture, well, the plague's emptied the seas, hasn't it? Besides, we will be sailing west. For now, I'm safe. And, unless Feather Witch is a lot smarter than I think she is, it will be a long time before she comes to comprehension.'

'How are you managing it?'

'I am teaching her four languages, all at once, and making no distinction among them, not even the rules of syntax. For each word I give her four in translation, then think up bizarre rules for selecting one over another given the context. She's caught me out but once. So, Malazan, the Taxilii Scholar's Dialect, the Ehrlii variant of the common tongue, and, from my grandfather's sister, tribal Rangala.'

'Rangala? I thought that was extinct.'

'Not until she dies, and I'd swear that old hag's going to live for ever.'

'What is your name?'

He shook his head. 'There is power in names – no, I do not distrust you – it is these Tiste Edur. And Feather Witch – if she discovers my name—'
She can compel you. I understand. Well, in my mind I think of you as the Taxilian.

'That will suffice.'

'I am Samar Dev, and the warrior I came with is Toblakai ... Sha'ik's Toblakai. He calls himself Karsa Orlong.'

'You risk much, revealing your names—'

'The risk belongs to Feather Witch. I surpass her in the old arts. As for Karsa, well, she is welcome to try.'

She glanced at him. 'You said we were sailing west?'

He nodded. 'Hanradi Khalag commands just under half the fleet – the rest is somewhere east of here. They have both been sailing back and forth along this coast for some months, almost half a year, in fact. Like fisher fleets, but the catch they seek walks on two legs and wields a sword. Discovering remnant kin was unexpected, and the state those poor creatures were in simply enraged these Edur. I do not know where the two fleets intend to merge – somewhere west of Sepik, I think. Once that happens,' he shrugged, 'we set a course for their empire.'

'And where is that?'

Another shrug. 'Far away, and beyond that, I can tell you nothing.'

'Far away indeed. I have never heard of an empire of humans ruled by Tiste Edur. And yet, this Letherii language. As you noted it is somehow related to many of the languages here in Seven Cities, those that are but branches from the same tree, and that tree is the First Empire.'

'Ah, that explains it, then, for I can mostly understand the Letherii, now. They use a different dialect when conversing with the Edur – a mix of the two. A trader tongue, and even there I begin to comprehend.'

'I suggest you keep such knowledge to yourself, Taxilian.'

'I will. Samar Dev, is your companion truly the same Toblakai as the one so named who guarded Sha'ik? It is said he killed two demons the night before she was slain, one of them with his bare hands.'

'Until recently,' Samar Dev said, 'he carried with him the rotted heads of those demons. He gifted them to Boatfinder – to the Anibari shaman who accompanied us. The white fur Karsa wears is from a Soletaken. He killed a third demon just outside Ugarat, and chased off another in the Anibar forest. He singlehandedly killed a bhederin bull – and that I witnessed with my own eyes.'

The Taxilian shook his head. 'The Edur Emperor ... he too is a demon. Every cruelty committed by these greyskinned bastards, they claim is by their Emperor’s command. And so too this search for warriors. An emperor who invites his own death – how can this be?'

'I don't know,' she admitted. And not knowing is what frightens me the most. 'As you say, it makes no sense.'

'One thing is known,' the man said. 'Their Emperor has never been defeated. Else his rule would have ended. Perhaps indeed that tyrant is the greatest warrior of all. Perhaps there is no-one, no-one anywhere in this world, who can best him. Not even Toblakai.'

She thought about that, as the huge Edur fleet, filling the seas around her, worked northward, the untamed wilds of the Olphara Peninsula a jagged line on the horizon to port. North, then west, into the Sepik Sea.

Samar Dev slowly frowned. Oh, they have done this before. Sepik, the island kingdom, the vassal to the Malazan Empire. A peculiar, isolated people, with their two-tiered society. The indigenous tribe, subjugated and enslaved. Rulhun’tal ven’or – the Mudskins ... 'Taxilian, these Edur slaves below. Where did they find them?'

'I don't know.' The bruised face twisted into a bitter smile. 'They liberated them. The sweet lie of that word, Samar Dev. No, I will think no more on that.'
You are lying to me, Taxilian, I think.

There was a shout from the crow's nest, picked up by sailors in the rigging and passed on below. Samar Dev saw heads turn, saw Tiste Edur appear and make their way astern.

'Ships have been sighted in our wake,' the Taxilian said.

'The rest of the fleet?'

'No.' He lifted his head and continued listening as the lookout called down ever more details. 'Foreigners. Lots of ships. Mostly transports – two-thirds transports, one-third dromon escort.' He grunted. 'The third time we've sighted them since I came on board. Sighted, then evaded, each time.'

'Have you identified those foreigners for them, Taxilian?'

He shook his head.

_The Malazan Imperial Fleet. Admiral Nok. It has to be._ She saw a certain tension now among the Tiste Edur.

'What is it? What are they so excited about?'

'Those poor Malazans,' the man said with a savage grin. 'It's the positioning now, you see.'

'What do you mean?'

'If they stay in our wake, if they keep sailing northward to skirt this peninsula, they are doomed.'

'Why?'

'Because now, Samar Dev, the rest of the Edur fleet – Tomad Sengar's mass of warships – is behind the Malazans.'

All at once, the cold wind seemed to cut through all of Samar Dev's clothing. 'They mean to attack them?'

'They mean to annihilate them,' the Taxilian said. 'And I have seen Edur sorcery and I tell you this – the Malazan Empire is about to lose its entire Imperial Fleet. It will die. And with it, every damned man and woman on board. 'Except, maybe, one or two ... champions.'

This was something new, Banaschar reflected as he hurried beneath sheets of rain towards Coop's. He was being followed. Once, such a discovery would have set a fury alight inside him, and he would have made short work of the fool, then, after extracting the necessary details, even shorter work of whoever had hired that fool.

But now, the best he could muster was a sour laugh under his breath. 'Aye, Master (or Mistress), he wakes up in the afternoon, without fail, and after a sixth of a bell or so of coughing and scratching and clicking nits, he heads out, onto the street, and sets off, Mistress (or Master), for one of six or so disreputable establishments, and once ensconced among the regulars, he argues about the nature of religion – or is it taxation and the rise in port tithes? Or the sudden drop-off in the coraval schools off the Jakatakan shoals? Or the poor workmanship of that cobbler who'd sworn he could re-stitch that sole on this here left boot – what? True enough, Master (or Mistress), it's all nefarious code, sure as I can slink wi' the best slinkers, and I'm as near to crackin' it as can be ...'

His lone source of entertainment these nights, these imagined conversations. Gods, _now that is pathetic. Then again, pathos ever amuses me._ And long before it could cease amusing him, he'd be drunk, and so went another passage of the sun and stars in that meaningless heaven overhead. Assuming it still existed – who could tell with this solid ceiling of grey that had settled on the island for almost a week now, with no sign of breaking? _Much more of this rain and we'll simply sink beneath the waves. Traders arriving from the mainland will circle and circle where Malaz Island used to be. Circle and circle, the pilots scratching their heads ... _There he went again, yet another conjured scene with its subtle weft of contempt for all things human – the sheer incompetence, stupidity, sloth and bad workmanship – look at this, after all, he limped like some one-footed shark baiter – the cobbler met him at the door _barefooted_ – he should have started up with the suspicion thing
about then. Don't you think?

'Well, Empress, it's like this. The poor sod was half-Wickan, and he'd paid for that, thanks to your refusal to rein in the mobs. He'd been herded, oh Great One, with bricks and clubs, about as far as he could go without diving headfirst into the harbour. Lost all his cobbler tools and stuff – his livelihood, you see. And me, well, I am cursed with pity – aye, Empress, it's not an affliction that plagues you much and all the good to you, I say, but where was I? Oh yes, racked with pity, prodded into mercy. Hood knows, the poor broken man needed that coin more than I did, if only to bury that little son of his he was still carrying round, aye, the one with the caved-in skull—' No, stop this, Banaschar.

Stop.

Meaningless mind games, right? Devoid of significance. Nothing but self-indulgence, and for that vast audience out there – the whispering ghosts and their intimations, their suppositions and veiled insults and their so easily bored minds – that audience – they are my witnesses, yes, that sea of murky faces in the pit, for whom my desperate performance, ever seeking to reach out with a human touch, yields nothing but impatience and agitation, the restless waiting for the cue to laugh. Well enough, this oratory pageant served only himself, Banaschar knew, and all the rest was a lie.

The child with the caved-in skull showed more than one face, tilted askew and flaccid in death. More than one, more than ten, more than ten thousand. Faces he could not afford to think about in his day-to-day, night-through-night stumble of existence. For they were as nails driven deep into the ground, pinning down whatever train he dragged in his wake, and with each forward step the resistance grew, the constriction round his neck stretching ever tighter – and no mortal could weather that – we choke on what we witness, we are strangled by headlong flight, that will not do, not do at all. Don't mind me, dear Empress. I see how clean is your throne.

Ah, here were the steps leading down. Coop's dear old Hanged Man, the stone scaffold streaming with gritty tears underfoot and a challenge to odd-footed descent, the rickety uncertainty – was this truly nothing more than steps down into a tavern? Or now transformed, my temple of draughts, echoing to the vacuous moaning of my fellow-kind, oh, how welcome this embrace—

He pushed through the doorway and paused in the gloom, just inside the dripping eaves, his feet planted in a puddle where the pavestones sagged, water running down him to add to its depth; and a half-dozen faces, pale and dirty as the moon after a dust storm, swung towards him ... for but a moment, then away again.

My adoring public. Yes, the tragic mummer has returned.

And there, seated alone at a table, was a monstrosity of a man. Hunched over, tiny black eyes glittering beneath the shadow of a jutting brow. Hairy beyond reason. Twisted snarls exploding out from both ears, the ebon-hued curls wending down to merge with the vast gull's nest that was his beard, which in turn engulfed his neck and continued downward, unabated, to what was visible of the man's bulging chest; and, too, climbed upward to fur his cheeks – conjoining on the way with the twin juts of nostril hairs, as if the man had thrust tiny uprooted trees up his nose – only to then merge uninterrupted with the sprung hemp ropes that were the man's eyebrows, which in turn blended neatly into the appallingly low hairline that thoroughly disguised what had to be a meagre, sloping forehead. And, despite the man's absurd age – rumoured age, actually, since no one knew for certain – that mass of hair was dyed squid-ink black.

He was drinking red-vine tea, a local concoction sometimes used to kill ants.

Banaschar made his way over and sat down opposite the man. 'If I'd thought about it, I'd say I've been looking for you all this time, Master Sergeant Braven Tooth.'

'But you ain't much of a thinker, are you?' The huge man did not bother looking up. 'Can't be, if you were looking for me. What you're seeing here is an escape – no, outright flight – Hood knows who's deciding these pathetic nitwits they keep sending me deserve the name of recruits. In the Malazan Army, by the Abyss! The world's gone mad. Entirely mad.'

'The gatekeeper,' Banaschar said. 'Top of the stairs, Mock's Hold. The gate watchman, Braven Tooth, I assume you know him. Seems he's been there as long as you've been training soldiers.'
'There's knowing and there's knowing. That bell-backed old crab, now, let me tell you something about him. I could send legion after legion of my cuddly little recruits up them stairs, with every weapon at their disposal, and they'd never get past him. Why? I'll tell you why. It ain't that Lubben's some champion or Mortal Sword or something. No, it's that I got more brains lodged up my left nostril waitin' for my finger than all my so-called recruits got put together.'

'That doesn't tell me anything about Lubben, Braven Tooth, only your opinion of your recruits, which it seems I already surmised.'

'Just so,' said the man, nodding.

Banaschar rubbed at his face. 'Lubben. Listen, I nee talk with someone, someone holed up in Mock's. I send messages, they get into Lubben's hands, and then ... nothing.'

'So who's that you want to talk to?'

'I'd rather not say.'

'Oh, him.'

'So, is Lubben dropping those messages down that slimy chute the effluence of which so decorously paints the cliff-side?'

'Efflu-what? No. Tell you what, how about I head up there and take that You'd rather not say by the overlong out-of-style braid on top of his head and give 'im a shake or three?'

'I don't see how that would help.'

'Well, it'd cheer me up, not for any particular gripe, mind you, but just on principle. Maybe You'd rather not say'd rather not talk to you, have you thought of that? Or maybe you'd rather not.'

'I have to talk to him.'

'Important, huh?'

'Yes.'

'Imperial interest?'

'No, at least I don't think so.'

'Tell you what, I'll grab him by his cute braid and dangle him from the tower. You can signal from below. I swing him back and forth and it means he says "Sure, come on up, old friend". And if I just drop 'im it means the other thing. That, or my hands got tired and maybe slipped.'

'You're not helpful at all, Braven Tooth.'

'Wasn't me sitting at your table, was you sitting at mine.'

Banaschar leaned back, sighing. 'Fine. Here, I'll buy you some more tea—'

'What, you trying to poison me now?'

'All right, how about we share a pitcher of Malazan Dark?'

The huge man leaned forward, meeting Banaschar's eyes for the first time. 'Better. Y'see, I'm in mourning.'

'Oh?'

'The news from Y'Ghatan.' He snorted. 'It's always the news from Y'Ghatan, ain't it? Anyway, I've lost some friends.'
'Ah.'

'So, tonight,' Braven Tooth said, 'I plan on getting drunk. For them. I can't cry unless I'm drunk, you see.'

'So why the red-vine tea?'

Braven Tooth looked up as someone arrived, and gave the man an ugly smile. 'Ask Temper here. Why the redvine tea, you old hunkered-down bastard?'

'Plan on crying tonight, Braven Tooth?'

The Master Sergeant nodded.

Temper levered himself into a chair that creaked alarmingly beneath him. Red-shot eyes fixed on Banaschar. 'Makes his tears the colour of blood. Story goes, he's only done it once before, and that was when Dassem Ultor died.'

_Gods below, must I witness this tonight?_

'It's what I get,' Braven Tooth muttered, head down once more, 'for believin' everything I hear.'

Banaschar frowned at the man opposite him.

_Now what does that mean?_

The pitcher of ale arrived, as if conjured by their silent desires, and Banaschar, relieved of further contemplation – and every other demanding stricture of thought – settled back, content to weather yet another night.

'Aye, Master (or Mistress), he sat with them veterans, pretending he belonged, but really he's just an imposter. Sat there all night, until Coop had to carry him out. Where is he now? Why, in his smelly, filthy room, dead to the world. Yes indeed, Banaschar is dead to the world.'

The rain descended in torrents, streaming over the battlements, down along the blood-gutters, and the cloud overhead had lowered in the past twenty heartbeats, swallowing the top of the old tower. The window Pearl looked through had once represented the pinnacle of island technology, a fusing of sand to achieve a bubbled, mottled but mostly transparent glass. Now, a century later, its surface was patinated in rainbow patterns, and the world beyond was patchy, like an incomplete mosaic, the tesserae melting in some world-consuming fire. Although sight of the flames eluded Pearl, he knew, with fearful certainty, that they were there, and no amount of rain from the skies could change that.

It had been flames, after all, that had destroyed his world. Flames that took her, the only woman he had ever loved. And there had been no parting embrace, no words of comfort and assurance exchanged. No, just that edgy dance round each other, and neither he nor Lostara had seemed capable of deciding whether that dance was desire or spite.

Even here, behind this small window and the thick stone walls, he could hear the battered, encrusted weather vane somewhere overhead, creaking and squealing in the buffeting gusts of wind assailing Mock's Hold. And he and Lostara had been no different from that weather vane, spinning, tossed this way and that, helpless victim to forces ever beyond their control. Beyond, even, their comprehension. And didn't that sound convincing? Hardly.

The Adjunct had sent them on a quest, and when its grisly end arrived, Pearl had realized that the entire journey had been but a prelude – as far as his own life was concerned – and that his own quest yet awaited him. Maybe it had been simple enough – the object of his desire would proclaim to his soul the consummation of that quest. Maybe _she_ had been what he sought. But Pearl was not certain of that, not any more. Lostara Yil was dead, and that which drove him, hounded him, was unabated. Was in fact growing.

_Hood take this damned, foul city anyway. Why must imperial events ever converge here? Because, he answered himself, Genabackis had Pale. Korel had the Stormwall. Seven Cities has Y'Ghatan. In the heart of the Malazan Empire, we have Malaz City. Where it began, so it returns, again and again. And again. Festering_
sores that never heal, and when the fever rises, the blood wells forth, sudden, a deluge.

He imagined that blood sweeping over the city below, climbing the cliff-side, lapping against the very stones of Mock's Hold. Would it rise higher?

'It is my dream,' said the man sitting cross-legged in the room behind him.

Pearl did not turn. 'What is?'

'Not understanding this reluctance of yours, Claw.'

'I assure you,' Pearl said, 'the nature of my report to the Empress will upend this tidy cart of yours. I was there, I saw—'

'You saw what you wanted to see. No witness in truth but myself, regarding the events now being revisited. Revised, yes? As all events are, for such is the exercise of quillclawed carrion who title themselves historians. Revisiting, thirsting for a taste, just a taste, of what it is to know trauma in one's quailing soul. Pronouncing with authority, yes, on that in which the proclaimant in truth has no authority. I alone survive as witness. I alone saw, breathed the air, tasted the treachery.'

Pearl would not turn to face the fat, unctuous man. He dare not, lest his impulse overwhelm him – an impulse to lift an arm, to flex the muscles of his wrist just so, and launch a poison-sheathed quarrel into the flabby neck of Mallick Rel, the Jhistal priest of Mael.

He knew he would likely fail. He would be dead before he finished raising that arm. This was Mallick Rel's chamber, after all, his residence. Wards carved into the floor, rituals suspended in the damp air, enough sorcery to set teeth on edge and raise hairs on the nape of the neck. Oh, officially this well-furnished room might be referred to as a cell, but that euphemistic absurdity would not last much longer.

The bastard's agents were everywhere. Whispering their stories in taverns, on street corners, beneath the straddled legs of whores and noblewomen. The Jhistal priest was becoming a hero – the lone survivor of the Fall at Aren, the only loyal one, that is. The one who managed to escape the clutches of the traitors, be they Sha'ik's own, or the betrayers in the city of Aren itself. Mallick Rel, who alone professes to know the truth.

There were seeds from a certain grass that grew on the Seti Plains, Pearl recalled, that were cleverly barbed, so that when they snagged on something, or someone, they were almost impossible to remove. Barbed husks, that weakened and cracked apart only after the host had travelled far. Such were rumours, carried on breaths from one host to the next, the barbs holding fast. And when the necessary time has passed, when every seed is in place, what then? What shall unfold at Mallick Rel's command? Pearl did not want to think about it.

Nor did he want to think about this: he was very frightened.

'Claw, speak with him.'

'Him. I admit, I cannot yet decide which "him" you are referring to, priest. In neither case, alas, can I fathom your reasons for making such a request of me. Tayschreenn is no friend of yours—'

'Nor is he a fool, Claw. He sees far ahead, does Tayschreenn. No, there is no reason I would urge you to speak with the Imperial High Mage. His position grows ever more precarious as it is. You seek, yes, to confabulate? Plainly, then, I urge you, Claw, to descend to the catacombs, and there speak with Korbolo Dom. You have not heard his story, and in humility I would advise, it is time that you did.'

Pearl closed his eyes on the rain-lashed scene through the window. 'Of course. He was in truth an agent of Laseen's, even when he fought on behalf of Sha'ik. His Dogslayers, they were in place to turn upon Sha'ik and crush her utterly, including killing both Toblakai and Leoman of the Flails. But there, during the Chain of Dogs, he stumbled upon a greater betrayal in the making. Oh yes, Mallick Rel, I can see how you and he will twist this – I imagine you two have worked long and hard, during those countless "illegal" sojourns of yours down in the catacombs – indeed, I know of them – the Claw remain outside your grasp, and that will not change, I assure you.'
'It is best,' the man said in his sibilant voice, 'that you consider my humble suggestion, Claw, for the good of your sect.'

'For the good of ...' Gods below, he feels ready to threaten the Claw! How far has all this madness gone? I must speak with Topper – maybe it's not too late ...

'This rain,' Mallick Rel continued behind him, 'it shall make the seas rise, yes?'
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Truth is a pressure, and I see us all shying away. But, my friends, from truth there can be no escape.

The Year of Ten Thousand Lies
Kayessan

Arhizan, clinging to the limp folds of the imperial standard, its hunger forgotten, its own life but a quiescent spark within its tiny body, had listened intently to the entire conversation.

A dromon was easing its way among the nearest transports, towing a sleek, black-hulled warship; and from the shoreline watched the Adjunct and Admiral Nok, along with Fist Keneb, Quick Ben and Kalam Mekhar. Few words were exchanged among them, until the arrival of Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy. At that point, things got interesting.

'Adjunct,' Gesler said in greeting. 'That's our ship. That's the Silanda.'

Admiral Nok was studying the gold-hued marine. 'Sergeant, I understand you claim that you can sail that unpleasant craft.'

A nod. 'With a couple squads, aye, and that's it. As for the crew below manning the oars, well, when we need 'em to row, they'll row.'

Stormy added, 'We lived with 'em long enough they don't scare us no more, sir, not even Gesler here an' he jumps every time he looks in that fancy silver mirror of his. An' those heads, they don't make our skins crawl neither, no more—'

'Stop talking like a sailor, Adjutant Stormy,' Nok said.

A smile amidst the red, bristling beard. 'Ain't no Adjutant any more, Admiral.'

Thin brows rose, and Nok said, 'Title alone gifts the bearer with intelligence?'

Stormy nodded. 'That it does, sir. Which is why Gesler's a sergeant and I'm a corporal. We get stupider every year that passes.'

'And Stormy's proud of that,' Gesler said, slapping his companion on the back.

The Adjunct rubbed at her eyes. She examined the tips of her leather gloves, then slowly began removing the gauntlets. 'I see by the waterline she's fully provisioned ...'

'Food does not spoil in that hold,' Nok said. 'That much my mages have determined. Furthermore, there are no rats or other vermin.' He hesitated, then sighed. 'In any case, I could find no sailors who would volunteer to crew the Silanda. And I have no intention of forcing the issue.' He shrugged. 'Adjunct, if they truly want it ...'

'Very well. Sergeant Gesler, your own squad and two others.'

'The Fourth and Ninth, Adjunct.'

Her gaze narrowed on the man, then she turned to Keneb. 'Fist? They're your resurrected squads.'

'The Fourth – that would be Strings's—'

'For Hood's sake,' the Adjunct said. 'His name is Fiddler. It is the worst-kept secret in this army, Keneb.'

'Of course. My apologies, Adjunct. Fiddler's, then, and the Ninth – let's see, Sergeant Balm's squad. Abyss take us, Gesler, what a snarly bunch of malcontents you've selected.'
'Yes sir.'

'All right.' Keneb hesitated, then turned to Tavore. 'Adjunct, may I suggest that the Silanda hold a flanking position to your own flagship at all times.'

Mock dismay on Gesler's face and he punched Stormy in the arm and said, 'They don't trust us, Stormy.'

'Shows what they know, don't it?'

'Aye, it does. Damn me, they're smarter than we thought.'

'Sergeant Gesler,' the Adjunct said, 'take your corporal and get out of here.'

'Aye, Adjunct.'

The two marines hurried off.

After a moment, Admiral Nok laughed, briefly, under his breath, then said, 'Adjunct, I must tell you, I am ... relieved.'

'To leave the Silanda to those idiots?'

'No, Tavore. The unexpected arrival of more survivors from Y'Ghatan, with soldiers such as Fiddler, Cuttle, Gesler and Stormy among them — and—' he turned to Quick Ben and Kalam, 'you two as well. The transformation within your army, Adjunct, has been ... palpable. It is often forgotten by commanders, the significance of storied veterans, especially among young, untried soldiers. Added to that, the extraordinary tale of their survival beneath the streets of Y'Ghatan,' he shook his head. 'In all, a most encouraging development.'

'I agree,' Tavore said, glancing at Keneb. 'It was, for the most part, these soldiers who at the very beginning embraced what could have been seen as a terrible omen, and made of it a thing of strength. None of us were fully cognizant of it at the time, but it was there, in Aren, at that first parade, that the Bonehunters were born.'

The others were all staring at her.

Her brows lifted fractionally.

Keneb cleared his throat. 'Adjunct, the Bonehunters may well have been birthed that day in Aren, but it only drew its first breath yesterday.'

'What do you mean?'

'We were wondering,' Kalam said to her, 'where that decoration came from. The one you presented, with your own hand, to Captain Faradan Sort and the witch Sinn.'

'Ah, yes. Well, I can make no claim regarding that. The design of that sigil was by T'amber's hand. There were jewelsmiths in her family, I understand, and she passed a few years of her youth as an apprentice. Nonetheless, I do not see how that ceremony achieved little more than a confirmation of what already existed.'

'Adjunct,' Fist Keneb said, 'it was your confirmation that was needed. To make it real. I do not wish to offend you, but before then, you were the Adjunct. You were Laseen's. Her property.'

Her expression was suddenly flat, dangerous. 'And now, Fist?'

But it was Kalam who answered. 'Now, you belong to the Fourteenth.'

'You belong to us,' Keneb said.

The moment should have ended there, and all would have been well. Better than well. It would have been perfect. Instead, they saw, upon Tavore's expression, a growing ... dismay. And fear. And at first, neither emotion made any sense.

Unless ...
Unless she was unable to return such loyalty.

And so the doubt twisted free, like newborn vipers slithering from their clutch of eggs, and tiny, deadly fangs sank into every figure standing there, witness to what her face revealed.

Revealed. And this from a woman whose self-control was damned near inhuman.

Startled into life, the rhizan lizard dropped free of its perch, wheeled once then flitted off, down along the strand, where it alighted on the white flank of a huge treetrunk some past storm had flung ashore, the creature's legs spread wide, belly to the wood, its tiny sides palpitating. Distracted and frightened, Bottle reached out to brush one fingertip between the rhizan's eyes, a gesture intended to offer comfort, even as he released his hold upon its lifespark. The creature fled in a flurry of wings and whipping tail.

And now, five days later, Bottle found himself on the foredeck of the *Silanda*, staring back down the ship to that tarp-covered heap of severed heads that Stormy called his brain's trust. Amusing, yes, but Bottle knew those undying eyes were piercing the frayed fabric of the canvas, watching him. In expectation. Of what? Damn you, I can't help you poor fools. You have to see that!

Besides, he had plenty of other things to worry over right now. So many, in fact, that he did not know where to start.

He had seen the sigil, the decoration the Adjunct had presented to Faradan Sort at what should have been her court-martial, and to the mute child Sinn – not that she was in truth mute, Bottle knew. The urchin just had very little to say to anyone, barring her brother Shard. The sigil ... in silver, a city wall over which rose ruby flames, and the sloped tel beneath that wall, a mass of gold human skulls. The echo of the Bridgeburners' old sigil was not accident – no, it was sheer genius. T'amber's genius.

By the end of that same day, iron needles and silk threads were out as blunted fingers worked with varying degrees of talent, and military-issue cloaks found a new decoration among the soldiers of the Fourteenth Army. To go along with dangling finger bones, the occasional bird skull and drilled teeth.

All well and good, as far as it went. For much of the first day, as Bottle and the others recovered, soldiers would come by just to look at them. It had been unnerving, all that attention, and he still struggled to understand what he saw in those staring eyes. Yes, we're alive. Unlikely, granted, but true nonetheless. Now, what is it that you see?

The memories of that time beneath the city were a haunting refrain behind every spoken word shared between Bottle and his fellow survivors. It fuelled their terrible dreams at night – he had grown used to awakening to some muffled cry from a squad member; from Smiles, or Cuttle, or Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas. Cries dimly echoed from where other squads slept on the stony ground.

Their kits had been rifled through in their absence, items and gear redistributed as was the custom, and on that first day soldiers arrived to return what they had taken. By dusk, each survivor had more than they had ever begun with – and could only look on in bemusement at the heaped trinkets, buckles, clasps and charms; the mended tunics, the scrubbed-clean quilted under-padding, the buffed leather straps and weapon-rigging. And daggers. Lots of daggers, the most personal and precious of all weapons – the fighter's last resort. The weapon that, if necessary, would be used to take one's own life in the face of something far worse. Now, what significance are we to take from that?

Crouched nearby on the foredeck, Koryk and Tarr were playing a game of Bones that the former had found among the offerings in his kit. A sailor's version, the cribbed box deep to prevent the playing pieces bouncing out of the field, the underside made stable by iron-tipped eagle talons at each corner, sharp enough to bite into the wood of a galley bench or deck. Tarr had lost every game thus far – over twenty – both to Koryk and Smiles, yet he kept coming back. Bottle had never seen a man so willing to suffer punishment.

In the captain's cabin lounged Gesler, Stormy, Fiddler and Balm, their conversation sporadic and desultory. Deep in shadows beneath the elongated map-table huddled Y'Ghatan, Bottle's rat – my eyes, my ears ... my aching teats.
No other rats on board, and without his control over Y'Ghatan and her brood, they would have flung themselves overboard long ago. Bottle sympathized. The sorcery engulfing this ship was foul, redolent with madness. It disliked anything alive that was not bound by its chaotic will. And it especially disliked ... me.

Only ... Gesler and Stormy, they seem immune to it. The bastards – forcing us to join them on this eerie, unwelcome floating barrow.

Bottle considered talking to Fiddler about it, then dismissed the idea. Fiddler was like Kalam, who was like Apsalar, who was like Quick Ben. All ... evil.

All right, not evil, but something. I don't know. That stuff in Shadow – what were they up to? And Kalam, ready to stick his knives in Apsalar. And Apsalar, looking like she wanted just that. Then Quick Ben waking up, getting between the two as if this was all some old argument, old wounds ripped open.

Tavore had claimed Quick Ben, Kalam and Apsalar for her own retinue on the Adjunct's flagship, Froth Wolf – a Quon-built dromon, its workmanship Mapau, its keel and metalwork from somewhere else entirely. Fenn – can't be more than a handful of keel-carvers and blacksmiths left among the squalid remnants ... but they made that keel and they made those fittings, and there's nothing insensate or inert about them. In any case, Bottle was glad they were on that ship riding the swells three reaches to starboard. Not quite far enough away for his comfort, but it would have to do. He could picture those two skeletal reptiles scurrying around in the hold below, hunting rats ...

'So it was Grub who held onto that whistle?' Fiddler asked Gesler in the cabin.

Beneath the table, Y'Ghatan's tattered ears perked up.

'Aye. Keneb's lad. Now there's a strange one for ya. Said he knew we were coming. Now, maybe I believe that. Maybe I don't. But it was the first thing I got back.'

'Good thing, too,' Stormy said, audibly scratching his beard. 'I'm feeling right at home—'

'That's a joke,' Gesler cut in. 'Last time we was on this damned ship, Stormy, you spent most of the time cowering in a corner.'

'Just took a while getting used to it, that's all.'

Fiddler said, 'Look what some bright spark left in my loot.' Something thumped onto the table.

'Gods below,' Sergeant Balm muttered. 'Is it complete?'

'Hard to say. There are cards in there I've never seen before. One for the Apocalyptic – it's an Unaligned – and there's something called the House of War, showing as its ranked card a bone throne, unoccupied, flanked by two wolves. And in that House there's a card called the Mercenary, and another – done by a different hand – that I think is named something like Guardians of the Dead, and it shows ghostly soldiers standing in the middle of a burning bridge ...'

A moment of silence, then Gesler: 'Recognize any faces, Fid?'

'Didn't want to look too closely at that one. There's the House of Chains, and the King of that House – the King in Chains – is sitting on a throne. The scene is very dark, swallowed in shadows, except I'd swear that poor bastard is screaming. And the look in his eyes ...'

'What else?' Balm asked.

'Stop sounding so eager, you Dal Honese rock-toad.'

'All right, if you don't like your new present, Fiddler, give it to me.'

'Right, and you'd probably lay a field right here, on this ship.'

'So?'
‘So, you want to open a door to this Tiste and Tellann nightmare of warrens? To the Crippled God, too?’

‘Oh.’

‘Anyway, there's more Unaligned. Master of the Deck, and aye, him I recognize. And Chain – a knot in the centre, with links stretching out in all directions. Don't like the look of that one.’

‘Some gift, Fid.’

‘Aye, like a rock thrown to a drowning sailor.’

‘Put it away,’ Gesler said.

The rat listened as the Deck was dragged back from the centre of the table.

‘We got us a problem,’ Gesler continued.

‘Only,’ Stormy added, ‘we don't know what it is. We only know that something’s rattled Keneb, and that assassin friend of yours, Fid. And Quick Ben. Rattled them all.’

‘The Adjunct,’ Fiddler said. ‘Kalam and Quick weren't talking, but they're not happy.’ A pause, then, ‘Could be it's the way Pearl just vanished, right after Y’Ghatan, likely straight back to the Empress. Just a Claw operative delivering his report? Maybe. But even that leaves a sour taste in the mouth – he was too quick to act, too quick to reach conclusions – as if what he thought happened at Y’Ghatan was only confirming suspicions he already held. Think on it – do you really suppose a report like that has anything good to say?’

‘She killed Sha’ik,’ Balm said, exasperated. ‘She broke open that wasp nest in Raraku and damned nothing came buzzing out. She nabbed Korbolo Dom and sent him back in shackles. And she did all that with us not losing nobody, or almost nobody – the scraps on the way were expected, and not nearly so bad as they could've been. Then she chases Leoman to Y’Ghatan. Unless you got someone on the inside to crack open the gate, sieges are costly, especially when the attackers got no time to wait it out. And we didn't, did we? There was a damned plague on the way!’

‘Calm down,’ Fiddler said, ‘we lived through all that, too, remember?’

‘Aye, and did any one of us really think Leoman would broil his own people? That he'd turn a whole city into a heap of ashes and rivers of lead? All I'm saying, Fid, is we ain't done too bad, have we? When you think on it.’

‘Balm's right,’ Stormy said, scratching again. ‘Fiddler, in that Deck you got, that House of War – did you smell Treach there? Those wolves, they got me wondering.’

‘I have real doubt about that version,’ Fiddler replied. ‘That whole House, in fact. I'm thinking the maker was confused, or maybe what she saw was confused—’

‘She?’

‘I think so, except the rogue one, the Guardians of the Dead. That's a man's hand for sure.’

There was a sudden tension in Stormy's voice. ‘Pull 'em out again, Fid. Let's see that House of War – all the cards in that House.’

Shuffling noises. I'll show each one, then. Not on the table, but still in my hand, all right? One at a time. Okay. As for titles, I'm just reading what's in the borders.’ A moment, then, ‘The Lords of War. Two wolves, one male, one female. Suggests to me the name for this one is wrong. But it's the plural that counts, meaning the unoccupied throne isn't that important. All right, everybody had a look? Good, next one. The Hunter, and aye, that's Treach—’

‘What's with the striped corpse in the foreground? That old man with no hands?’

‘No idea, Gesler.’
'Next one,' said Stormy.'Guardians of the Dead—' 'Let me get a closer ... good. Wait ...' 'Stormy,' said Balm, 'what do you think you're seeing?' 'What's next?' the Falari corporal demanded. 'Quick!' 'The Army and the Soldier – I don't know – two names for this, which may be determined by context or something.' 'Any more?' 'Two, and I don't like these ones at all. Here, Life Slayer ...' 'Jaghut?' 'Half-Jaghut,' Fiddler said in a dull voice. 'I know who this is – the horn bow, the single-edged sword. Life Slayer is Icarium. And his protector, Mappo Runt, is nowhere in sight.' 'Never mind all that,' Stormy said. 'What's the last card?' 'Icarium's counterpoint, of sorts. Death Slayer.' 'Who in the Abyss is that supposed to be? That's impossible.' A sour grunt from Fiddler, then he said, 'Who? Well, let's see. Squalid hut of skins and sticks, brazier coughing out smoke, a hooded thing inside the hut, broken limbed, shackles sunk into the earth. Now, who might that be?' 'That's impossible,' Gesler said, echoing Stormy's assertion. 'He can't be two things at once!' 'Why not?' Fiddler said, then sighed. 'That's it. Now, Stormy, what's lit that fire in your eyes?' 'I know who made these cards.' 'Really?' Fiddler sounded unconvinced. 'And how did you come by that?' 'The Guardians card, something about the stonework on the bridge. Then those last two, the skulls – I got a damned good look at Faradan Sort's medal. So's I could sew the like, you see.' There was a long, long silence. And Bottle stared, unseeing, as implications settled in his mind – settled momentarily, then burst up and out, like dust-devils, one after another. The Adjunct wants that Deck of Dragons in Fiddler's hands. And either she or T'amber – or maybe Nether and Nil, or someone – is boiling over with arcane knowledge, and isn't afraid to use it. Now, Fid, he never lays a field with those cards. No. He makes up games. The Adjunct knows something. Just like she knew about the ghosts at Raraku ... and the flood. But she carries an otataral sword. And the two Wickans are nothing like they once were, or so goes the consensus. It must be T'amber. What awaits us? Is this what's got Quick Ben and the others so rattled? What if— 'Something just nudged my foot – what? Is that a rat? Right under our table?' 'Ain't no rats on the Silanda, Stormy—'
'I'm telling you, Ges – there!'

Fiddler swore, then said, 'That's *Bottle's rat! Get it!*'

'After it!'

Skidding chairs, the crash of crockery, grunts and stamping boots.

'It's getting away!'

There were so many places, Bottle knew, on a ship, where only a rat could go. Y'Ghatan made her escape, despite all the cursing and thumping.

Moments later, Bottle saw Fiddler appear on deck amidships – the soldier looked away a moment before the sergeant's searching gaze found him, and Bottle listened – staring out to sea – as the man, pushing past lounging soldiers, approached.

*Thump thump thump* up the steps to the foredeck.

'Bottle!'

Blinking, he looked over. 'Sergeant?'

'Oh no I ain't fooled – you was spying! Listening in!'

Bottle gestured over at Koryk and Tan, who had looked up from their game and were now staring. 'Ask them. I've been sitting here, not doing a thing, for more than a bell. Ask them.'

'Your rat!'

'Her? I lost track of her last night, Sergeant. Haven't bothered trying to hunt her down since – what would be the point? She's not going anywhere, not with her pups to take care of.'

Gesler, Stormy and Balm were now crowding up behind Fiddler, who looked ready to rip off his own stubby beard in frustration.

'If you're lying ..' Fiddler hissed.

'Of course he's lying,' Balm said. 'If I was him, I'd be lying right now, too.'

'Well, Sergeant Balm,' Bottle said, 'you're not me, and that is the crucial difference. Because I happen to be telling the truth.'

With a snarl, Fiddler turned round and pushed his way back down to the mid deck. A moment later the others followed, Balm casting one last glare at Bottle – as if only now comprehending that he'd just been insulted.

A low snort from Koryk after they'd left. 'Bottle, I happened to glance up a while back – before Fiddler came out – and, Hood take me, there must have been fifty expressions crossing your face, one after the other.'

'Really?' Bottle asked mildly. 'Probably clouds passing the sun, Koryk.'

Tarr said, 'Your rat still has those pups? You must've carried them on the march, then. If I'd been the one carrying them, I would've eaten them one by one. Pop into the mouth, crunch, chew. Sweet and delicious.'

'Well, it was me, not you, wasn't it? Why does everyone want to be me, anyway?'

'We don't,' Tarr said, returning to study the game. 'We're just all trying to tell you we think you're a raving idiot, Bottle.'

Bottle grunted. 'All right. Then, I suppose, you two aren't interested in what they were talking about in that cabin just a little while ago.'
'Get over here,' Koryk said in a growl. 'Watch us play, and start talking, Bottle, else we go and tell the sergeant.'

'No thanks,' Bottle said, stretching his arms. 'I think I'm in need of a nap. Maybe later. Besides, that game bores me.'

'You think we won't tell Fiddler?'

'Of course you won't.'

'Why not?'

'Because then this would be the last time – the last time ever – you got any inside information from me.'

'You lying, snivelling, snake of a bastard—'

'Now now,' Bottle said, 'be nice.'

'You're getting worse than Smiles,' Koryk said.

'Smiles?' Bottle paused at the steps. 'Where is she, by the way?'

'Mooning away with Corabb, I expect,' Tarr said.

'Really? 'She shouldn't do that.'

'Why?'

'Corabb's luck doesn't necessarily extend to people around him, that's why.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means I talk too much. 'Never mind.'

Koryk called out, 'They'll get that rat, you know, Bottle! Sooner or later.'

Nobody's thinking straight around here. Gods, Koryk, you still think those pups are little helpless pinkies. Alas, they are all now quite capable of getting around all by themselves. So, I haven't got just one extra set of eyes and ears, friends. No. There's Baby Koryk, Baby Smiles, Baby Tarr, Baby ... oh, you know the rest ...

He was halfway to the hatch when the alarms sounded, drifting like demonic cries across the swollen waves, and on the wind there arrived a scent ... no, a stench.

Hood take me, I hate not knowing. Kalam swung himself up into the rigging, ignoring the pitching and swaying as the Froth Wolf heeled hard about on a new course, northeast, towards the gap that had – through incompetence or carelessness – opened between two dromons of the escort. As the assassin quickly worked his way upward, he caught momentary glimpses of the foreign ships that had appeared just outside that gap. Sails that might have been black, once, but were now grey, bleached by sun and salt.

Amidst the sudden confusion of signals and alarms, one truth was becomingly appallingly evident: they had sailed into an ambush. Ships to the north, forming an arc with killing lanes between each one. Another crescent, this one bulging towards the Malazans, was fast approaching before the wind from the northeast. Whilst another line of ships formed a bristling barrier to the south, from the shallows along the coast to the west, then out in a saw-toothed formation eastward until the arc curled north.

Our escorts are woefully outnumbered. Transports loaded down with soldiers, like bleating sheep trapped in a slaughter pen.

Kalam stopped climbing. He had seen enough. Whoever they are, they've got us in their jaws. He began making his way down once more, an effort almost as perilous as had been the ascent. Below, figures were
scrambling about on the decks, sailors and marines, officers shouting back and forth.

The Adjunct's flagship, flanked still to starboard by the Silanda, was tacking a course towards that gap. It was clear that Tavore meant to engage that closing crescent. In truth, they had little choice. With the wind behind those attackers, they could drive like a spear-point into the midst of the cumbersome transports. Admiral Nok was commanding the lead escorts to the north, and they would have to seek to push through the enemy blocking the way, with as many of the transports following as were able — but all the enemy ships have to do is drive them into the coast, onto whatever uncharted reefs lurk in the shallows.

Kalam dropped the last distance to the deck, landed in a crouch. He heard more shouts from somewhere far above as he made his way forward. Positioned near the pitching prow, the Adjunct and Quick Ben stood side by side, the wind whipping at Tavore's cloak. The High Mage glanced over as Kalam reached them.

'They've shortened their sails, drawn up or whatever it is sailors call slowing down.'

'Now why would they do that?' Kalam asked. 'That makes no sense. Those bastards should be driving hard straight at us.'

Quick Ben nodded, but said nothing.

The assassin glanced over at the Adjunct, but of her state of mind as she stared at the opposing line of ships he could sense nothing. 'Adjunct,' he said, 'perhaps you should strap on your sword.'

'Not yet,' she said. 'Something is happening.'

He followed her gaze.

'Gods below, what is that?'

On the Silanda, Sergeant Gesler had made use of the bone whistle, and now banks of oars swept out and back with steady indifference to the heaving swells, and the ship groaned with each surge, easily keeping pace with the Adjunct's dromon. The squads had finished reefing the sails and were now amidships, readying armour and weapons.

Fiddler crouched over a wooden crate, trying to quell his ever-present nausea — gods, I hate the sea, the damned back and forth and up and down. No, when I die I want my feet to be dry. That and nothing more. No other stipulations. Just dry feet, dammit — as he worked the straps loose and lifted the lid. He stared down at the Moranth munitions nestled in their beds of padding. 'Who can throw?' he demanded, glaring over at his squad, then something cold slithered in his gut.

'I can,' both Koryk and Smiles said.

'Why ask?' said Cuttle.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas sat nearby, knees drawn up, too sick to move, much less respond to Fiddler's question.

Tarr said, shrugging, 'If it's right in front of me, maybe I can hit it, Sergeant.'

But Fiddler barely heard any of this — his eyes were fixed on Bottle, who stood, motionless, staring at the enemy line of ships. 'Bottle? What is it?'

An ashen face turned to regard him. 'It's bad, Sergeant. They're ... conjuring.'

Samar Dev shrank away until hard, insensate wood pressed against her back. Before her, to either side of the main mast, stood four Tiste Edur, from whom burgeoned crackling, savage sorcery, whipping like chains between them, fulminating with blooms and gouts of grey flames — and, beyond the rocking prow, a tumbling wave was rising, thrashing as if held taut, lifting skyward—
Bristling chains of power snapped out from the four warlocks, arcing left and right, out to conjoin with identical kin from the ships to either side of Hanradi Khalag’s command ship, and then onward to other ships, one after another, and the air Samar Dev drew into her lungs seemed dead, some essential necessity utterly destroyed. She gasped, sank down to the deck, drawing up her knees. A cough, then trembles racked through her in waves—

Sudden air, life flooding her lungs – someone stood to her left. She looked over, then up.

Karsa Orlong, motionless, staring at the billowing, surging wall of magic. ‘What is this?’ he demanded.

‘Elder,’ she said in a ragged voice. ‘They mean to destroy them. They mean to tear ten thousand souls and more ... into pieces.’

‘Who is the enemy?’

Karsa, what is this breath of life you deliver?

‘The Malazan Imperial Fleet,’ Samar heard the Taxilian answer, and she saw that he had appeared on deck, along with Feather Witch and the Preda, Hanradi Khalag, and all were staring upward at the terrible, chained storm of power.

The Toblakai crossed his arms. ‘Malazans,’ he said. ‘They are not my enemy.’

In a harsh, halting accent, Hanradi Khalag turned to Karsa Orlong and said, ‘Are they Tiste Edur?’

The giant’s eyes thinned to slits as he continued studying the conjuration, from which there now came a growing roar, as of a million enraged voices. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Then,’ replied the Preda, ‘they are enemy.’

‘If you destroy these Malazans,’ Karsa said, ‘more of them will come after you.’

‘We do not fear.’

The Toblakai warrior finally glanced over at the Preda, and Samar Dev could read, with something fluttering inside her, his contempt. Yet he said nothing, simply turned about and crouched down at Samar Dev’s side.

She whispered, ‘You were going to call him a fool. I’m glad you didn’t – these Tiste Edur don’t manage criticism too well.’

‘Which makes them even bigger fools,’ the giant rumbled. ‘But we knew that, Samar Dev. They believe their Emperor can defeat me.’

‘Karsa—’

A strange chorus of cries erupted from the warlocks, and they all convulsed, as if some fiery hand had reached into their bodies, closed tight and cruel about their spines – Samar Dev’s eyes widened – this ritual, it twists them, oh – such pain—

The enormous wall lifted free of the sea’s suddenly becalmed surface. Rose higher, then higher still – and in the space beneath it, a horizontal strip mocking normality, the Malazan ships were visible, their sails awry, each one losing way as panic raced through the poor bastards – except for those two, in the lead, a dromon warship, and on its seaward flank, a black-hulled craft, its oars flashing to either side.

What?

Hanradi Khalag had stepped forward upon seeing that odd black ship, but from where Samar sat curled up she could not see his expression, only the back of his head – the suddenly taut posture of his tall form.

And then, something else began to happen ...
The wall of magic was pulling free from the surface, drawing with it spouts of white, churning water that fragmented and fell away like toppling spears as the grey-shot, raging manifestation lifted ever higher. The roar of sound rolled forward, loud and fierce as a charging army.

The Adjunct's voice was low, flat. 'Quick Ben.'

'Not warrens,' the wizard replied, as if awed. 'Elder. Not warrens. Holds, but shot through with Chaos, with rot—'

'The Crippled God.'

Both the wizard and Kalam looked over at her.

'You're full of surprises, Adjunct,' Quick Ben observed.

'Can you answer it?'

'Adjunct?'

'This Elder sorcery, High Mage – can you answer it?'

The glance that Quick Ben cast at Kalam startled the assassin, yet it matched his reply perfectly: 'If I cannot, Adjunct, then we are all dead.'

You bastard – you've got something—

'You do not have long,' the Adjunct said. 'If you fail,' she added as she turned away, 'I have my sword.'

Kalam watched her make her way down the length of the ship. Then, heart pounding hard in his chest, he faced the tumbling, foaming conjuration that filled the north sky. 'Quick, you ain't got long here, you know – once she comes back with her sword—'

'I doubt it'll be enough,' the wizard cut in. 'Oh, maybe for this ship and this ship alone. As for everybody else, forget it.'

'Then do something!' And Quick Ben turned on Kalam a grin the assassin had seen before, hundreds of times, and that light in his eyes – so familiar, so—

The wizard spat on his hands and rubbed them together, facing the Elder sorcery once more. 'They want to mess with Holds ... so will I.'

Kalam bared his teeth. 'You've got some nerve.'

'What?'

'"Full of surprises", you said to her.'

'Yes, well, best give me some room. It's been a while. I may be a little ... rusty.' And he raised his arms.

So familiar ... so ... alarming.

On the Silanda four reaches to seaward, Bottle felt something jolt all his senses. His head whipped round, to fix his eyes on the forecastle of the Froth Wolf. Quick Ben, alone, standing tall at the prow, arms stretched out to the sides, like some damned offering—

—and around the High Mage, fire the colour of goldflecked mud billowed awake, rushed outward, upward, fast – so fast, so fierce – gods take me – no, more patience, you fool! If they—

Whispering a prayer, Bottle flung all his will at the High Mage's conjuration – slower, you fool. Slower!
Here, deepen the hue, thicker, fling it out to the sides, it's just a reverse mudslide, yes, all going back up the slope, flames like rain, tongues of gold nastiness, yes, like that—

No, stop fighting me, damn you. I don't care how terrified you are – panic will ruin everything. Pay attention!

Suddenly, filling Bottle's head, a scent ... of fur. The soft brush of not-quite-human hands – and Bottle's flailing efforts to quell Quick Ben's manic enthusiasm all at once ceased to matter, as his will was brushed aside like a cobweb—

Kalam, crouched down on the forecastle's wooden steps, watched as Quick Ben, legs spread wide, slowly lifted from the deck, as if some outside force had closed invisible hands on the front of his tunic, drawing him close, then giving him a shake.

'What in Hood's name—'

The magic rising in answer to that grey seething storm opposite was like a wall of earth, shot through with burning roots, churning and heaving and tumbling back into itself, its wild, explosive will bound tighter to something more powerful – and when he releases it, into that other one ... Hood below, nobody's going to survive this—

Hanradi Khalag had stared, frozen in place for a dozen heartbeats, as the wild chaos of Elder magic rose in appalling challenge to that of the Edur warlocks – to that of nearly a hundred Edur warlocks – and, Samar Dev realized as she stared at the lead Malazan dromon, all from that one man, that black-skinned man floating above the ship's prow, his limbs spread wide.

The Preda seemed to stagger, then he straightened, and screamed orders – the same phrase repeated, again and again, as he lurched drunkenly towards his warlocks.

They collapsed, flung to the deck as if knocked down one after another by a giant's blows, then they lay writhing, mouths foaming, liquids spilling from them—

As the looming, roaring grey wall seemed to implode, tendrils whipping off to vanish in the air or strike the now churning surface of the sea, sending gouts skyward that shot into view from clouds of billowing steam. The roaring sound shattered, fell away.

The sorcery collapsed, the chains linking wielders on each ship flickering out, or breaking explosively as if they were in truth links of iron.

The deck pitched drunkenly beneath them, and all but Karsa Orlong staggered.

Samar Dev dragged her eyes away from him and looked out once more upon that dark, earthen wall of magic – it too was subsiding – yes, maybe these Edur fools feel no compunction about unleashing such things when unopposed ... but the same stupidity cannot be said of you, Malazan, whoever you are.

Hanradi Khalag, ignoring the warlocks thrashing about in their own filth, was calling out commands, and Letherii sailors – white-faced and chanting prayers – scrambled to bring the ship about, eastward.

We're withdrawing. The Malazan called their bluff. He faced them down – oh, wizard, I could kiss you – I could do more than that. Gods, I'd—

'What are the Edur saying?' Karsa Orlong demanded.

The Taxilian, frowning, shrugged, then said, 'They're disbelieving—'

'Disbelieving?' Samar Dev croaked. 'They're shaken, Taxilian. Badly'

The man nodded, glancing over at Feather Witch, who was watching all three of them. 'Toblakai, the Edur
are saying that these Malazans – they have a Ceda on board.'

Karsa scowled. 'I do not know that word.'

'I do,' Samar Dev said. She smiled as a sudden shaft of sunlight broke through the tumult overhead and bathed her face with unexpected warmth. 'Tell them, Taxilian, that they are right. They do. A Ceda. The Malazans have a Ceda, and for all the Edur expected from this day, in their arrogance, these Malazans were not afraid. Tell them that, Taxilian. Tell them!'

Kalam knelt beside Quick Ben, studied the man's face for a moment, the slack expression, the closed eyes. Then he slapped the wizard. Hard.

Quick Ben swore, then glared up at the assassin. 'I should crush you like a bug, Kalam.'

'Right now, I think,' he rumbled in reply, 'a bug's fart might blow you right off this ship, Quick.'

'Be quiet. Can't I just lie here for a while longer?'

'The Adjunct's coming. Slowly, I'll grant you. Idiot, you gave too much away—'

'Enough, Kalam. I need to think, and think hard.'

'Since when did you play with Elder magic?'

Quick Ben met Kalam's eyes. 'When? Never, you idiot.'

'What?'

'That was a Hood-damned illusion. Thank the gods cowering in their outhouses right now that the idiots swallowed the hook – but listen, it wasn't just that. I had help. And then I had help!'

'What does that mean?'

'I don't know! Let me think!'

'No time for that,' Kalam said, sitting back, 'the Adjunct's here.'

Quick Ben's hand snapped up and grasped Kalam's shirt, tugged him close. 'Gods, friend,' he whispered, 'I've never been so scared in my entire life! Don't you see? It started out as an illusion. Yes, but then—'

The Adjunct's voice: 'High Mage, you and I must talk.'

'It wasn't—'

'Ben Adaephon Delat, you and I will talk. Now.'

Straightening, Kalam backed away, then halted at a gesture from Tavore.

'Oh no, assassin. You as well.'

Kalam hesitated, then said, 'Adjunct, this conversation you propose ... it cannot be one-sided.'

She frowned, then, slowly, nodded.

Fiddler stood next to Bottle where he lay on the deck. 'You, soldier.'

The man's eyes were closed, and at Fiddler's words the eyes scrunched tight. 'Not now, Sergeant. Please.'

'Soldier,' Fiddler repeated, 'you have, uh, made something of a mess of yourself. You know, around your crotch.'

Bottle groaned.
Fiddler glanced over at the others of the squad. Still busy with themselves for the moment. Good. He crouched down. 'Dammit, Bottle, crawl off and get yourself cleaned up – if the others see this – but hold on, I need to know something. I need to know what you found so exciting about all that?'

Bottle rolled onto his side. 'You don't understand,' he mumbled. 'She likes doing that. When she gets the chance, I don't know why. I don't know.'

'She? Who? Nobody's been near you, Bottle!'

'She plays with me. With ... it.'

'Somebody sure does,' Fiddler said. 'Now get below and clean yourself up. Smiles sees this and you're looking at a life of torment.'

The sergeant watched the man crawl away. Excited. Here we were, about to get annihilated. Every damned one of us. And he fantasizes about some old sweetheart.

Hood's breath.

Taralack Veed studied the confusion on the deck for a time, frowning as he watched the commander, Tomad Sengar, pacing back and forth whilst Edur warriors came and went with messages somehow signalled across from the seemingly countless other Edur ships. Something had struck Tomad Sengar an almost physical blow – not the ritual sorcery that had challenged their own, but some news that arrived a short time later, as the Malazan fleet worked to extricate itself from the encirclement. Ships were passing within a quarrel's flight of each other, faces turned and staring across the gap, something like relief connecting that regard – Taralack had even seen a Malazan soldier wave. Before a fellow soldier had batted the man in the side of the head with a fist.

Meanwhile, the two Edur fleets were conjoining into one – no simple task, given the unsettled waters and the vast number of craft involved, and the fading light as the day waned.

And, there in the face of Tomad Sengar, the admiral of this massive floating army, the haunting that could only come with news of a very personal tragedy. A loss, a terrible loss. Curious indeed.

The air hung close about the ship, still befouled with Elder sorcery. These Edur were abominations, to so flagrantly unleash such power. Thinking they would wield it as if it were a weapon of cold, indifferent iron. But with Elder powers – with chaos – it was those powers that did the wielding.

And the Malazans had answered in kind. A stunning revelation, a most unexpected unveiling of arcane knowledge. Yet, if anything, the power of the Malazan ritual surpassed that of the scores of Edur warlocks. Extraordinary. Had not Taralack Veed witnessed it with his own eyes, he would have considered such ability in the hands of the Malazan Empire simply unbelievable. Else, why had they never before exploited it?

Ah, a moment's thought and he had the answer to that. The Malazans might be bloodthirsty tyrants, but they are not insane. They understand caution. Restraint.

These Tiste Edur, unfortunately, do not.

Unfortunate, that is, for them.

He saw Twilight, the Atri-Preda, moving among her Letherii soldiers, voicing a calming word or two, the occasional low-toned command, and it seemed the distraught eddies calmed in her wake.

The Gral headed over.

She met his eyes and greeted him with a faint nod.

'How fares your companion below?' she asked, and Taralack was impressed by her growing facility with the language.

'He eats. His fortitude returns, Atri-Preda. But, as to this day and its strange events, he is indifferent.'
'He will be tested soon.'

Taralack shrugged. 'This does not concern him. What assails Tomad Sengar?' he asked under his breath, stepping closer as he did so.

She hesitated for a long moment, then said, 'Word has come that among the Malazan fleet was a craft that had been captured, some time back and an ocean away, by the Edur. And that ship was gifted to one of Tomad's sons to command – a journey into the Nascent, a mission the nature of which Emperor Rhulad would not be told.'

'Tomad now believes that son is dead.'

'There can be no other possibility. And in losing one son, he in truth has lost two.'

'What do you mean?'

She glanced at him, then shook her head. 'It is no matter. But what has been born in Tomad Sengar this day, Taralack Veed, is a consuming hatred. For these Malazans.'

The Gral shrugged. 'They have faced many enemies in their day, Atri-Preda. Caladan Brood, Sorrel Tawrith, K'azz D'Avore, Anomander Rake—'

At the last name Twilight's eyes widened, and as she was about to speak her gaze shifted fractionally, to just past Taralack Veed's left shoulder. A male voice spoke from behind him.

'That is impossible.'

The Gral stepped to one side to take in the newcomer.

An Edur.

'This one is named Ahlrada Ahn,' Twilight said, and he sensed some hidden knowledge between the two in her voicing of the Edur's name. 'Like me, he has learned your language – swifter than I.'

'Anomander Rake,' the Edur said, 'the Black Winged Lord, dwells at the Gates of Darkness.'

'The last I heard,' Taralack Veed said, 'he dwelt in a floating fortress called Moon's Spawn. He fought a sorcerous battle with the Malazans on a distant continent, above a city named Pale. And Anomander Rake was defeated. But not killed.'

Shock and disbelief warred on the Edur warrior's weathered, lined visage. 'You must tell me more of this. The one you call Anomander Rake, how is he described?'

'I know little of that. Tall, black-skinned, silver hair. He carries a cursed two-handed sword. Are these details accurate? I know not ... but I see by the look in your eyes, Ahlrada Ahn, that they must be.' Taralack paused, considering how much he should reveal – his next statement would involve arcane knowledge – information not known by many. Still ... let us see how this plays out. His shifted his language, to that of the Letherii, and said, 'Anomander Rake is Tiste Andii. Not Edur. Yet, by your reaction, warrior, I might think that, as with Tomad Sengar, you are wounded by some manner of unwelcome revelation.'

A sudden skittish look in the warrior's eyes. He glanced at Twilight, then pivoted about and strode away.

'There are matters,' the Atri-Preda said to Taralack Veed, 'that you are unaware of, and it is best that it remain so. Ignorance protects you. It was not wise,' she added, 'that you revealed your facility with the Letherii language.'

'I believe,' the Gral replied, 'that Ahlrada Ahn will prove disinclined to report our conversation to anyone.' He met her eyes then, and smiled. 'As will you, Atri-Preda.'

'You are careless, Taralack Veed.'
He spat on his hands and swept them through his hair, wondering again at her sudden look of distaste. 'Tell Tomad Sengar this, Atri-Preda. It is he who risks much, with his demand that Icarium's prowess be tested.'

'You seem so certain,' she said.

'Of what?'

'That your companion represents the most formidable threat Emperor Rhulad has ever faced. Alas, as has invariably proved the case, all others who believed the same are now dead. And, Taralack Veed, there have been so many. Tomad Sengar must know for certain. He must be made to believe, before he will guide your friend to stand before his son.'

'His son?'

'Yes. Emperor Rhulad is Tomad Sengar's youngest son. Indeed, now, the only son he has left. The other three are gone, or dead. Likely they are all dead.'

'Then it strikes me,' the Gral said, 'that what Tomad seeks to measure is not Icarium's prowess, but his lack thereof. After all, what father would wish death upon his last surviving son?'

In answer, Twilight simply stared at him for a long moment. Then she turned away.

Leaving Taralack Veed alone, a frown growing ever more troubled on his face.

Sergeant Hellian had found a supply of sailor's rum and now walked round the decks, a benign smile on her face. Not half a bell earlier, she'd been singing some Kartoolian death dirge as the very Abyss was being unleashed in the skies overhead.

Masan Gilani, her armour off once more and a heavy woollen cloak wrapped about her against the chill wind, sat among a handful of other soldiers, more or less out of the way of the sailors. The enemy fleet was somewhere to the south now, lost in the deepening dusk, and good riddance to them.

'We've got us a High Mage now. A real one. That Quick Ben, he was a Bridgeburner, after all. A real High Mage, who just saved all our skins. That's good.'

A new badge adorned her cloak, in silver, crimson and gold thread – she was quite proud of her handiwork. *The Bonehunters*. *Yes, I can live with that name*. True, it wasn't as poignant as *Bridgeburners*. In fact, its meaning was a little bit obscure, but that was fine, since, thus far, the Fourteenth's history was equally obscure. Or at least muddied up enough to make things confused and uncertain.

*Like where we're going. What's next? Why has the Empress recalled us? It's not as if Seven Cities don't need rebuilding, or Malazans filling all those empty garrisons*. Then again, the plague now held the land by the throat and was still choking the life from it.

*But we got us a High Mage.*

The young girl, Sinn, crawled near, shivering in the chill, and Masan Gilani opened one side of her cloak. Sinn slipped within that enveloping embrace, snuggled closer then settled her head on Masan's chest.

Nearby, Sergeant Cord was still cursing at Crump, who had stupidly waved at one of the passing enemy ships, just after the battle that wasn't. Crump had been the one who'd messed things badly at the wall of Y'Ghatan, she recalled. The one who ran with his knees up to either side of his big ears. And who was now listening to his sergeant with a broad, mindless smile, his expression twitching to sheer delight every time Cord's tirade reached new heights of imagination.

If all of that went on much longer, Masan Gilani suspected, the sergeant might well launch himself at Crump, hands closing on that long, scrappy neck with its bobbing fist-sized apple. Just to strangle that smile from the fool's horsey face.
Sinn's small hand began playing with one of Masan's breasts, the index finger circling the nipple. *What kind of company has this imp been keeping?* She gently pushed the hand away, but it came back. *Fine. What of it, but damn, that's one cold hand she's got there.*

'All dead,' Sinn murmured.

'What? Who's all dead, girl?'

'They're all dead – you like this? I think you like this.'

'Your finger is cold. Who is all dead?'

'Big.'

The finger went away, was replaced by a warm, wet mouth. A dancing tongue. *Hood's breath! Well, I can think of worse ways to end this terrifying day.*

'Is that my sister hiding in there?'

Masan Gilani looked up at Corporal Shard. 'Yes.'

A slightly pained expression on his face. 'She won't tell me ... what happened at the estate. What happened ... to her.' He hesitated, then added, 'Yours isn't the first cloak of the night she's crawled under, Masan Gilani. Though you're the first woman.'

'Ah, I see.'

'I want to know what happened. You understand that? I need to know.'

Masan Gilani nodded.

'I can see how it is,' Shard went on, looking away and rubbing at his face. 'We all cope in our own ways ...'

'But you're her brother,' she said, still nodding. 'And you've been following her around. To make sure nobody does anything with her they shouldn't do.'

His sigh was heavy. 'Thanks, Masan Gilani. I wasn't really worried about you—'

'I doubt you'd need worry about any of us,' she replied. 'Not the squads here.'

'You know,' he said, and she saw tears trickle down his cheeks, 'that's what's surprised me. Here, with these people – all of us, who came out from under the city – they've all said the same thing as you just did.'

'Shard,' she said gently, 'you still Ashok Regiment? You and the rest?'

He shook his head. 'No. We're Bonehunters now.'

*That's good.* 'I got some extra thread,' she noted. 'Might be I could borrow your cloaks ... on a warm day ...'

'You've got a good hand, Masan Gilani. I'll tell the others, if that's okay.'

'It is. Not much else for us to do now anyway, on these bloated hippos.'

'Still, I appreciate it. I mean, everything, that is.'

'Go get some sleep, Corporal. From your sister's breathing, that's what she's doing right now.'

Nodding, he moved away.

*And if some soldier who doesn't get it tries to take advantage of this broken thing, all forty-odd of us will skin him or her alive. Add one more. Faradan Sort.*
Four children scrambled across the deck, one squealing with laughter. Tucked in Masan Gilani's arms, Sinn stirred slightly, then settled in once more, her mouth planted firm on the woman's nipple. The Dal Honese woman stared after the children, pleased to see that they'd recovered from the march, that they'd begun their own healing. *We all cope in our own ways, aye.*

So who was Sinn seeing, when she said that they were all dead?

_Gods below, I don't think I want to know. Not tonight, anyway. Let her sleep. Let those others play, then curl up beneath blankets somewhere below. Let us all sleep to this beast's swaying. Quick Ben's gift to us, all of this._

Brother and sister stood at the prow, wrapped against the chill, and watched as stars filled the darkness of the north sky. Creaking cordage, the strain of sails canted over as the ship made yet another tack. Westward, a ridge of mountains blacker than the heavens marked the Olphara Peninsula.

The sister broke the long silence between them. 'It should have been impossible.'

Her brother snorted, then said, 'It was. That's the whole point.'

'Tavore won't get what she wants.'

'I know.'

'She's used to that.'

'She's had to deal with us, yes.'

'You know, Nil, he saved us all.'

A nod, unseen beneath the heavy hood of Wickan wool.

'Especially Quick Ben.'

'Agreed. So,' Nil continued, 'we are also agreed that it is a good thing he is with us.'

'I suppose,' Nether replied.

'You're only sounding like that because you like him, sister. Like him the way a woman likes a man.'

'Don't be an idiot. It's those dreams ... and what she does ...'

Nil snorted again. 'Quickens your breath, does it? That animal hand, gripping him hard—'

'Enough! That's not what I meant. It's just ... yes, it's a good thing he's with this army. But her, with him, well, I'm not so sure.'

'You're jealous, you mean.'

'Brother, I grow weary of this childish teasing. There's something, well, compulsive about it, the way she uses him.'

'All right, on that I would agree. But for you and me, sister, there is one vital question remaining. The Eres'al has taken an interest. She follows us like a jackal.'

'Not us. Him.'

'Exactly. And that is at the heart of the question here. Do we tell her? Do we tell the Adjunct?'

'Tell her what? That some wet-crotched soldier in Fiddler's squad is more important to her and her army than Quick Ben, Kalam and Apsalar all put together? Listen, we wait until we discover what the High Mage tells the Adjunct – about what just happened.'
'Meaning, if he says little, or even claims complete ignorance—'

'Or takes credit and struts around like a First Hero – that's when we decide on our answer, Nil.'

'All right.'

They were silent then for a dozen heartbeats, until Nil said, 'You shouldn't worry overmuch, Nether. A half-woman half-animal all covered in smelly fur isn't much competition for his heart, I'd imagine.'

'But it wasn't my hand—' Abruptly, she shut up, then offered up a most ferocious string of Wickan curses.

In the dark, Nil was smiling. Thankful, nonetheless, that his sister could not see it.

Marines crowded the hold, sprawled or curled up beneath blankets, so many bodies Apsalar was made uneasy, as if she'd found herself in a soldier barrow. Drawing her own coverings to one side, she rose. Two lanterns swung from timbers, their wicks low. The air was growing foul. She clasped on her cloak and made her way towards the hatch.  

Climbing free, she stepped onto the mid deck. The night air was bitter cold but blissfully fresh in her lungs. She saw two figures at the prow. Nil and Nether. So turned instead and ascended to the stern castle, only to find yet another figure, leaning on the stern rail. A soldier, short, squat, his head left bare despite the icy wind. Bald, with a fringe of long, grey, ratty strands that whipped about in the frigid blasts. She did not recognize the man.

Apsalar hesitated, then, shrugging, walked over. His head turned when she reached the rail at his side. 'You invite illness, soldier,' she said. 'At the least, draw up your hood.'

The old man grunted, said nothing.

'I am named Apsalar.'

'So you want my name back, do you? But if I do that, then it ends. Just silence. It's always that way.'

She looked down on the churning wake twisting away from the ship's stern. Phosphorescence lit the foam. 'I am a stranger to the Fourteenth Army,' she said.

'Doubt it'll make a difference,' he said. 'What I did ain't no secret to nobody.'

'I have but recently returned to Seven Cities.' She paused, then said, 'In any case, you are not alone with the burden of things you once did.'

He glanced over again. 'You're too young to be haunted by your past.'

'And you, soldier, are too old to care so much about your own.'

He barked a laugh, returned his attention to the sea.

To the east clouds skidded from the face of the moon, yet the light cast down was muted, dull.

'Look at that,' he said. 'I got good eyes, but that moon's nothing but a blur. Not the haze of cloud, neither. It's a distant world, ain't it? Another realm, with other armies crawling around in the fog, killing each other, draggin' children into the streets, red swords flashing down over'n over. And I bet they look up every now and then, wonderin' at all the dust they kicked up, makin' it hard to see that other world overhead.'

'When I was a child,' Apsalar said, 'I believed that there were cities there, but no wars. Just beautiful gardens, and the flowers were ever in bloom, every season, day and night, filling the air with wondrous scents ... you know, I told all of that to someone, once. He later said to me that he fell in love with me that night. With that story. He was young, you see.'

'And now he's just that emptiness in your eyes, Apsalar.'
She flinched. 'If you are going to make observations like that, I will know your name.'

'But that would ruin it. Everything. Right now, I'm just me, just a soldier like all the others. You find out who I am and it all falls apart.' He grimaced, then spat down into the sea. 'Very well. Nothing ever lasts, not even ignorance. My name's Squint.'

'I hate to puncture your ego – as tortured as it is – but no vast revelation follows your name.'

'Do you lie? No, I see you don't. Well, never expected that, Apsalar.'

'Nothing changes, then, does it? You know nothing of me and I know nothing of you.'

'I'd forgotten what that was like. That young man, what happened to him?'

'I don't know. I left him.'

'You didn't love him?'

She sighed. 'Squint, it's complicated. I've hinted at my own past. The truth is, I loved him too much to see him fall so far into my life, into what I was – and still am. He deserves better.'

'You damned fool, woman. Look at me. I'm alone. Once, I wasn't in no hurry to change that. And then, one day I woke up, and it was too late. Now, alone gives me my only peace, but it ain't a pleasant peace. You two loved each other – any idea how rare and precious that is? You broke yourself and broke him too, I'd think. Listen to me – go find him, Apsalar. Find him and hold onto him – now whose ego tortures itself, eh? There you are, thinking that change can only go one way.'

Her heart was thudding hard. She was unable to speak, every counter argument, every refutation seeming to melt away. Sweat cooled on her skin.

Squint turned away. 'Gods below, a real conversation. All edges and life ... I'd forgotten. I'm going below – my head's gone numb.' He paused. 'Don't suppose you'd ever care to talk again? Just Squint and Apsalar, who ain't got nothing in common except what they don't know about each other.'

She managed a nod, and said, 'I would ... welcome that, Squint.'

'Good.'

She listened to his footsteps dwindle behind her. Poor man. He did the right thing taking Coltaine's life, but he's the only one who can't live with that.

Climbing down into the hold, Squint stopped for a moment, hands on the rope rails to either side of the steep steps. He could have said more, he knew, but he had no idea he'd slice so easily through her defences. That vulnerability was ... unexpected.

You'd think, wouldn't you, that someone who'd been possessed by a god would be tougher than that.

'Apsalar.'

She knew the voice and so did not turn. 'Hello, Cotillion.'

The god moved up to lean against the rail at her side. 'It was not easy to find you.'

'I am surprised. I am doing as you ask, after all.'

'Into the heart of the Malazan Empire. That detail was not something we had anticipated.'

'Victims do not stand still, awaiting the knife. Even unsuspecting, they are capable of changing everything.'

He said nothing for a time, and Apsalar could feel a renewal of tension within her. In the muted moonlight
his face looked tired, and in his eyes as he looked at her, something febrile.

'Apsalar, I was ... complacent—'
'Cotillion, you are many things, but complacency is not one of them.'
'Careless, then. Something has happened – it is difficult to piece together. As if the necessary details have been flung into a muddy pool, and I have been able to do little more than grope, half-blind and not even certain what it is I am looking for.'
'Cutter.'

He nodded. 'There was an attack. An ambush, I think – even the memories held in the ground, where the blood spilled, were all fragmented – I could read so little.'

*What has happened?* She wanted to ask that question. Now, cutting through his slow, cautious approach – *not caution – he is hedging*—

'A small settlement is near the scene – they were the ones who cleaned things up.'

'He is dead.'

'I don't know – there were no bodies, except for horses. One grave, but it had been opened and the occupant exhumed – no, I don't why anyone would do that. In any case, I have lost contact with Cuttet, and that more than anything else is what disturbs me.'

'Lost contact,' she repeated dully. 'Then he is dead, Cotillion.'

'I honestly do not know. There are two things, however, of which I am certain. Do you wish to hear them?'

'Are they relevant?'

'That is for you to decide.'

'Very well.'

'One of the women, Scillara—'

'Yes.'

'She gave birth – she survived to do that at least, and the child is now in the care of the villagers.'

'That is good. What else?'

'Heboric Light Touch is dead.'

She turned at that – but away from him – staring out over the seas, to that distant, murky moon. *Ghost Hands.*

'Yes. The power – the aura – of that old man – it burned like green fire, it had the wild rage of Treach. It was unmistakable, undeniable—'

'And now it is gone.'

'Yes.'

'There was another woman, a young girl.'

'Yes. We wanted her, Shadowthrone and I. As it turns out, I know she lives, and indeed she appears to be precisely where we wanted her to be, with one crucial difference—'

'It is not you and Shadowthrone who control her.'
'Guide, not control – we would not have presumed control, Apsalar. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of her new master. The Crippled God.' He hesitated, then said, 'Felisin Younger is Sha'ik Reborn.'

Apsalar nodded. 'Like a sword that kills its maker ... there are cycles to justice.'

'Justice? Abyss below, Apsalar, justice is nowhere to be seen in any of this.'

'Isn't it?' She faced him again. 'I sent Cutter away, because I feared he would die if he stayed with me. I sent him away and that is what killed him. You sought to use Felisin Younger, and now she finds herself a pawn in another god's hand. Treach wanted a Destriant to lead his followers into war, but Heboric is killed in the middle of nowhere, having achieved nothing. Like a tiger cub getting its skull crushed – all that potential, that possibility, gone. Tell me, Cotillion, what task did you set Cutter in that company?'

He did not answer.

'You charged him to protect Felisin Younger, didn't you? And he failed. Is he alive? For his own sake, perhaps it is best that he is not.'

'You cannot mean that, Apsalar.'

She closed her eyes. No, I do not mean that. Gods, what am I to do ... with this pain? What am I to do?

Cotillion slowly reached up, his hand – the black leather glove removed – nearing the side of her face. She felt his finger brush her cheek, felt the cold thread that was all that was left of the tear he wiped away. A tear she had not known was there.

'You are frozen,' he said in a soft voice.

She nodded, then shook her head suddenly as everything crumbled inside – and she was in his arms, weeping uncontrollably.

And the god spoke, 'I'll find him, Apsalar. I swear it. I'll find the truth.'

Truths, yes. One after another, one boulder settling down, then another. And another. Blotting out the light, darkness closing in, grit and sand sifting down, a solid silence when the last one is in place. Now, dear fool, try drawing a breath. A single breath.

There were clouds closed fast round the moon. And one by one, gardens died.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cruel misapprehension, you choose the shape and cast of this wet clay in your hands, as the wheel ever spins
Tempered in granite, this fired shell hardens into the scarred shield of your deeds, and the dark decisions within
Settle hidden in suspension, unseen in banded strata awaiting death's weary arrival, the journey's repast to close you out
We blind grievers raise you high, honouring all you never were and what rots sealed inside follows you to the grave
I stand now among the mourners, displeased by my suspicions as the vessel's dust drifts—oh how I despise funerals.

The Secrets of Clay
Panith Fanal

His eyes opened in the darkness. Lying motionless, he waited until his mind separated the sounds that had awakened him. Two sources, Barathol decided. One distant, one close at hand. Caution dictated he concentrate on the latter.

Bedclothes rustling, pulled and tugged by adjusting hands, a faint scrape of sandy gravel, then a muted murmur. A long exhaled breath, then some more shifting of positions, until the sounds became rhythmic, and two sets of breathing conjoined.

It was well. Hood knew, Barathol wasn't the one with a chance of easing the haunted look in the Daru's eyes. He then added another silent prayer, that Scillara not damage the man with some future betrayal. If that happened, he suspected Cutter would retreat so far from life there would be no return.

In any case, such matters were out of his hands, and that, too, was well.

And so...the other, more distant sound. A susurration, more patient in its rhythm than the now quickening lovemaking on the opposite side of the smouldering firepit. Like wind stroking treetops...but there were no trees. And no wind.

It is the sea.

Dawn was approaching, paling the eastern sky. Barathol heard Scillara roll to one side, her gasps low but long in settling down. From Cutter, a drawing up of coverings, and he then turned onto one side and moments later fell into sleep once more.

Scillara sat up. Flint and iron, a patter of sparks, as she awakened her pipe. She had used the last of her coins to resupply herself with rustleaf the day before, when they passed a modest caravan working its way inland. The meeting had been sudden, as the parties virtually collided on a bend in the rocky trail. An exchange of wary looks, and something like relief arriving in the faces of the traders.

The meeting had been sudden, as the parties virtually collided on a bend in the rocky trail. An exchange of wary looks, and something like relief arriving in the faces of the traders.

The plague was broken. Tanno Spiritwalkers had so pronounced it, lifting the self-imposed isolation of the island of Otataral.

But Barathol and his companions were the first living people this troop had encountered since leaving the small, empty village on the coast where their ship had delivered them. The merchants, transporting basic staples from Rutu Jelba, had begun to fear they were entering a ghost land.

Two days of withdrawal for Scillara had had Barathol regretting ever leaving his smithy. Rustleaf and now lovemaking—the woman is at peace once more, thank Hood.
Scillara spoke: 'You want I should prepare breakfast, Barathol?'

He rolled onto his back and sat up, studied her in the faint light.

She shrugged. 'A woman knows. Are you upset?'

'Why would I be?' he replied in a rumble. He looked over at the still motionless form of Cutter. 'Is he truly asleep once more?'

Scillara nodded. 'Most nights he hardly sleeps at all – nightmares, and his fear of them. An added benefit to a roll with him – breaks loose his exhaustion afterwards.'

'I applaud your altruism,' Barathol said, moving closer to the firepit and prodding at the dim coals with the point of his cook-knife. From the gloom to his right, Chaur appeared, smiling.

'You should at that,' Scillara said in reply to Barathol's comment.

He glanced up. 'And is that all there is? For you?'

She looked away, drew hard on her pipe.

'Don't hurt him, Scillara.'

'Fool, don't you see? I'm doing the opposite.'

'That's what I concluded. But what if he falls in love with you?'

'He won't. He can't.'

'Why not?'

She rose and walked over to the packs. 'Get that fire going, Barathol. Some hot tea should take away the chill in our bones.'

*Unless that's all you have in them, woman.*

Chaur went to Scillara's side, crouching to stroke her hair as, ignoring him, she drew out wrapped foodstuffs.

Chaur watched, with avid fascination, every stream of smoke Scillara exhaled.

*Aye, lad, like the legends say, some demons breathe fire.*

They let Cutter sleep, and he did not awaken until midmorning – bolting into a sitting position with a confused, then guilty expression on his face. The sun was finally warm, tempered by a pleasantly cool breeze coming in from the east.

Barathol watched as Cutter's scanning gaze found Scillara, who sat with her back to a boulder, and the Daru flinched slightly at her greeting wink and blown kiss.

Chaur was circling the camp like an excited dog – the roar of surf was much louder now, carried on the wind, and he could not contain his eagerness to discover the source of that sound.

Cutter pulled his attention from Scillara and watched Chaur for a time. 'What's with him?'

'The sea,' Barathol said. 'He's never seen it. He probably doesn't even know what it is. There's still some tea, Cutter, and those packets in front of Scillara are your breakfast.'

'It's late,' he said, rising. 'You should've woken me.' Then he halted. 'The sea? Beru fend, we're that close?'

'Can't you smell it? Hear it?'
Cutter suddenly smiled – and it was a true smile – the first Barathol had seen on the young man.

'Did anyone see the moon last night?' Scillara asked. 'It was mottled. Strange, like holes had been poked through it.'

'Some of those holes,' Barathol observed, 'seem to be getting bigger.'

She looked over, nodding. 'Good, I thought so, too, but I couldn't be sure. What do you think it means?'

Barathol shrugged. 'It's said the moon is another realm, like ours, with people on its surface. Sometimes things fall from our sky. Rocks. Balls of fire. The Fall of the Crippled God was said to be like that. Whole mountains plunging down, obliterating most of a continent and filling half the sky with smoke and ash.' He glanced across at Scillara, then over at Cutter. 'I was thinking, maybe, that something hit the moon in the same way.'

'Like a god being pulled down?'

'Yes, like that.'

'So what are those dark blotches?'

'I don't know. Could be smoke and ash. Could be pieces of the world that broke away.'

'Getting bigger ...'

'Yes.' Barathol shrugged again. 'Smoke and ash spreads. It stands to reason, then, doesn't it?'

Cutter was quickly breaking his fast. 'Sorry to make you all wait. We should get going. I want to see what's in that abandoned village.'

'Anything seaworthy is all we need,' Barathol said.

'That is what I'm hoping we'll find.' Cutter brushed crumbs from his hands, tossed one last dried fig into his mouth, then rose. 'I'm ready,' he said around a mouthful.

_All right, Scillara, you did well._

There were sun-bleached, dog-gnawed bones in the back street of the fisher village. Doors to the residences within sight, the inn and the Malazan assessor's building were all open, drifts of fine sand heaped in the entranceways. Moored on both sides of the stone jetty were half-submerged fisher craft, the ropes holding them fast stretched to unravelling, while in the shallow bay beyond, two slightly larger carracks waited at anchor next to mooring poles.

Chaur still stood on the spot where he had first come in sight of the sea and its rolling, white-edged waves. His smile was unchanged, but tears streamed unchecked and unabating from his eyes, and it seemed he was trying to sing, without opening his mouth: strange mewling sounds emerged. What had run down from his nose was now caked with wind-blown sand.

Scillara wandered through the village, looking for whatever might prove useful on the voyage they now planned. Rope, baskets, casks, dried foodstuffs, nets, gaffs, salt for storing fish – anything. Mostly what she found were the remnants of villagers – all worried by dogs. Two squat storage buildings flanked the avenue that ran inward from the jetty, and these were both locked. With Barathol's help, both buildings were broken into, and in these structures they found more supplies than they could ever use.

Cutter swam out to examine the carracks, returning after a time to report that both remained sound and neither was particularly more seaworthy than the other. Of matching length and beam, the craft were like twins.

'Made by the same hands,' Cutter said. 'I think. You could judge that better than me, Barathol, if you're at all interested.'
'I will take your word for it, Cutter. So, we can choose either one, then.'

'Yes. Of course, maybe they belong to the traders we met.'

'No, they're not Jelban. What are their names?'

'Dhenrabi's Tail is the one on the left. The other's called Sanal's Grief. I wonder who Sanal was?'

'We'll take Grief,' Barathol said, 'and before you ask, don't.'

Scillara laughed.

Cutter waded alongside one of the swamped sculls beside the jetty. 'We should bail one of these, to move our supplies out to her.'

Barathol rose. 'I'll start bringing those supplies down from the warehouse.'

Scillara watched the huge man make his way up the avenue, then turned her attention to the Daru, who had found a half-gourd bailer and was scooping water from one of the sculls. 'Want me to help?' she asked.

'It's all right. Finally, I've got something to do.'

'Day and night now.'

The glance he threw her was shy. 'I've never tasted milk before.'

Laughing, she repacked her pipe. 'Yes you have. You just don't remember it.'

'Ah. I suppose you're right.'

'Anyway, you're a lot gentler than that little sweet-faced bloodfly was.'

'You've not given her a name?'

'No. Leave that to her new mothers to fight over.'

'Not even in your own mind? I mean, apart from bloodfly and leech and horse tick.'

'Cutter,' she said, 'you don't understand. I give her a real name I'll end up having to turn round and head back. I'll have to take her, then.'

'Oh. I am sorry, Scillara. You're right. There's not much I understand about anything.'

'You need to trust yourself more.'

'No.' He paused, eyes on the sea to the east. 'There's nothing I've done to make that ... possible. Look at what happened when Felisin Younger trusted me – to protect her. Even Heboric – he said I was showing leadership, he said that was good. So, he too trusted me.'

'You damned idiot. We were ambushed by T'lan Imass. What do you think you could have done?'

'I don't know, and that's my point.'

'Heboric was the Destriant of Treach. They killed him as if he was nothing more than a lame dog. They lopped limbs off Greyfrog like they were getting ready to cook a feast. Cutter, people like you and me, we can't stop creatures like that. They cut us down then step over us and that's as far as they're concerned. Yes, it's a hard thing to take, for anyone. The fact that we're insignificant, irrelevant. Nothing is expected of us, so better we just hunch down and stay out of sight, stay beneath the notice of things like T'lan Imass, things like gods and goddesses. You and me, Cutter, and Barathol there. And Chaur. We're the ones who, if we're lucky, stay alive long enough to clean up the mess, put things back together. To reassert the normal world. That's what we do, when we can – look at you, you've just resurrected a dead boat – you gave it its function again – look at it, Cutter, it finally looks the way it should, and that's satisfying, isn't it?'
'For Hood's sake,' Cutter said, shaking his head, 'Scillara, we're not just worker termites clearing a tunnel after a god's careless footfall. That's not enough.'

'I'm not suggesting it's enough,' she said. 'I'm telling you it's what we have to start with, when we're rebuilding – rebuilding villages and rebuilding our lives.'

Barathol had been trudging back and forth during this conversation, and now Chaur had come down, timidly, closer to the water. The mute had unpacked the supplies from the horses, including Heboric's wrapped corpse, and the beasts – unsaddled, their bits removed – now wandered along the grassy fringe beyond the tideline, tails swishing.

Cutter began loading the scull.

He paused at one point and grinned wryly. 'Lighting a pipe's a good way of getting out of work, isn't it?'

'You said you didn't need any help.'

'With the bailing, yes.'

'What you don't understand, Cutter, is the spiritual necessity for reward, not to mention the clarity that comes to one's mind during such repasts. And in not understanding, you instead feel resentment, which sours the blood in your heart and makes you bitter. It's that bitterness that kills people, you know, it eats them up inside.'

He studied her. 'Meaning, I'm actually jealous?'

'Of course you are, but because I can empathize with you, I am comfortable withholding judgement. Tell me, can you say the same for yourself?'

Barathol arrived with a pair of casks under his arms. 'Get off your ass, woman. We've got a good wind and the sooner we're on our way the better.'

She threw him a salute as she rose. 'There you go, Cutter, a man who takes charge. Watch him, listen, and learn.'

The Daru stared at her, bemused.

She read his face: But you just said ...

So I did, my young lover. We are contrary creatures, us humans, but that isn't something we need be afraid of, or even much troubled by. And if you make a list of those people who worship consistency, you'll find they're one and all tyrants or would-be tyrants. Ruling over thousands, or over a husband or a wife, or some cowering child. Never fear contradiction, Cutter, it is the very heart of diversity.

Chaur held on to the steering oar whilst Cutter and Barathol worked the sails. The day was bright, the wind fresh and the carrack rode the swells as if its very wood was alive. Every now and then the bow pitched down, raising spray, and Chaur would laugh, the sound child-like, a thing of pure joy.

Scillara settled down amidships, the sun on her face warm, not hot, and stretched out.

We sail a carrack named Grief, with a corpse on board. That Cutter means to deliver to its final place of rest. Heboric, did you know such loyalty could exist, there in your shadow?

Barathol moved past her at one point, and, as Chaur laughed once more, she saw an answering smile on his battered, scarified face.

Oh yes, it is indeed blessed music. So unexpected, and in its innocence, so needed ...

The return of certain mortal traits, Onrack the Broken realized, reminded one that life was far from perfect. Not that he had held many illusions in that regard. In truth, he held no illusions at all. About anything. Even so,
some time passed – in something like a state of fugue – before Onrack recognized that what he was feeling was ... impatience.

The enemy would come again. These caverns would echo with screams, with the clangour of weapons, with voices raised in rage. And Onrack would stand at Trull Sengar's side, and with him witness, in helpless fury, the death of still more of Minala's children.

Of course, children was a term that no longer fit. Had they been Imass, they would have survived the ordeal of the passage into adulthood by now. They would be taking mates, leading hunting parties, and joining their voices to the night songs of the clan, when the darkness returned to remind them all that death waited, there at the end of life's path.

Lying with lovers also belonged to night, and that made sense, for it was in the midst of true darkness that the first fire of life was born, flickering awake to drive back the unchanging absence of light. To lie with a lover was to celebrate the creation of fire. From this in the flesh to the world beyond.

Here, in the chasm, night reigned eternal, and there was no fire in the soul, no heat of lovemaking. There was only the promise of death.

And Onrack was impatient with that. There was no glory in waiting for oblivion. No, in an existence bound with true meaning and purpose, oblivion should ever arrive unexpected, unanticipated and unseen. One moment racing full tilt, the next, gone.

As a T'lan Imass of Logros, Onrack had known the terrible cost borne in wars of attrition. The spirit exhausted beyond reason, with no salvation awaiting it, only more of the same. The kin falling to the wayside, shattered and motionless, eyes fixed on some skewed vista – a scene to be watched for eternity, the minute changes measuring the centuries of indifference. Some timid creature scampering through, a plant's exuberant green pushing up from the earth after a rain, birds pecking at seeds, insects building empires ...

Trull Sengar came to his side where Onrack stood guarding the choke-point. 'Monok Ochem says the Edur's presence has ... contracted, away from us. For now. As if something made my kin retreat. I feel, my friend, that we have been granted a reprieve – one that is not welcome. I don't know how much longer I can fight.'

'When you can no longer fight in truth, Trull Sengar, the failure will cease to matter.'

'I did not think they would defy her, you know, but now, I see that it makes sense. She expected them to just abandon this, leaving the handful remaining here to their fate. Our fate, I mean.' He shrugged. 'Panek was not surprised.'

'The other children look to him,' Onrack said. 'They would not abandon him. Nor their mothers.'

'And, in staying, they will break the hearts of us all.'

'Yes.'

The Tiste Edur looked over. 'Have you come to regret the awakening of emotions within you, Onrack?'

'This awakening serves to remind me, Trull Sengar.'

'Of what?'

'Of why I am called "The Broken".'

'As broken as the rest of us.'

'Not Monok Ochem, nor Ibra Gholan.'

'No, not them.'

'Trull Sengar, when the attackers come, I would you know – I intend to leave your side.'
'Indeed?'

'Yes. I intend to challenge their leader. To slay him or be destroyed in the attempt. Perhaps, if I can deliver a truly frightful cost, they will reconsider their alliance with the Crippled God. At the very least, they may withdraw and not return for a long time.'

'I understand.' Trull then smiled in the gloom. 'I will miss your presence at my side in those final moments, my friend.'

'Should I succeed in what I intend, Trull Sengar, I shall return to your side.'

'Then you had better be quick killing that leader.'

'Such is my intention.'

'Onrack, I hear something new in your voice.'

'Yes.'

'What does it mean?'

'It means, Trull Sengar, that Onrack the Broken, in discovering impatience, has discovered something else.'

'What?'

'This: I am done with defending the indefensible. I am done with witnessing the fall of friends. In the battle to come, you shall see in me something terrible. Something neither Ibra Gholan nor Monok Ochem can achieve. Trull Sengar, you shall see a T'lan Imass, awakened to anger.'

Banaschar opened the door, wavered for a moment, leaning with one hand against the frame, then staggered into his decrepit room. The rank smell of sweat and unclean bedding, stale food left on the small table beneath the barred window. He paused, considering whether or not to light the lantern – but the oil was low and he'd forgotten to buy more. He rubbed at the bristle on his chin, more vigorously than normal since it seemed his face had gone numb.

A creak from the chair against the far wall, six paces distant. Banaschar froze in place, seeking to pierce the darkness. 'Who's there?' he demanded.

'There are few things in this world,' said the figure seated in the chair, 'more pathetic than a once-Demidrek fallen into such disrepair, Banaschar. Stumbling drunk into this vermin-filled hovel every night – why are you here?'

Banaschar stepped to his right and sank heavily onto the cot. 'I don't know who you are;' he said, 'so I see no reason to answer you.'

A sigh, then, 'You send, one after another for a while there, cryptic messages. Pleading, with increasing desperation, to meet with the Imperial High Mage.'

'Then you must realize,' Banaschar said, struggling to force sobriety into his thoughts – the terror was helping – 'that the matter concerns only devotees of D'rek—'

'A description that no longer fits either you or Tayschrenn.'

'There are things,' Banaschar said, 'that cannot be left behind. Tayschrenn knows this, as much as I—'

'Actually, the Imperial High Mage knows nothing.' A pause, accompanying a gesture that Banaschar interpreted as the man studying his fingernails, and something in his tone changed. 'Not yet, that is. Perhaps not at all. You see, Banaschar, the decision is mine.'

'Who are you?'
'You are not ready yet to know that.'

'Why are you intercepting my missives to Tayschrenn?'

'Well, to be precise, I have said no such thing.'

Banaschar frowned. 'You just said the decision was yours.'

'Yes I did. That decision centres on whether I remain inactive in this matter, as I have been thus far, or – given sufficient cause – I elect to, um, intervene.'

'Then who is blocking my efforts?'

'You must understand, Banaschar, Tayschrenn is the Imperial High Mage first and foremost. Whatever else he once was is now irrelevant—'

'No, it isn't. Not given what I have discovered—'

'Tell me.'

'No.'

'Better yet, Banaschar, convince me.'

'I cannot,' he replied, hands clutching the grimy bedding to either side.

'An imperial matter?'

'No.'

'Well, that is a start. As you said, then, the subject pertains to once-followers of D'rek. A subject, one presumes, related to the succession of mysterious deaths within the cult of the Worm. Succession? More like slaughter, yes? Tell me, is there anyone left? Anyone at all?'

Banaschar said nothing.

'Except, of course,' the stranger added, 'those few who have, at some time in the past and for whatever reasons, fallen away from the cult. From worship.'

'You know too much of this,' Banaschar said. He should never have stayed in this room. He should have been finding different hovels every night. He hadn't thought there'd be anyone, anyone left, who'd remember him. After all, those who might have were now all dead. And I know why. Gods below, how I wish I didn't.'

'Tayschrenn,' said the man after a moment, 'is being isolated. Thoroughly and most efficiently. In my professional standing, I admit to considerable admiration, in fact. Alas, in that same capacity, I am also experiencing considerable alarm.'

'You are a Claw.'

'Very good – at least some intelligence is sifting through that drunken haze, Banaschar. Yes, my name is Pearl.'

'How did you find me?'

'Does that make a difference?'

'It does. To me, it does, Pearl.'

Another sigh and a wave of one hand. 'Oh, I was bored. I followed someone, who, it turned out, was keeping track of you – with whom you spoke, where you went, you know, the usual things required.'

'Required? For what?'
'Why, preparatory, I imagine, to assassination, when that killer's master deems it expedient.'

Banaschar was suddenly shivering, the sweat cold and clammy beneath his clothes. 'There is nothing political,' he whispered, 'nothing that has anything to do with the empire. There is no reason—'

'Oh, but you have made it so, Banaschar. Do you forget? Tayschrenn is being isolated. You are seeking to break that, to awaken the Imperial High Mage—'

'Why is he permitting it?' Banaschar demanded. 'He's no fool—'

A soft laugh. 'Oh no, Tayschrenn is no fool. And in that, you may well have your answer.'

Banaschar blinked in the gloom. 'I must meet with him, Pearl.'

'You have not yet convinced me.'

A long silence, in which Banaschar closed his eyes, then placed his hands over them, as if that would achieve some kind of absolution. But only words could do that. Words, uttered now, to this man. Oh, how he wanted to believe it would ... suffice. A Claw, who would be my ally. Why? Because the Claw has ... rivals. A new organization that has deemed it expedient to raise impenetrable walls around the Imperial High Mage. What does that reveal of that new organization? They see Tayschrenn as an enemy, or they would so exclude him as to make his inaction desirable, even to himself. They know he knows, and wait to see if he finally objects. But he has not yet done so, leading them to believe that he might not – during whatever is coming. Abyss take me, what are we dealing with here?

Banaschar spoke from behind his hands. 'I would ask you something, Pearl.'

'Very well.'

'Consider the most grand of schemes,' he said. 'Consider time measured in millennia. Consider the ageing faces of gods, goddesses, beliefs and civilizations ...'

'Go on. What is it you would ask?'

Still he hesitated. Then he slowly lowered his hands, and looked across, to that grey, ghostly face opposite him. 'Which is the greater crime, Pearl, a god betraying its followers, or its followers betraying their god? Followers who then choose to commit atrocities in that god's name. Which, Pearl? Tell me, please.'

The Claw was silent for a dozen heartbeats, then he shrugged. 'You ask a man without faith, Banaschar.'

'Who better to judge?'

'Gods betray their followers all the time, as far as I can tell. Every unanswered prayer, every unmet plea for salvation. The very things that define faith, I might add.'

'Failure, silence and indifference? These are the definitions of faith, Pearl?'

'As I said, I am not the man for this discussion.'

'But are those things true betrayal?'

'That depends, I suppose. On whether the god worshipped is, by virtue of being worshipped, in turn beholden to the worshipper. If that god isn't – if there is no moral compact – then your answer is "no", it's not betrayal.'

'To whom – for whom – does a god act?' Banaschar asked.

'If we proceed on the aforementioned assertion, the god acts and answers only to him or herself.'

'After all,' Banaschar said, his voice rasping as he leaned forward, 'who are we to judge?'

'As you say.'
'Yes.'

'If,' Pearl said, 'on the other hand, a moral compact does exist between god and worshipper, then each and every denial represents a betrayal—'

'Assuming that which is asked of that god is in itself bound to a certain morality.'

'True. A husband praying his wife dies in some terrible accident so that he can marry his mistress, for example, is hardly something any self-respecting god would acquiesce to, or assist in.'

Banaschar heard the mockery in the man's voice, but chose to ignore it. 'And if the wife is a tyrant who beats their children?'

'Then a truly just god would act without the necessity for prayer.'

'Meaning the prayer itself, voiced by that husband, is also implicitly evil, regardless of his motive?'

'Well, Banaschar, in my scenario, his motive is made suspect by the presence of the mistress.'

'And if that mistress would be a most loving and adoring stepmother?'

Pearl snarled, chopping with one hand. 'Enough of this, damn you – you can wallow in this moral quandary all you want. I don't see the relevance ...' His voice fell away.

His heart smothered in a bed of ashes, Banaschar waited, willing himself not to sob aloud, not to cry out.

'They prayed but did not ask, nor beseech, nor plead,' Pearl said. 'Their prayers were a demand. The betrayal ... was theirs, wasn't it?' The Claw sat forward. 'Banaschar. Are you telling me that D'rek killed them all? Her entire priesthood? They betrayed her! In what way? What did they demand?'

'There is war,' he said in a dull voice.

'Yes. War among the gods, yes – gods below – those worshippers chose the wrong side!'

'She heard them,' Banaschar said, forcing the words out. 'She heard them choose. The Crippled God. And the power they demanded was the power of blood. Well, she decided, if they so lusted for blood ... she would give them all they wanted.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'All they wanted.'

'Banaschar ... hold on a moment ... why would D'rek's followers choose blood, the power of blood? That is an Elder way. What you are saying makes no sense.'

'The Cult of the Worm is ancient, Pearl. Even we cannot determine just how old. There is mention of a goddess, the Matron of Decay, the Mistress of Worms – a half-dozen titles – in Gothos's Folly – in the fragments possessed by the temple. Or at least, once in the temple's possession – those scrolls disappeared—'

'When?'

Banaschar managed a bitter smile. 'On the night of Tayschrenn's flight from the Grand Temple in Kartool. He has them. He must have them. Don't you see? Something is wrong! With all of this! The knowledge that I hold, and the knowledge that Tayschrenn must possess – with his access to Gothos's Folly – we must speak, we must make sense of what has happened, and what it means. This goes beyond the Imperium – yet this war among the gods – tell me, whose blood do you think will be spilled? What happened in the cult of D'rek, that is but the beginning!'

'The gods will betray us?' Pearl asked, leaning back. 'Us ... mortals. Whether we worship or not, it is mortal blood that will soak the earth.' He paused, then said, 'Perhaps, given the opportunity, you will be able to persuade Tayschrenn. But what of the other priesthoods – do you truly believe you can convince them – and what will you say to them? Will you plead for some kind of reformation, Banaschar? Some revolution among believers? They will laugh in your face.'
Banaschar looked away. 'In my face, perhaps. But ... Tayschrenn ...'

The man opposite him said nothing for a time. A graininess filled the gloom – dawn was coming, and with it a dull chill. Finally, Pearl rose, the motion fluid and silent. 'This is a matter for the Empress—'

'Her? Don't be a fool—'

'Careful,' the Claw warned in a soft voice.

Banaschar thought quickly, in desperation. 'She only comes into play with regard to releasing Tayschrenn from his position as High Mage, in freeing him to act. And besides, if the rumours are true about the Grey Mistress stalking Seven Cities, then it is clear that the pantheonic war has already begun in its myriad manipulations of the mortal realm. She would be wise to heed that threat.'

'Banaschar,' Pearl said, 'the rumours do not even come close to the truth. Hundreds of thousands have died. Perhaps millions.'

_Millions?

'I shall speak with the Empress,' Pearl repeated.

'When do you leave?' Banaschar asked. _And what of those who are isolating Tayschrenn? What of those who contemplate killing me?

'There will be no need for that,' the Claw said, walking to the door. 'She is coming here.'

'Here? When?'

'Soon.'

_Why? But he did not voice that question, for the man had gone.

Saying it needed the exercise, Iskaral Pust was sitting atop his mule, struggling to guide it in circles on the mid deck. From the looks of it, he was working far harder than the strange beast as it was cajoled into a step every fifty heartbeats or so.

Red-eyed and sickly, Mappo sat with his back to the cabin wall. Each night, in his dreams, he wept, and would awaken to find that what had plagued his dreams had pushed through the barrier of sleep, and he would lie beneath the furs, shivering with something like a fever. A sickness in truth, born of dread, guilt and shame. Too many failures, too many bad judgements; he had been stumbling, blind, for so long.

Out of friendship he had betrayed his only friend.

_I will make amends for all of this. So I vow, before all the Trell spirits._

Standing at the prow, the woman named Spite was barely visible within the gritty, mud-brown haze that engulfed her. Not one of the bhok’arala, scrambling about in the rigging or back and forth on the decks, would come near her.

She was in conversation. So Iskaral Pust had claimed. With a spirit that didn’t belong. Not here in the sea, and that wavering haze, like dust skirling through yellow grasses – even to Mappo’s dull eyes, blatantly out of place.

An intruder, but one of power, and that power seemed to be growing.

_'Mael,’ Iskaral Pust had said with a manic laugh, ‘he’s resisting, and getting his nose bloodied. Do you sense his fury, Trell? His spitting outrage? Hee. Hee hee. But she’s not afraid of him, oh no, she’s not afraid of anyone!’_}

Mappo had no idea who that ‘she' was, and had not the energy to ask. At first, he had thought the High Priest
had been referring to Spite, but no, it became increasingly apparent that the power manifesting itself over the bow of the ship was nothing like Spite's. No draconean stink, no cold brutality. No, the sighs of wind reaching the Trell were warm, dry, smelling of grasslands.

The conversation had begun at dawn, and now the sun was directly overhead. It seemed there was much to discuss ... about something.

Mappo saw two spiders scuttle past his moccasined feet. You damned witch, I don't think you're fooling anyone.

Was there a connection? Here, on this nameless ship, two shamans from Dal Hon, a land of yellow grasses, acacias, huge herds and big cats – savannah – and now, this ... visitor, striding across foreign seas.

'Outraged, yes,' Iskaral Pust had said. 'Yet, do you sense his reluctance? Oh, he struggles, but he knows too that she, who chooses to be in one place and not many, she is more than his match. Dare he focus? He doesn't even want this stupid war, hah! But oh, it is that very ambivalence that so frees his followers to do as they please!'

A snarling cry as the High Priest of Shadow fell from the back of the mule. The animal brayed, dancing away and wheeling round to stare down at the thrashing old man. It brayed again, and in that sound Mappo imagined he could hear laughter.

Iskaral Pust ceased moving, then lifted his head. 'She's gone.'

The wind that had been driving them steady and hard, ever on course, grew fitful.

Mappo saw Spite making her way down the forecastle steps, looking weary and somewhat dismayed.

'Well?' Iskaral demanded.

Spite's gaze dropped to regard the High Priest where he lay on the deck. 'She must leave us for a time. I sought to dissuade her, and, alas, I failed. This places us ... at risk.'

'From what?' Mappo asked.

She glanced over at him. 'Why, the vagaries of the natural world, Trell. Which can, at times, prove alarming and most random.' Her attention returned to Iskaral Pust. 'High Priest, please, assert some control over your bhok'arala. They keep undoing knots that should remain fast, not to mention leaving those unsightly offerings to you everywhere underfoot.'

'Assert some control?' Iskaral asked, sitting up with a bewildered look on his face. 'But they're crewing this ship!'

'Don't be an idiot,' Spite said. 'This ship is being crewed by ghosts. Tiste Andii ghosts, specifically. True, it was amusing to think otherwise, but now your little smallbrained worshippers are becoming troublesome.'

'Troublesome? You have no idea, Spite! Hah!' He cocked his head. 'Yes, let her think on that for a while. That tiny frown wrinkling her brow is so endearing. More than that, admit it, it inspires lust – oh yes, I'm not as shrivelled up as they no doubt think and in so thinking perforce nearly convince me! Besides, she wants me. I can tell. After all, I had a wife, didn't I? Not like Mappo there, with his bestial no doubt burgeoning traits, no, he has no-one! Indeed, am I not experienced? Am I not favoured by my idiotic, endlessly miscalculating god?'

Shaking her head, Spite walked past him, and halted before Mappo. 'Would that I could convince you, Trell, of the necessity for patience, and faith. We have stumbled upon a most extraordinary ally.'

Allies. They ever fail you in the end. Motives clash, divisive violence follows, and friend betrays friend.

'Will you devour your own soul, Mappo Runt?'

'I do not understand you,' he said. 'Why do you involve yourself with my purpose, my quest?'
'Because,' she said, 'I know where it shall lead.'

'The future unfolds before you, does it?'

'Never clearly, never completely. But I can well sense the convergence ahead – it shall be vast, Mappo, more terrible than this or any other realm has ever seen before. The Fall of the Crippled God, the Rage of Kallor, the Wounding at Morn, the Chainings – they all shall be dwarfed by what is coming. And you shall be there, for you are part of that convergence. As is Icarium. Just as I will come face to face with my evil sister at the very end, a meeting from which but one of us will walk away when all is done between us.'

Mappo stared at her. 'Will I,' he whispered, 'will I stop him? In the end? Or, is he the end – of everything?'

'I do not know. Perhaps the possibilities, Mappo Runt, depend entirely on how prepared you are at that moment, at your readiness, your faith, if you will.'

He slowly sighed, closed his eyes, then nodded. 'I understand.'

And, not seeing, he did not witness her flinch, and was himself unaware of the pathos filling the tone of that admission.

When he looked upon her once more, he saw naught but a calm, patient expression. Cool, gauging. Mappo nodded. 'As you say. I shall ... try.'

'I would expect no less, Trell.'

'Quiet!' Iskaral Pust hissed, still lying on the deck, but now on his belly. He was sniffing the air. 'Smell her? I do. I smell her! On this ship! That udder-knotted cow! Where is she!?'

The mule brayed once more.

Taralack Veed crouched before Icarium. The Jhag was paler than he had ever seen him before, the consequence of day after day in this hold, giving his skin a ghoulish green cast. The soft hiss of iron blade against whetstone was the only sound between them for a moment, then the Gral cleared his throat and said, 'A week away at the least – these Edur take their time. Like you, Icarium, they have already begun their preparations.'

'Why do they force an enemy upon me, Taralack Veed?'

The question was so lifeless that for a moment the Gral wondered if it had been rhetorical. He sighed, reaching up to ensure that his hair was as it should be – the winds upside were fierce – then said, 'My friend, they must be shown the extent of your ... martial prowess. The enemy with which they have clashed – a number of times, apparently – has proved both resilient and ferocious. The Edur have lost warriors.'

Icarium continued working the sword's single, notched edge. Then he paused, his eyes fixed on the weapon in his hands. 'I feel,' he said, 'I feel ... they are making a mistake. This notion ... of testing me – if what you have told me is true. Those tales of my anger ... unleashed.' He shook his head. 'Who are those I will face, do you know?'

Taralack Veed shrugged. 'No, I know very little – they do not trust me, and why should they? I am not an ally -- indeed, we are not allies—'

'And yet we shall soon fight for them. Do you not see the contradictions, Taralack Veed?'

'There is no good side in the battle to come, my friend. They fight each other endlessly, for both sides lack the capacity, or the will, to do anything else. Both thirst for the blood of their enemies. You and I, we have seen all of this before, the manner in which two opposing forces – no matter how disparate their origins, no matter how righteously one begins the conflict – end up becoming virtually identical to each other. Brutality matches brutality, stupidity matches stupidity. You would have me ask the Tiste Edur? About their terrible, evil enemies? What is the point? This, my friend, is a matter of killing. That and nothing more, now. Do you see that?'
'A matter of killing,' Icarium repeated, his words a whisper. After a moment, he resumed honing the edge of his sword.

'And such a matter,' Taralack Veed said, 'belongs to you.'

'To me.'

'You must show them that. By ending the battle. Utterly.'

'Ending it. All the killing. Ending it, for ever.'

'Yes, my friend. It is your purpose.'

'With my sword, I can deliver peace.'

'Oh yes, Icarium, you can and you will.' Mappo Runt, you were a fool. How you might have made use of this Jhag. For the good of all. Icarium is the sword, after all. Forged to be used, as all weapons are.

_The weapon, then, that promises peace. Why, you foolish Trell, did you ever flee from this?_

North of the Olphara Peninsula, the winds freshened, filling the sails, and the ships seemed to surge like migrating dhenrabi across the midnight blue of the seas. Despite her shallow draught, the _Silanda_ struggled to keep pace with the dromons and enormous transports.

Almost as bored as the other marines, Bottle walked up and down the deck, trying to ignore their bickering, trying to nail down this sense of unease growing within him.

'Something ... in this wind ... something ...'

'Bone monger,' Smiles said, pointing her knife at Koryk. 'That's what you remind me of, with all those bones hanging from you. I remember one who used to come through the village – the village outside our estate, I mean. Collecting from kitchen middens. Grinding up all kinds and sticking them in flasks. With labels. Dog jaws for toothaches, horse hips for making babies, bird skulls for failing eyes—'

'Penis bones for homely little girls,' Koryk cut in.

In a blur, the knife in Smiles's hand reversed grip and she held the point between thumb and fingers.

'Don't even think it,' Cuttle said in a growl.

'Besides,' Tarr observed, 'Koryk ain't the only one wearing lots of bones – Hood's breath, Smiles, you're wearing your own—'

'Tastefully,' she retorted, still holding the knife by its point. 'It's the excess that makes it crass.'

'Latest court fashion in Unata, you mean?' Cuttle asked, one brow lifting.

Tarr laughed. 'Subtle and understated, that modest tiny finger bone, dangling just so – the ladies swooned with envy.'

In all of this, Bottle noted in passing, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas simply stared, from one soldier to the next as they bantered. On the man's face baffled incomprehension.

From the cabin house, voices rising in argument. Again. Gesler, Balm, Stormy and Fiddler.

One of Y'Ghatan's pups was listening, but Bottle paid little attention, since the clash was an old one, as both Stormy and Balm sought to convince Fiddler to play games with the Deck of Dragons. Besides, what was important was out here, a whisper in the air, in this steady, unceasing neargale, a scent mostly obscured by the salty seaspray ...

Pausing at the port rail, Bottle looked out at that distant ridge of land to the south. Hazy, strangely blurred, it seemed to be visibly sweeping by, although at this distance such a perception should have been impossible. The
We have left Seven Cities. Thank the gods. He never wanted to set foot on that land again. Its sand was a gritty patina on his soul, fused by heat, storms, and uncounted people whose bodies had been incinerated – remnants of them were in him now, and would never be fully expunged from his flesh, his lungs. He could taste their death, hear the echo of their screams.

Shortnose and Flashwit were wrestling over the deck, growling and biting like a pair of dogs. Some festering argument – Bottle wondered what part of Shortnose would get bitten off this time – and there were shouts and curses as the two rolled into soldiers of Balm's squad who had been throwing bones, scattering the cast. Moments later fights were erupting everywhere.

As Bottle turned, Mayfly had picked up Lobe and he saw the hapless soldier flung through the air – to crash up against the mound of severed heads.

Screams, as the ghastly things rolled about, eyes blinking in the sudden light—

And the fight was over, soldiers hurrying to return the trophies to their pile beneath the tarpaulin.

Fiddler emerged from the cabin, looking harried. He paused, scanning the scene, then, shaking his head, he walked over to where Bottle leaned on the rail.

'Corabb should've left me in the tunnel,' the sergeant said, scratching at his beard. 'At least then I'd get some peace.'

'It's just Balm,' Bottle said, then snapped his mouth shut – but too late.

'I knew it, you damned bastard. Fine, it stays between you and me, but in exchange I want to hear your thoughts. What about Balm?'

'He's Dal Honese.'

'I know that, idiot.'

'Well, his skin's crawling, is my guess.'

'So's mine, Bottle.'

Ah, that explains it, then. 'She's with us, now. Again, I mean.'

'She?'

'You know who.'

'The one who plays with your—'

'The one who also healed you, Sergeant.'

'What's she got to do with Balm?'

'I'm not sure. More like where his people live, I think.'

'Why is she helping us?'

'Is she, Sergeant?' Bottle turned to study Fiddler. 'Helping us, I mean. True, the last time ... Quick Ben's illusion that chased off that enemy fleet. But so what? Now we've got this gale at our backs, and it's driving us west, fast, maybe faster than should be possible – look at that coast – our lead ships must be due south of Monkan by now. At this pace, we'll reach Sepik before night falls. We're being pushed, and that makes me very nervous – what's the damned hurry?'

'Maybe just putting distance between us and those greyskinned barbarians.'
'Tiste Edur. Hardly barbarians, Sergeant.'

Fiddler grunted. 'I've clashed with the Tiste Andii, and they used Elder magic – Kurald Galain – and it was nothing like what we saw a week ago.'

'No, that wasn't warrens. It was Holds – older, raw, way too close to chaos.'

'What it was,' Fiddler said, 'doesn't belong in war.'

Bottle laughed. He could not help it. 'You mean, a little bit of wholesale slaughter is all right, Sergeant? Like what we do on the battlefield? Chasing down fleeing soldiers and caving their skulls in from behind, that's all right?'

'Never said I was making sense, Bottle,' Fiddler retorted. 'It's just what my gut tells me. I've been in battles where sorcery was let loose – really let loose – and it was nothing like what those Edur were up to. They want to win wars without drawing a sword.'

'And that makes a difference?'

'It makes victory unearned, is what it does.'

'And does the Empress earn her victories, Sergeant?'

'Careful, Bottle.'

'Well,' he persisted, 'she's just sitting there on her throne, while we're out here—'

'You think I fight for her, Bottle?'

'Well—'

'If that's what you think, you wasn't taught a damned thing at Y'Ghatan.' He turned and strode off.

Bottle stared after him a moment, then returned his attention to the distant horizon. 

Fine, he's right. But still, what we're earning is her currency and that's that.

'What in Hood's name are you doing down here?'

'Hiding, what's it look like? That's always been your problem, Kal, your lack of subtlety. Sooner or later it's going to get you into trouble. Is it dark yet?'

'No. Listen, what's with this damned gale up top? It's all wrong—'

'You just noticed?'

Kalam scowled in the gloom. Well, at least he'd found the wizard. The High Mage of the Fourteenth, hiding between crates and casks and bales. Oh, how bloody encouraging is that? 'The Adjunct wants to talk to you.'

'Of course she does. I would too if I was her. But I'm not her, am I? No, she's a mystery – you notice how she almost never wears that sword? Now, I'll grant you, I'm glad, now that I've been chained to this damned army. Remember those sky keeps? We're in the midst of something, Kal. And the Adjunct knows more than she's letting on. A lot more. Somehow. The Empress has recalled us. Why? What now?'

'You're babbling, Quick. It's embarrassing.'

'You want babbling, try this. Has it not occurred to you that we lost this one?'

'What?'

'Dryjhna, the Apocalyptic, the whole prophecy – we didn't get it, we never did – and you and me, Kal, we should have, you know. The Uprising, what did it achieve? How about slaughter, anarchy, rotting corpses
everywhere. And what arrived in the wake of that? Plague. The apocalypse, Kalam, wasn't the war, it was the plague. So maybe we won and maybe we lost. Both, do you see?"

'Dryjinha never belonged to the Crippled God. Nor Poliel—'

'Hardly matters. It's ended up serving them both, hasn't it?'

'We can't fight all that, Quick,' Kalam said. 'We had a rebellion. We put it down. What these damned gods and goddesses are up to – it's not our fight. Not the empire's fight, and that includes Laseen. She's not going to see all this as some kind of failure. Tavore did what she had to do, and now we're going back, and then we'll get sent elsewhere. That's the way it is."

'Tavore sent us into the Imperial Warren, Kal. Why?'

The assassin shrugged. 'All right, like you said, she's a mystery.'

Quick Ben moved further into the narrow space between cargo. 'Here, there's room.'

After a moment, Kalam joined him. 'You got anything to eat? Drink?'

'Naturally.'

'Good.'

As the lookouts cried out the sighting of Sepik, Apsalar made her way forward. The Adjunct, Nil, Keneb and Nether were already on the forecastle. The sun, low on the horizon to the west, lit the rising mass of land two pegs to starboard with a golden glow. Ahead, the lead ships of the fleet, two dromons, were drawing near.

Reaching the rail, Apsalar found she could now make out the harbour city tucked in its half-moon bay. No smoke rose from the tiers, and in the harbour itself, a mere handful of ships rode at anchor; the nearest one had clearly lost its bow anchor – some snag had hung the trader craft up, heeling it to one side so that its starboard rail was very nearly under water.

Keneb was speaking. 'Sighting Sepik,' he said in a tone that suggested he was repeating himself, 'should have been four, maybe five days away.'

Apsalar watched the two dromons work into the city's bay. One of them was Nok's own flagship.

'Something is wrong,' Nether said.

'Fist Keneb,' the Adjunct said quietly, 'stand down the marines."

'Adjunct?'

'We shall be making no landfall—'

At that moment, Apsalar saw the foremost dromon suddenly balk, as if it had inexplicably lost headway – and its crew raced like frenzied ants, sails buckling overhead. A moment later the same activity struck Nok's ship, and a signal flag began working its way upward.

Beyond the two warcraft, the city of Sepik exploded into life.

Gulls. Tens of thousands, rising from the streets, the buildings. In their midst, the black tatters of crows, island vultures, lifting like flakes of ash amidst the swirling smoke of the white gulls. Rising, billowing, casting a chaotic shadow over the city.

Nether whispered, 'They're all dead."

'The Tiste Edur have visited,' Apsalar said.

Tavore faced her. 'Is slaughter their answer to everything?'
'They found their own kind, Adjunct, a remnant population. Subject, little more than slaves. They are not reluctant to unleash their fury, these Edur.'

'How do you know this, Bridgeburner?'

She eyed the woman. 'How did you know, Adjunct?'

At that, Tavore turned away.

Keneb stood looking at the two women, one to the other, then back again.

Apsalar fixed her gaze back upon the harbour, the gulls settling again to their feast as the two lead dromons worked clear of the bay, sails filling once more. The ships in their immediate wake also began changing course.

'We shall seek resupply with Nemil,' the Adjunct said. As she turned away, she paused. 'Apsalar, find Quick Ben. Use your skeletal servants if you must.'

'The High Mage hides among the cargo below,' she replied.

Tavore's brows lifted. 'Nothing sorcerous, then?'

'No.'

As the sound of the Adjunct's boots receded, Fist Keneb stepped closer to Apsalar. 'The Edur fleet – do you think it pursues us even now, Apsalar?'

'No. They're going home.'

'And how do you come by this knowledge?'

Nether spoke: 'Because a god visits her, Fist. He comes to break her heart. Again and again.'

Apsalar felt as if she had been punched in the chest, the impact reverberating through her bones, the beat inside suddenly erratic, tightening as heat flooded through her veins. Yet, outwardly, she revealed nothing.

Keneb's voice was taut with fury. 'Was that necessary, Nether?'

'Don't mind my sister,' Nil said. 'She lusts after someone—'

'Bastard!'

The young Wickan woman rushed off. Nil watched her for a moment, then he looked over at Keneb and Apsalar, and shrugged.

A moment later he too left.

'My apologies,' Keneb said to Apsalar. 'I would never have invited such a cruel answer – had I known what Nether would say—'

'No matter, Fist. You need not apologize.'

'Even so, I shall not pry again.'

She studied him for a moment.

Looking uncomfortable, he managed a nod, then walked away.

The island was now on the ship's starboard, almost five pegs along. 'He comes to break her heart. Again and again.' Oh, there could be so few secrets on a ship such as this one. And yet, it seemed, the Adjunct was defying that notion.

*No wonder Quick Ben is hiding.*
'They killed everyone,' Bottle said, shivering. 'A whole damned island's worth of people. And Monkan Isle, too — it's in the wind, now, the truth of that.'

'Be glad for that wind,' Koryk said. 'We've left that nightmare behind fast, damned fast, and that's good, isn't it?'

Cuttle sat straighter and looked at Fiddler. 'Sergeant, wasn't Sepik an Imperial principality?'

Fiddler nodded.

'So, what these Tiste Edur did, it's an act of war, isn't it?'

Bottle and the others looked over at the sergeant, who was scowling — and clearly chewing over Cuttle's words. Then he said, 'Technically, aye. Is the Empress going to see it that way? Or even care? We got us enough enemies as it is.'

'The Adjunct,' Tarr said, 'she'll have to report it even so. And the fact that we already clashed once with that damned fleet of theirs.'

'It's probably tracking us right now,' Cuttle said, grimacing. 'And we're going to lead it straight back to the heart of the empire.'

'Good,' Tarr said. 'Then we can crush the bastards.'

'That,' Bottle muttered, 'or they crush us. What Quick Ben did, it wasn't real—'

'To start,' Fiddler said.

Bottle said nothing. Then, 'Some allies you're better off without.'

'Why?' the sergeant demanded.

'Well,' Bottle elaborated, 'the allies that can't be figured out, the ones with motives and goals that stay forever outside our comprehension — that's what we're talking about here, Sergeant. And believe me, we don't want a war fought with the sorcery of the Holds. We don't.'

The others were staring at him.

Bottle looked away.

'Drag 'im round the hull,' Cuttle said. 'That'll get him to cough it all up.'

'Tempting,' Fiddler said, 'but we got time. Lots of time.'

You fools. *Time is the last thing we got. That's what she's trying to tell us. With this eerie wind, thrusting like a fist through Mael's realm — and there's not a thing he can do about it. Take that, Mael, you crusty barnacle!*

*Time? Forget it. She's driving us into the heart of a storm.*
CHAPTER TWENTY

Discipline is the greatest weapon against the self-righteous. We must measure the virtue of our own controlled response when answering the atrocities of fanatics. And yet, let it not be claimed, in our own oratory of piety, that we are without our own fanatics; for the self-righteous breed wherever tradition holds, and most often when there exists the perception that tradition is under assault. Fanatics can be created as easily in an environment of moral decay (whether real or imagined) as in an environment of legitimate inequity or under the banner of a common cause.

Discipline is as much facing the enemy within as the enemy before you; for without critical judgement, the weapon you wield delivers – and let us not be coy here – naught but murder.

And its first victim is the moral probity of your cause.

(Words to the Adherents)
Mortal Sword Brukhalian
The Grey Swords

It was growing harder, Ganoes Paran realized, not to regret certain choices he had made. While scouts reported that the Deragoth were not trailing his army as it marched north and east across virtually empty lands, this very absence led to suspicion and trepidation. After all, if those hoary beasts were not following them, what were they up to?

Ganath, the Jaghut sorceress, had more or less intimated that Paran's decision to unleash those beasts was a terrible mistake. He probably should have listened to her. It was a conceit to imagine he could manipulate indefinitely all the forces he had let loose to deal with the T'robarahl. And, perhaps, there had been a lack of confidence in the capabilities of ascendants already active in this realm. The Deragoth were primal, but sometimes, that which was primal found itself assailed by a world that no longer permitted its unmitigated freedom.

Well, enough of that. It's done, isn't it. Let someone else clean up the mess I made, just for a change.

Then he frowned. Granted, that's probably not the proper attitude for the Master of the Deck. But I didn't ask for the title, did I?

Paran rode in the company of soldiers, somewhere in the middle of the column. He didn't like the notion of an entourage, or a vanguard. Fist Rythe Bude was leading the way at the moment, although that position rotated among the Fists. While Paran remained where he was, with only Noto Boil beside him and, occasionally, Hurlochel, who appeared when there was some message to deliver – and there were, blissfully, scant few of those.

'You were more forceful, you know,' Noto Boil said beside him, 'when you were Captain Kindly.'

'Oh, be quiet,' Paran said.

'An observation, High Fist, not a complaint.'

'Your every observation is a complaint, healer.'

'That's hurtful, sir.'

'See what I mean? Tell me something interesting. Kartoolian, right? Were you a follower of D'rek, then?'

'Hood, no! Very well, if you wish to hear something interesting, I shall tell you of my own history. As a youth, I was a leg-breaker—'
'A what?'
'I broke dog legs. Just one per mongrel, mind you. Lame dogs were important for the festival—'
'Ah, you mean the D’rek festival! That disgusting, barbaric, filth-strewn day of sordid celebration! So, you broke the legs of poor, bemused animals, so they could be stoned to death in alleys by psychotic little children.'
'What is your point, High Fist? Yes, that is precisely what I did. Three crescents a dog. It was a living. Alas, I eventually tired of that—'
'The Malazans outlawed the festival—'
'Yes, that too. A most unfortunate decision. It has made my people moribund, forcing us to search elsewhere for our—'
'For your sick, obnoxious tastes in delivering misery and suffering.'
'Well, yes. Whose story is this?'
'Abyss take me, please accept my apologies. Do go on – assuming I can stomach it.'
Noto Boil tilted his nose skyward. 'I was not busy running around skewering goddesses in my youth—'
'Neither was I, although I suppose, like any healthy young non-leg-breaking boy, I lusted after a few. At least, based on their statues and the like. Take Soliel, for instance—'
'Soliel! A likeness expressly visualized to encourage notions of motherhood!'
'Oh, really? My, that's a little too revealing, isn't it?'
'Mind you,' Noto Boil said in a commiserating tone, 'you were a young boy ...'
'So I was, now let's forget all that. You were saying? After your leg-breaker career died with a whimper, then what?'
'Oh, how very droll, sir. I should also point out, the manifestation of Soliel back in G'danisban—'
'Damned disappointing,' Paran agreed. 'You've no idea how many adolescent fantasies were obliterated by that.'
'I thought you had no desire to discuss that subject any further?'
'Fine. Go on.'
'I was apprenticed for a short time to a local healer—'
'Healing lame dogs?'
'Not our primary source of income, sir. There was a misunderstanding, as a consequence of which I was forced to depart his company, in some haste. A local recruiting drive proved opportune, especially since such efforts by the Malazans rarely garnered more than a handful of Kartoolians – and most of those either destitute or criminal—'
'And you were both.'
'The principal source of their delight at my joining the ranks derived from my skills as a healer. Anyway my first campaign was in Korel, the Theftian Campaigns, where I was fortunate to acquire further tutelage from a healer who would later become infamous. Ipshank.'
'Truly?'
'Indeed, none other. And yes, I met Manask as well. It must be said – and you, High Fist, will comprehend
more than most the necessity of this – it must be said, both Ipshank and Manask remained loyal to Greymane ... to the last. Well, as far as I knew, that is – I was healer to a full legion by then, and we were sent to Genabackis. In due course—'

'Noto Boil,' Paran interrupted, 'it seems you have a singular talent for consort ing with the famous and the infamous.'

'Why, yes, sir. I suppose I have at that. And now, I suspect, you are wondering into which category I place you?'

'Me? No, don't bother.'

The healer prepared to speak again but was interrupted by the arrival of Hurlochel.

'High Fist.'

'Outrider.'

'The trail ahead, sir, has up until now revealed little more than a scattering of your so-called pilgrims. But it seems that a troop of riders have joined the migration.'

'Any idea how many?'

'More than five hundred, High Fist. Could be as many as a thousand – they are riding in formation so it's difficult to tell.'

'Formation. Now, who might they be, I wonder? All right, Hurlochel, advance your scouts and flanking outriders – how far ahead are they?'

'Four or five days, sir. Riding at a collected canter for the most part.'

'Very good. Thank you, Hurlochel.'

The outrider rode back out of the column.

'What do you think this means, High Fist?'

Paran shrugged at the healer's question. 'I imagine we'll discover soon enough, Boil.'

'Noto Boil, sir. Please.'

'Good thing,' Paran continued, unable to help himself, 'you became a healer and not a lancer.'

'If you don't mind, sir, I think I hear someone complaining up ahead about saddle sores.' The man clucked his mount forward.

*Oh my, he prefers saddle sores to my company. Well, to each his own ...*

'High Fist Paran,' Captain Sweetcreek muttered. 'What's he doing riding back there, and what's all that about no saluting? It's bad for discipline. I don't care what the soldiers think – I don't even care that he once commanded the Bridgeburners – after all, he took them over only to see them obliterated. It's not proper, I'm saying. None of it.'

Fist Rythe Bude glanced over at the woman. Her colour was up, the Fist observed, eyes flashing. Clearly, the captain was not prepared to forget that punch in the jaw. *Mind you, I probably wouldn't forgive something like that either.*

'I think the Fists need to organize a meeting—'

'Captain,' Rythe Bude warned, 'you forget yourself.'
'My apologies, sir. But, now that we're trailing some kind of army, well, I don't want to end up like the Bridgeburners. That's all.'

'Dujek Onearm's confidence in Paran, and his admiration for the man, Captain, is sufficient for me. And my fellow Fists. I strongly advise you to suppress your anger and recall your own discipline. As for the army ahead of us, even a thousand mounted warriors hardly represents a significant threat to the Host. This rebellion is over – there's no-one left to rebel, after all. And little left to fight over.' She gestured forward with one gauntleted hand. 'Even these pilgrims keep falling to the wayside.'

A low mound of stones was visible to one side of the rough track – another sad victim of this pilgrimage – and from this one rose a staff bedecked in crow feathers.

'That's eerie, too,' Sweetcreek said. 'All these Coltaine worshippers ...'

'This land breeds cults like maggots in a corpse, Captain.' Sweetcreek grunted. 'A most appropriate image, Fist, in this instance.' Rythe Bude grunted. *Aye, I stumble on those every now and then.*

Behind the two riders, Corporal Futhgar said, 'Sirs, what are those?' They twisted round in their saddles, then looked to where the man was pointing. The eastern sky. Voices were rising among the soldiers now, invoked prayers, a few shouts of surprise.

A string of suns, a dozen in all, each small but bright enough to burn blinding holes in the blue sky. From two stretched tails of fiery mist. The row of suns curved like a longbow, the ends higher, and above it was the blurred, misshapen face of the moon.

*An omen of death!* someone shouted.

'Captain,' Rythe Bude snapped, 'get that fool to shut his mouth.'

'Aye, sir.'

'The sky falls,' Noto Boil said as he fell back in beside the High Fist.

Scowling, Paran continued studying the strange appearance in the eastern sky, seeking some sense of what it was they were witnessing. *Whatever it is, I don't like it.*

'You doubt me?' the healer asked. 'High Fist, I have walked the lands of Korel. I have seen the craters left behind by all that descended from the sky. Have you ever perused a map of Korel? The entire northern subcontinent and its host of islands? Fling a handful of gravel into mud, then wait whilst water fills the pocks. That is Korel, sir. The people still tell tales of the countless fires that fell from the sky, in the bringing down of the Crippled God.'

'Ride to the head of the column, Noto Boil,' Paran said.

'Sir?'

'Call a halt. Right now. And get me Hurlochel and his outriders. I need a sense of the surrounding area. We may need to find cover.' For once, the healer made no complaint.

Paran stared at the string of fires, growing like a salvo from the Abyss. *Damn, where's Ormulogun? I need to find him, and he'd better have that Deck ready – or at least the cards etched out, preferably scribed and ready for the threads of paint. Gods below, he'd better have something, because I don't have time to ...* his thoughts trailed away.
He could feel them now, coming ever closer – he could feel their heat – was that even possible?

*The damned moon – I should have paid attention. I should have quested, found out what has happened up there, to that forlorn world. And then another thought struck him, and he went cold.*

*War among the gods.*

*Is this an attack? A salvo in truth?*

Paran bared his teeth. 'If you're out there,' he whispered, glaring at the eastern sky as his horse shied nervously beneath him, 'you're not playing fair. And ... I don't like that.' He straightened, stood in his stirrups, and looked about.

'Ormulogun! Where in Hood's name are you!'

'Against this,' Iskaral Pust muttered, 'I can do nothing.' He hugged himself. 'I think I should start gibbering, now. Yes, that would be highly appropriate. A crazed look in my eyes. Drool, then froth, yes. Who could blame me? We're all going to die!'

These last words were a shriek, sufficient to shake Mappo from his insensate lethargy. Lifting his head, he looked across at the High Priest of Shadow. The Dal Honese was huddled beside his mule, and both were bathed in a strange light, green-hued – no, the Trell realized, that light was everywhere.

Spite descended from the forecastle, and Mappo saw in her expression cold rage. 'We are in trouble,' she said in a grating voice. 'Out of time – I had hoped ... never mind—' Suddenly her head snapped round and she stared southwestward. Her eyes narrowed. Then she said, 'Oh ... who in Hood's name are you? And what do you think you are up to?' Falling silent once more, her frown deepening.

Blinking, Mappo Runt pushed himself upright, and saw that the sky was on fire – almost directly above them. As if the sun had spawned a host of children, a string of incandescent pearls, their flames wreathed in haloes of jade. Growing ... descending. *What are those?*

The sea seemed to tremble around them, the waves choppy, clashing in confusion. The air felt brittle, hot, and all wind had fallen away. And there, above the mass of land to the east that was Otataral Island ... Mappo looked back at Iskaral Pust. The High Priest, crouching now, had his hands covering his head. Bhoka'rala were converging around him, mewling and whimpering, reaching out to touch the shivering old man. As he babbled, 'We didn't plan for this, did we? I don't remember – gods, I don't remember anything! Mogora, my dear hag, where are you? This is my moment of greatest need. I want sex! Even with you! I'll drink the white paralt later – what choice? It's that, or the memory of most regrettable weakness on my part! There is only so much I can suffer. Stop touching me, you vile apes! Shadowthrone, you miserable insane shade – where are you hiding and is there room for me, your most devoted servant, your Magus? There'd better be! Come get me, damn you – never mind anyone else! Just me! Of course there's room! You mucus-smeared knee-in-the-groin fart-cloud! Save me!'

'Spirits below,' Mogora muttered at Mappo's side, 'listen to that pathetic creature! And to think, I married him!'

Spite suddenly wheeled and ran back to the bow, bhok'arala scattering from her path. Once there, she spun round and shouted. 'I see them! Make for them, fools! Quickly!' And then she veered, rising above the wallowing, rocking ship, silver-etched wings spreading wide. Swirling mists, writhing, growing solid, until an enormous dragon hovered before the ship, dwarfing the craft in its immensity.

Lambent eyes flared like quicksilver in the eerie, emerald light. The creature's long, sinuous tail slithered down, snake-like, and coiled round the upthrust prow. The dragon then twisted in the air, a savage beat of the wings—

—and with an alarming jolt the ship lunged forward.
Mappo was flung back into the cabin wall, wood splintering behind him. Gasping, the Trell regained his feet and clambered towards the bows.

_She sees them? Who?_

The sky was filling with spears of green fire, plunging towards them.

Iskaral Pust screamed.

Over a thousand leagues away, westward, Bottle stood with the others and stared at the eastern horizon – where darkness should have been, crawling heavenward to announce the unending cycle of day's death and night's birth. Instead they could see distinctly a dozen motes of fire, descending, filling a third of the sky with a lurid, incandescent, greenish glow.

'Oh,' Bottle whispered, 'this is bad.'

Fiddler clutched at his sleeve, pulled him close. 'Do you understand this?' the sergeant demanded in a harsh whisper.

Bottle shook his head.

'Is this – is this another Crippled God?'

Bottle stared at Fiddler, eyes widening. _Another? Gods below!_

'Is it?'

'I don't know!'

Swearing, Fiddler pushed him away. Bottle staggered back, shouldering into Sergeant Balm – who barely reacted – then he twisted through the press, stumbling as he made his way clear, looked across the waters. To the south, the Nemil ships – war biremes and supply transports – had every sheet to the wind as they raced back towards their homeland, the former swiftly outdistancing the latter, many of the transports still half-filled with cargo – the resupply abandoned.

_Aye, it's every fool for himself now. But when those things hit, that shock wave will roll fast. It will smash us all into kindling. Poor bastards, you'll never make it. Not even those ugly biremes._

The unceasing wind seemed to pause, as if gathering breath, then returned with redoubled force, sending everyone on deck staggering. Sailcloth bucked, mast and spars creaking – the Silanda groaned beneath them.

_Quick Ben? Best make your escape now, and take whoever you can with you. Against what's coming ... there is no illusion that will dissuade it. As for those Tiste Edur, well, they're as finished as we are. I will accept that as consolation._

_Well, Grandma, you always said the sea will be the death of me._

Sergeant Hellian wandered across the deck, marvelling at the green world she had found. This Nemil brandy packed a punch, didn't it just? People were screaming, or just standing, as if frozen in place, but that's how things usually were, those times she accidentally – _oops_ – slipped over that blurry line of not-quite drunk. Still, this green was making her a little sick.

_Hood-damned Nemil brandy – what idiots drank this rubbish? Well, she could trade it for some Falari sailor's rum. There were enough idiots on this ship who didn't know better, she just had to find one. A sailor, like that one there._

'Hey. Look, I got N'm'l brandy, but I'm thirsty for rum, right? Paid ten crescents for this, I know, it's a lot, but my squad, they love me y'see. Took up a c'lection. So's, I'm thinking, how 'bout we trade. Straight across, baw'll for baw'll. Sure, I drunk most a this, but it's worth more, right. Which, as you can see, e'ens thingzup.' Then she
waited.

The man was a tall bastard. Kind of severe looking. Other people were staring — what was their problem, anyway?

Then the man took the bottle, swished it back and forth and frowned. He drank it down, three quick swallows.

'Hey—'

And reached beneath his fancy cloak, drawing out a flask, which he passed across to her. 'Here, soldier,' he said. 'Now get below and drink until you pass out.'

She collected the flask with both hands, marvelling at its polished silver surface, even the gouge that ran diagonally across one side, and the sigils stamped into it, very nice. The Imperial Sceptre, and four old ones — the ones that used to identify flagships — she’d seen those before. There, that was Cartheron Crust's, and that one was Urko's, and that one she didn't know, but the last one was the same as on the flag up top of this ship she was on. That's a coincidence now, ain't it? She blinked at the man. 'Can't,' she said. 'I got orders—'

'I am countermanding those orders, Sergeant.'

'You can do that?'

'Under these circumstances, yes.'

'Well then, I'll never forget you, sailor. Promise. Now, where's the hatch ...?'

He guided her, with one firm hand on her shoulder, in the right direction. Clutching the beautiful and beautifully swishing flask against her chest, Hellian made her way along, through the green murk, and all the staring faces. She stuck out her tongue.

They can get their own.

Apsalar turned at the sigh from the Adjunct.

Tavore's expression was ... philosophic, as she stared at the eastern horizon. 'Humbling, is it not?'

'Yes, Adjunct, I suppose it is.'

'All of our plans ... our conceits ... as if the sheer force of our wills, each of us, can somehow ensure that all else remains unchanged around us, awaiting naught but what we do, what we say.'

'The gods—'

'Yes, I know. But that' — she nodded eastward — 'does not belong to them.'

'No?'

'It is too devastating, soldier. Neither side is that desperate ... yet. And now,' she shrugged, 'even their games dwindle into insignificance.'

'Adjunct,' Apsalar said, 'you lack confidence.'

'Do I? In what?'

'Our resilience.'

'Perhaps.'

But Apsalar could feel her own confidence crumbling, clinging to a single thought — and the resolve behind that thought was itself weakening. Even so. A single thought. This — this was anticipated. By someone. It had to
Someone saw this coming.

Most people were blind, wilfully or otherwise. But, there were some who weren't.

So now, my prescient friend, you had better do something about it. And quick.

Ormulogun, trailed by his toad, stumbled into view, an overflowing leather satchel in his arms. The toad was bleating something about delusional artists and the brutal world in a tone of pessimistic satisfaction. Ormulogun tripped and fell almost at Paran's feet, the satchel tipping and spilling its contents – including scores of wooden cards, most of them blank.

'You've barely started! You damned fool!'

'Perfection!' Ormulogun shrieked. 'You said—'

'Never mind,' Paran snarled. He looked back at the eastern sky. Spears of fire were descending like rain. 'Mainland? Into the sea?' he wondered aloud. 'Or Otataral Island?'

'Maybe all three,' Noto Boil said, licking his lips.

'Well,' Paran said, crouching down and clearing a space in the sand before him, 'sea's worse. That means ...' He began drawing with his index finger.

'I have some!' Ormulogun whimpered, fumbling through the cards.

Mael. I hope you're paying attention – I hope you're ready to do what needs doing. He studied the streaks he had etched in the sand. Enough? It has to be. Closing his eyes, he focused his will. The Gate is before me—

'I have this one!'

The shout was loud in Paran's right ear, and even as the force of his will was unleashed, he opened his eyes – and saw, hovering before him, another card—

And all of his power rushed into it—

Onto his knees, skidding on clay that deformed beneath him, hands thrusting out to catch himself. Grey air, a charnel stench, and Paran lifted his head. Before him stood a gate, a mass of twisted bones and pale, bruised flesh, dangling strands of hair, innumerable staring eyes, and beyond it was grey, murky oblivion.

'Oh, Hood.'

He was at the very threshold. He had damned near flung himself right through—

A figure appeared in the portal, black-cloaked, cowled, tall. This isn't one of his servants. This is the hoary old bastard himself—

'Is there time for such unpleasant thoughts, mortal?' The voice was mild, only faintly rasping. 'With what is about to happen ... well, Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck of Dragons, you have positioned yourself in a most unfortunate place, unless you wish to be trampled by the multitudes who shall momentarily find themselves on this path.'

'Oh, be quiet, Hood,' Paran hissed, trying to climb to his feet, then stopping when he realized that doing so would not be a good idea. 'Help me. Us. Stop what's coming – it'll destroy—'

'Far too much, yes. Too many plans. I can do little, however. You have sought out the wrong god.'

'I know. I was trying for Mael.'

'Pointless ...' Yet, even as Hood spoke that word, Paran detected a certain ... hesitation.
Ah, you’ve had a thought.

'I have. Very well, Ganoes Paran, bargain.'

'Abyss take us – there's no time for that!'

'Think quickly, then.'

'What do you want? More than anything else, Hood. What do you want?'

And so Hood told him. And, among the corpses, limbs and staring faces in the gate, one face in particular suddenly grew animate, its eyes opening very wide – a detail neither noticed.

Paran stared at the god, disbelieving. 'You can't be serious.'

'Death is always serious.'

'Oh, enough with the portentous crap! Are you certain?'

'Can you achieve what I ask, Ganoes Paran?'

'I will. Somehow.'

'Do you so vow?'

'I do.'

'Very well. Leave here. I must open this gate.'

'What? It is open!'

But the god had turned away, and Paran barely heard Hood's reply: 'Not from this side.'

Chaur squealed as a hail of firestones struck the roiling waters barely a ship's-breadth away. Explosions of steam, a terrible shrieking sound tearing through the air. Cutter pushed hard on the steering oar, trying to scull the wallowing craft – but he didn't have the strength for that. The Grief wasn't going anywhere. Except, I fear, to the bottom.

Something struck the deck; a thud, splintering, reverberations trembling the entire hull, then steam was billowing from the fist-sized hole. The Grief seemed to sag beneath them.

Cursing, Barathol scrambled to the breach, dragging a bundle of spare sailcloth. Even as he sought to push it down into the hole, two more stones struck the craft, one up front tearing away the prow, another – a flash of heat against Cutter’s left thigh and he looked down to see steam then water gushing up.

The air seethed like the breath from a forge. The entire sky overhead seemed to be on fire.

The sail above them was burning, ripped through.

Another concussion, and more than half of the port rail was simply gone, pulverized wood a mist drifting away, flaring with motes of flame.

'Vere sinking!' Scillara shouted, grasping hold of the opposite rail as the Grief’s deck tilted alarmingly.

Cargo shifted – too many supplies – we got greedy – making the dying craft lean further.

The wrapped corpse of Heboric rolled towards the choppy waves.

Crying out, Cutter sought to make his way towards it, but he was too far away – the cloth-wrapped form slid down into the water—
And, wailing, Chaur followed it.

'No!' Barathol yelled. 'Chaur – no!'

The mute giant's huge arms closed about the corpse, a moment before both simply slipped from sight.

*Sea*.

*Bara called it sea. Warm now, wet. Was so nice. Now, sky bad, and sea bad – up there – but nice now. Here. Dark, night, night is coming, ears hurt. Ears hurt. Hurt. Bara said never breathe in sea. Need to breathe now. Oh, hurt! Breathe!*

He filled his lungs, and fire burst through his chest, then ... cool, calm, the spasms slowing. Darkness closed in round him, but Chaur was no longer frightened by that. The cold was gone, the heat was gone, and numbness filled his head.

He had so loved the sea.

The wrapped body in his arms pulled ever down, and the limbs that had been severed and that he had collected when Bara told him to, seemed to move about within as the canvas stretched, lost shape.

Darkness, now, inside and out. Something hot and savage tore past him, racing downward like a spear of light, and Chaur flinched. And he closed his eyes to make those things go away. The ache was finally gone from his lungs.

*I sleep now.*

*Geysers of steam shooting skyward, thunderous concussions racking the air and visibly battering the sea so that it shook, trembled, and Cutter saw Barathol dive into the churning water, into Chaur's wake. The body. *Heboric* – Chaur, oh gods ...*

He reached Scillara's side and pulled her close, into his arms. She clutched his sodden shirt. 'I'm so glad,' she whispered, as the *Grief* groaned and canted further onto its side.

'About what?'

'That I left her. Back there. I left her.'

Cutter hugged her all the tighter.

*I'm sorry, Apsalar. For everything—*

Sudden buffeting winds, a sweeping shadow. He looked up and his eyes widened at the monstrous shape occluding the sky, descending—

*A dragon. What now?*

And then he heard shouts – and at that moment, the *Grief* seemed to explode.

Cutter found himself in the water, thrashing, panic awakened within him, like a fist closing round his heart.

*... Reaching ... reaching ...*

*What is this sound? Where am I?*

A million voices – screaming, plunging into terrible death – oh, they had travelled the dark span for so long, weightless, seeing before them that vast ... emptiness. Unmindful of their arguing, their discussions, their fierce debates, it swallowed them. Utterly. Then, out, through to the other side ... a net of power spreading out, something eager for mass, something that grew ever stronger, and the journey was suddenly in crazed, violent motion – a world beneath – so many lost then – and beyond it, another, this one larger—
'Oh, hear us, so many ... annihilated. Mountains struck to dust, rock spinning away into dark, blinding clouds that scintillated in harsh sunlight – and now, this beast world that fills our vision – is this home?

'Have we come home?'

Reaching ... hands of jade, dusty, raw, not yet polished into lurid brightness. I remember ... you had to die, Treach, didn't you? Before ascendancy, before true godhood. You had to die first.

Was I ever your Destriant?

Did that title ever belong to me?

Did I need to be killed?

Reaching – these hands, these unknown, unknowable hands – how can I answer these screams? These millions in their shattered prisons – I touched, once, fingertip to fingertip, I touched, oh ... the voices—

'This is not salvation. We simply die. Destruction—'

'No, no, you fool. Home. We have come home—'

'Annihilation is not salvation. Where is he? Where is our god?'

'I tell you, the search ends'.

'No argument there.'

Listen to me.

'Who is that?'

'He returns! The one outside – the brother!'

Listen to me, please. I – I'm not your brother. I'm no-one. I thought ... Destriant ... did I know it for certain? Have I been lied to? Destriant ... well, maybe, maybe not. Maybe we all got it wrong, every one of us. Maybe even Treach got it wrong.

'He has lost his mind.'

'Forget him – look, death, terrible death, it comes—'

'Mad? So what. I'd rather listen to him than any of you. He said listen, he said that, and so I shall.'

'We will all listen, idiot – we have no choice, have we?'

Destriant. We got it all wrong. Don't you see? All I have done ... cannot be forgiven. Can never be forgiven – he's sent me back. Even Hood – he's rejected me, flung me back. But ... it's slipping away, so tenuous, I am failing—

'Failing, falling, what's the difference?'

Reaching.

'What?'

My hands – do you see them? Cut loose, that's what happened. The hands ... cut loose. Freed. I can't do this ... but I think they can. Don't you see?

'Senseless words.'

'No, wait—'

Not Destriant.
Shield Anvil.

_Reaching ... look upon me – all of you! Reach! See my hands! See them! They're reaching – reaching out for you!_

_They ... are ... reaching ..._

Barathol swam down into darkness. He could see nothing. No-one. _Chaur, oh gods, what have I done?_ He continued clawing his way downward. Better he drowned as well – he could not live with this, not with that poor manchild's death on his hands – he could not—

His own breath was failing, the pressure closing in, pounding in his skull. He was blind—

A flash of emerald green below, blooming, incandescent, billowing out – and at its core – _Oh gods, wait – wait for me_—

Limp, snagged in unravelled folds of canvas, Chaur was sinking, arms out to the sides, his eyes closed, his mouth ... open.

_No! No, no!_

From the pulsing glow, heat – such heat – Barathol fought closer, his chest ready to explode – and reached down, down—

A section of the aft deck floated free from what was now little more than pummelled wreckage. The firestones tore down on all sides as Cutter struggled to help Scillara clamber onto the pitching fragment. Those firestones – they were smaller than pebbles, despite the fist-sized holes they had punched through the _Grief_. Smaller than pebbles – more like grains of sand, glowing bright green, like spatters of glass, their colour changing, almost instantly, into rust red as they plummeted into the depths.

Scillara cried out.

'Are you hit? Oh, gods – no—'

She twisted round. 'Look! Hood take us – _look_!' And she lifted an arm, pointed as a swelling wave lifted them – pointed eastward—

Towards Otataral Island.

It had ... ignited. Jade green, a glowing dome that might have spanned the entire island, writhing, lifting skyward, and, rising up through it ... _hands. Of jade, like ... like Heboric's_. Rising, like trees. _Arms – huge – dozens of them_ – rising, fingers spreading, green light spiralling out – from their upturned palms, from the fingers, from the veins and arteries cabling their muscled lengths – green light, slashing into the heavens like sword-blades. Those arms were too big to comprehend, reaching upward like pillars through the dome—

—as the fires filling the sky seemed to flinch ... tremble ... and then began to _converge_.

Above the island, above the hands of jade reaching up, through the billowing green light.

The first falling sun struck the glowing dome.

The sound was like a drum beat, on a scale to deafen the gods. Its pulse rippled through the dome's burgeoning flanks, racing outward and seeming to strip the surface of the sea, shivering through Cutter's bones, a concussion that triggered bursting agony in his ears – then another, and another as sun after sun plunged into that buckling, pocked dome. He was screaming, yet unable to hear himself. Red mist filled his eyes – he felt himself sliding from the raft, down into the foam-laden waves—

Even as an enormous clawed foot reached down, spread wide over Cutter – and Scillara, who was grasping him by an arm, seeking to drag him back onto the raft – and talons the size of scimitars closed round them both.
They were lifted from the thrashing water, upward, up—

Reaching ... yes. For me, closer, closer.

Never mind the pain.

It will not last. I promise. I know, because I remember.

No, I cannot be forgiven.

But maybe you can, maybe I can do that, if you feel it's needed – I don't know – I was the wrong one, to have touched ... there in that desert. I didn't understand, and Baudin could never have guessed what would happen, how I would be marked.

Marked, yes, I see now, for this, this need.

Can you hear me? Closer – do you see the darkness? There, that is where I am.

Millions of voices, weeping, crying out, voices, filled with yearning – he could hear them—

Ah gods, who am I? I cannot remember.

Only this. The darkness that surrounds me. We, yes, all of you – we can all wait here, in this darkness.

Never mind the pain.

Wait with me. In this darkness.

And the voices, in their millions, in their vast, unbearable need, rushed towards him.

Shield Anvil, who would take their pain, for he could remember such pain.

The darkness took them, and it was then that Heboric Ghost Hands, Shield Anvil, realized a most terrible truth.

One cannot, in any real measure, remember pain.

Two bodies tumbling like broken dolls onto the deck. Mappo struggled towards them, even as Spite wheeled away one more time – he could feel the dragon's agony with every ragged breath she drew, and the air was foul with the reek of scorched scales and flesh.

The rain of fire had descended in a torrent all round them, wild as a hailstorm and far deadlier; yet not one particle had struck their ship – protection gifted, Mappo realized, not by Spite, nor indeed by Iskaral Pust or Mogora. No, as the High Priest's fawning, wet kisses gave proof, some power born in that damned black-eyed mule was responsible. Somehow.

The beast simply stood, unmoving and seemingly indifferent, tail flicking the absence of flies. Slowly blinking, as if half-asleep, its lips twitching every now and then.

While the world went mad around them; while it tore that other ship to pieces—

Mappo rolled the nearer figure over. Blood-smeared face, streams from the ears, the nose, the corners of the eyes – yet he knew this man. He knew him. Crokus, the Daru. Oh, lad, what has brought you to this?

Then the young man's eyes opened. Filled with fear and apprehension.

'Be at ease,' Mappo said, 'you are safe now.'

The other figure, a woman, was coughing up seawater, and there was blood flowing down from her left ear to track the underside of her jaw before dripping from her chin. On her hands and knees, she lifted her head and
met the Trell's gaze.

'Are you all right?' Mappo asked.

She nodded, crawled closer to Crokus.

'He will live,' the Trell assured her. 'It seems we all shall live ... I had not believed—'

Iskaral Pust screamed.

Pointed.

A large, scarred, black-skinned arm had appeared over the port rail, like some slithering eel, the hand grasping hard on the slick wood, the muscles straining.

Mappo clambered over.

The man he looked down upon was holding onto another body, a man easily as large as he was, and it was clear that the former was fast losing his strength. Mappo reached down and dragged them both onto the deck.

'Barathol,' the woman gasped.

Mappo watched as the man named Barathol quickly rolled his companion over and began pushing the water from his lungs.

'Barathol—'

'Quiet, Scillara—'

'He was under too long—'

'Quiet!'

Mappo watched, trying to remember what such ferocity, such loyalty, felt like. He could almost recall ... almost. *He has drowned, this one. See all that water?* Yet Barathol would not cease in his efforts, pulling the limp, flopping body about this way and that, rocking the arms, then, finally, dragging the head and shoulders onto his lap, where he cradled the face as if it was a newborn babe.

The man's expression twisted, terrible in its grief. 'Chaur! Listen to me! This is Barathol. Listen! I want you to ... to bury the horses! Do you hear me? You have to bury the horses! Before the wolves come down! I'm not asking, Chaur, do you understand? I'm telling you!'

*He has lost his mind. From this, there is no recovery. I know, I know—*

'Chaur! I will get angry, do you understand? Angry ... with you! With you, Chaur! Do you want Barathol angry at you, Chaur? Do you want—'

A cough, gouting water, a convulsion, then the huge man held so tenderly in Barathol's arms seemed to curl up, one hand reaching up, and a wailing cry worked its way through the mucus and froth.

'No, no my friend,' Barathol gasped, pulling the man into a tight, rocking embrace. 'I'm not angry. No, I'm not. Never mind the horses. You did that already. Remember? Oh, Chaur, I'm not angry.'

But the man bawled, clutching at Barathol like a child.

*He is a simpleton. Otherwise, this Barathol, he would not have spoken to him in such a manner. He is a child in a man's body, this Chaur ...*

Mappo watched. As the two huge men wept in each other's arms.

Spite now stood beside the Trell, and as soon as Mappo became aware of her, he sensed her pain – and then her will, pushing it away with such ferocity – he dragged his gaze from the two men on the deck and stared at
Pushing, pushing away all that pain—

'How? How did you do that?' he demanded.

'Are you blind, Mappo Runt?' she asked. 'Look – look at them, Trell. Chaur, his fear is gone, now. He
believes Barathol, he believes him. Utterly, without question. You cannot be blind to this, to what it means.

'You are looking upon joy, Mappo Runt. In the face of this, I will not obsess on my own pain, my own
suffering. Do you understand? I will not.'

Ah, spirits below, you break my heart, woman. He looked back at the two men, then across to where Scillara
held Crokus in her arms, stroking the man's hair as he came round. Broken, by all this. Again.

I had ... forgotten.

Iskaral Pust was dancing round Mogora, who watched him with a sour expression, her face contracting until
it resembled a dried-up prune. Then, in a moment when the High Priest drew too close, she lashed out with a
kick that swept his feet out from beneath him. He thumped hard onto the deck, then began swearing.
'Despicable woman! Woman, did I say woman? Hah! You're what a shedding snake leaves behind! A sickly
snake! With scabs and pustules and weals and bunions—'

'I heard you lusting after me, you disgusting creep!'

'I tried to, you mean! In desperation, but even imminent death was not enough! Do you understand? Not
enough!'

Mogora advanced on him.

Iskaral Pust squealed, then slithered his way beneath the mule. 'Come any closer, hag, and my servant will
kick you! Do you know how many fools die each year from a mule kick? You'd be surprised.'

The Dal Honese witch hissed at him, then promptly collapsed into a swarm of spiders – that raced
everywhere, and moments later not one remained in sight.

The High Priest, his eyes wide, looked about frantically, then began scratching beneath his clothes. 'Oh! You
awful creature!

Mappo's bemused attention was drawn away by Crokus, who had moved towards Barathol and Chaur.

'Barathol,' the Daru said. 'There was no chance?'

The man looked over, then shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Cutter. But, he saved Chaur's life. Even dead, he saved
Chaur.'

'What do you mean?'

'The body was glowing,' Barathol said. 'Bright green. It's how I saw them. Chaur was snagged in the bolt
cloth – I had to cut him free. I could not carry both of them to the surface – I barely made it—'

'It's all right,' Crokus said.

'He sank, down and down, and the glow ebbed. The darkness swallowed him. But listen, you got him close
enough – do you understand? Not all the way, but close enough. Whatever happened, whatever saved us all, it
came from him.'

Mappo spoke: 'Cokus – it is Cutter, now, yes? Cutter, who are you speaking about? Did someone else
drown?'

'No, Mappo. I mean, not really. A friend, he died – I, well, I was trying to take his body to the island – it's
where he wanted to go, you see. To give something back."

'Something.' I believe your friend here is right, then,' the Trell said. 'You brought him close enough. To make a difference, to do what even death could not prevent him doing.'

'He was named Heboric Ghost Hands.'

'I will remember that name, then,' Mappo said. 'With gratitude.'

'You ... you look different.' Cutter was frowning. 'Those tattoos.' Then his eyes widened, and he asked what Mappo feared he would ask. 'Where? Where is he?'

Doors within the Trell that had cracked open suddenly slammed shut once more. He looked away. 'I lost him.'

'You lost him?'

'Gone.' Yes, I failed him. I failed us all.

Mappo could not look at the Daru. He could not bear it.

My shame ...

'Oh, Mappo, I am sorry.'

You are ... what?

A hand settled on his shoulder, and that was too much. He could feel the tears, the grief flooding his eyes, running down. He flinched away. 'My fault ... my fault ...'

Spite stood watching for a moment longer. Mappo, the Trell. Who walked with Icarium. Ah, he now blames himself. I understand. My ... that is ... unfortunate. But such was our intent, after all. And, there is the chance – the one chance I most cherish. Icarium, he may well encounter my sister, before all of this is done. Yes, that would be sweet, delicious, a taste I could savour for a long, long time. Are you close enough, Envy, to sense my thoughts? My ... desire? I hope so. But no, this was not the time for such notions, alluring as they were.

Aching still with wounds, she turned and studied the wild, roiling clouds above Otataral Island. Blooms of colour, as if flames ravaged the land, tongues of fire flickering up those gargantuan jade arms, spinning from the fingers. Above the seething dome, night was dimming the penumbra of dust and smoke, where slashes of falling matter still cut through every now and then.

Spite then faced the west, the mainland. Whoever you are ... thank you.

With a gasp, Paran opened his eyes, to find himself pitching forward – sandy gravel rising fast – then he struck, grunting with the impact. His arms felt like unravelled ropes as he slowly dragged them up, sufficiently to push himself onto his side, which let him roll onto his back.

Above him, a ring of faces, all looking down.

'High Fist,' Rythe Bude asked, 'did you just save the world?'

'And us with it?' Noto Boil added, then frowned. 'Never mind that one, sir. After all, in answering the Fist's query, the second is implicitly—'

'Be quiet,' Paran said. 'If I saved the world – and by no means would I make such a claim – I am already regretting it. Does anyone have some water? With where I've just come back from, I've got a rather unpleasant taste in my mouth.'

Skins sloshed into view.

But Paran held up a hand. 'The east – how bad does it look?'

'Should have been much, much worse, sir,' Fist Rythe Bude said. 'There's a real ruckus over there, but
nothing's actually coming out, if you understand me.'

'Good.' Good.

*Oh, Hood. Did you truly mean it?*

*Gods, me and my promises ...*

Night to the east was a lurid, silent storm. Standing near the Adjunct, with Nil and Nether a few strides off to one side, Fist Keneb shivered beneath his heavy cloak, despite the peculiar, dry sultriness of the steady wind. He could not comprehend what had happened beyond that eastern horizon, not before, not now. The descent of green-flamed suns, the raging maelstrom. And, for a time there, a pervasive malaise enshrouding everyone – from what was coming, it had seemed, there would be no reprieve, no escape, no hope of survival.

Such a notion had, oddly enough, calmed Keneb. When struggle was meaningless, all pressure simply drained away. It struck him, now, that there was something to be said for holding on to such sentiments. After all, death was itself inevitable, wasn't it? Inescapable – what point scratching and clawing in a doomed effort to evade it?

The comfort of that was momentary, alas. Death took care of itself- it was in life, in living, that things mattered. Acts, desires, motives, fears, the gifts of joy and the bitter taste of failure – *a feast we must all attend.*

*At least until we leave.*

Stars wavered overhead, streaks of cloud clung to the north, the kind that made Keneb think of snow. And yet *here I stand sweating, the sweat cooling, this chill fashioned not by night or the wind, but by exhaustion.* Nether had said something about this wind, its urgency, the will behind it. Thus, not natural. *A god, then, manipulating us yet again.*

The fleets of Nemil patrolled a vast stretch of this coast. Their war biremes were primitive, awkward-looking, never straying far from the rocky shoreline. That shoreline traditionally belonged to the Trell, but there had been wars, generations of wars, and now Nemil settlements dotted the bays and inlets, and the Trell, who had never been seafarers, had been driven far inland, into the hills, a dwindling enclave surrounded by settlers. Keneb had seen mixed-bloods among the Nemil crews in the trader ships that sailed out with supplies.

Belligerent as the Nemil were towards the Trell, they were not similarly inclined when facing a huge Malazan fleet entering their territorial waters. Sages among them had foretold this arrival, and the lure of profit had triggered a flotilla of merchant craft setting forth from the harbours, accompanied by a disorganized collection of escorts, some private, others royal. The resupply had resembled a feeding frenzy for a time there, until, that is, the eastern sky suddenly burst into savage light.

Not a single Nemil ship remained now, and that coastline had been left behind, as the second bell after midnight tolled dully at the sand-watcher's hand – the sound taken up by nearby ships, rippling outward through the imperial fleet.

From a Nemil captain, earlier in the day, had come interesting news, and it was that information that, despite the lateness, the Adjunct continued to discuss with her two Wickan companions.

'Are there any details from Malazan sources,' Nether was asking Tavore, 'of the peoples beyond the Catal Sea?'

'No more than a name,' the Adjunct replied, then said to Keneb, 'Fist, do you recall it?'

'Perish.'

'Yes.'

'And nothing more is known of them?' Nether asked.
There was no answer forthcoming from the others. And it seemed that the Wickans then waited.

‘An interesting suggestion,’ the Adjunct said after a moment. ‘And, given this near-gale, we shall discover for ourselves soon enough what manner of people are these Perish.’

The Nemil captain had reported – second-hand – that another Edur fleet had been sighted the day before. Well to the north, less than a score of ships, struggling eastward in the face of this unceasing wind. Those ships were in a bad way, the captain had said. Damaged, limping. Struck by a storm, perhaps, or they had seen battle. Whatever the cause, they were not eager to challenge the Nemil ships, which in itself was sufficient matter for comment – apparently, the roving Edur ships had been preying on Nemil traders for nearly two years, and on those instances when Nemil escorts were close enough to engage, the results had been disastrous for the antiquated biremes.

Curious news. The Adjunct had pressed the Nemil captain on information regarding the Perish, the inhabitants of the vast, mountain-girdled peninsula on the western side of the Catal Sea, which was itself a substantial, southward-jutting inlet, at the very bottom of which was the heart of the Nemil Kingdom. But the man had simply shaken his head, suddenly mute.

Nether had, moments earlier, suggested that perhaps the Edur fleet had clashed with these Perish. And suffered in consequence.

The Malazan fleet was cutting across the mouth of the Catal Inlet now – as it was called on the Malazan maps – a distance the captain had claimed was a journey of four days' sailing under ideal conditions. The lead ships were already a fourth of the way across.

There was more than wind, magic or otherwise – the way the horizons looked blurry, especially headlands ...

‘The Nemil,’ Nil said, ‘were not reluctant to speak of the Edur.’

‘Yet they would say nothing at all of the Perish,’ Nether added.

‘History between them,’ Keneb suggested.

The others turned to him.

Keneb shrugged. ‘Just a thought. The Nemil are clearly expansionist, and that entails a certain ... arrogance. They devoured the Trell peoples, providing a reassuring symbol of Nemil prowess and righteousness. It may be that the Perish delivered an opposing symbol, something that both shocked and humbled the Nemil – neither sentiment quite fitting with their own notions of grandiosity. And so they will not speak of it.’

‘Your theory makes sense,’ the Adjunct said. ‘Thank you, Fist.’ She turned and studied the riotous eastern sky. ‘Humbled, yes,’ she said in a low voice. ‘In the writings of Duiker, he speaks of the manifold scales to be found in war, from the soldier facing another soldier, to the very gods themselves locked in mortal combat. At first glance, it seems an outrage to consider that such extremes can coexist, yet Duiker then claims that the potential for cause and effect can proceed in both directions.’

‘It would be comforting to think so,’ Keneb said. ‘I can think of a few gods that I’d love to trip up right now.’

‘It may be,’ the Adjunct said, ‘that someone has preceded you.’

Keneb frowned. ‘Do you know who, Adjunct?’

She glanced at him, said nothing.

Thus ends her momentary loquaciousness. Well. And what did it tell me? She’s well read, but I already knew that. Anything else?

No.

Kalam pushed his way forward, slumped once more at Quick Ben's side. ‘It's official,' he said in the gloom of
the musty hold.

'What is?'

'We're still alive.'

'Oh, that's good, Kal. I was sitting on coals down here waiting for that news.'

'I prefer that image to the reality, Quick.'

'What do you mean?'

'We're hiding, your loincloth suddenly baggy and a puddle spreading beneath you.'

'You don't know anything. I do. I know more than I'd ever want to—'

'Impossible. You drink in secrets like Hellian does rum. The more you know the drunker and more obnoxious you get.'

'Oh yeah? Well, I know things you'd want to know, and I was going to tell you, but now I think I'll change my mind—'

'Out with it, wizard, before I go back up and tell the Adjunct where she can find you.'

'You can't do that. I need time to think, damn you.'

'So talk. You can think while you're doing that, since with you the two activities are clearly distinct and mostly unrelated.'

'What's got you so miserable?'

'You.'

'Liar.'

'All right, me.'

'That's better. Anyway, I know who saved us.'

'Really?'

'Well, sort of – he started the big rock rolling, at least.'

'Who?'

'Ganoes Paran.'

Kalam scowled. 'All right, I'm less surprised than I should be.'

'Then you're an idiot. He did it by having a conversation with Hood.'

'How do you know?'

'I was there, listening in. At Hood's Gate.'

'What were you doing hanging around there?'

'We were all going to die, weren't we?'

'Oh, so you wanted to beat the rush?'

'Hilarious, Kalam. No, I was planning on doing some bargaining, but that's irrelevant now. Ended up, it was Paran who did the bargaining. Hood said something. He wants something – by his own damned breath, it
shocked me, let me tell you—'

'So do that.'

'No. I need to think.'

Kalam closed his eyes and leaned back against the bale. It smelled of oats. 'Ganoes Paran.' A pause, then, 'Do you think she knows?'

'Who, Tavore?'

'Yes, who else?'

'I have no idea. Wouldn't surprise me. Nothing about her would surprise me, in fact. She might even be listening in right now—'

'Wouldn't you sense that?'

'Kalam, something's wandering through this fleet tonight, and it isn't pleasant, whatever it is. I keep feeling it brush by ... close, then, before I can grab it by the throat, it whispers away again.'

'So, you are hiding down here!'

'Of course not. Not any more, I mean. Now I'm staying here, in order to lay a trap.'

'A trap. Right. Very clever, High Mage.'

'It is. For the next time it sidles close.'

'Do you really expect me to believe that?'

'Believe what you like, Kalam. What do I care, even if it's my oldest friend who no longer trusts me—'

'For Hood's sake, Quick Ben, I've never trusted you!'

'Now that's hurtful. Wise, but still hurtful.'

'Tell me something, Quick, exactly how did you manage hiding at Hood's Gate, with both Paran and the god himself standing there?'

A sniff. 'They were distracted, of course. Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight.'

'And between them, they saved the world.'

'Gave the rock a nudge, Kal. The rest belonged to someone else. Don't know who, or what. But I will tell you one thing, those falling suns, they were filled with voices.'

'Voices?'

'Enormous pieces of stone. Jade, sailing down from the stars. And in those broken mountains or whatever they were, there were souls. Millions of souls, Kalam. I heard them.'

Gods, no wonder you hid down here, Quick. 'That's ... uncanny. You're sending shivers all through me.'

'I know. I feel the same way.'

'So, how did you hide from Hood?'

'I was part of the Gate, of course. Just another corpse, just another staring face.'

'Hey, now that was clever.'

'Wasn't it?
'What was it like, among all those bones and bodies and stuff?'

'Kind of ... comforting ...'

* I can see that. Kalam scowled again. Hold on ... I wonder ... is there maybe something wrong with us? *

'Quick, you and me.'

'Yes?'

'I think we're insane.'

'You're not.'

'What do you mean?'

'You're too slow. You can't be insane if you only just realized that we're insane. Understand?'

'No.'

'As I said, then.'

'Well,' the assassin grunted, 'that's a relief.'

'For you, yes. Shh!' The wizard's hand clutched Kalam's arm. 'It's back!' he hissed. 'Close!'

'Within reach?' Kalam asked in a whisper.

'Gods, I hope not!'

A solitary resident in this cabin, and in the surrounding alcoves and cubby berths, a cordon of Red Blades, fiercely protective of their embittered, broken commander, although none elected to share the Fist's quarters, despite the ship's crowded conditions. Beyond those soldiers, the Khundryl Burned Tears, seasick one and all, filling the air below-decks with the sour reek of bile.

And so he remained alone. Wreathed by his own close, fetid air, no lantern light to beat back the dark, and this was well. For all that was outside matched what was inside, and Fist Tene Baralta told himself, again and again, that this was well.

Y'Ghatan. The Adjunct had sent them in, under strength, knowing there would be slaughter. She didn't want the damned veterans and their constant gnawing at her command. She wanted to be rid of the Red Blades, and the marines – soldiers like Cuttle and Fiddler. She had probably worked it out, conspiring with Leoman himself. That conflagration, its execution had been too perfect, too well-timed. There had been signals – those fools with the lanterns on the rooftops, along the wall's battlements.

And the season itself – a city filled with olive oil, an entire year's harvest – she hadn't rushed the army after Leoman, she hadn't shown any haste at all, when any truly loyal commander would have ... would have chased that bastard down, long before he reached Y'Ghatan.

No, the timing was ... diabolical.

And here he was, maimed and trapped in the midst of damned traitors. Yet, again and again, events had transpired to befoul the Adjunct and her treasonous, murderous plans. The survival of the marines – Lostara among them. Then, Quick Ben's unexpected countering of those Edur mages. Oh yes, his soldiers reported to him, every morsel of news. They understood – although they revealed nothing of their suspicions – he could well see it in their eyes, they understood. That necessary things were coming. Soon.

And it would be Fist Tene Baralta himself who would lead them. Tene Baralta, the Maimed, the Betrayed. Oh yes, there would be names for him. There would be cults to worship him, just as there were cults worshipping other great heroes of the Malazan Empire. Like Coltaine. Bult. Baria Setral and his brother, Mesker, of the Red Blades.
In such company, Tene Baralta would belong. Such company, he told himself, was his only worthy company.

One eye left, capable of seeing ... almost ... In daylight a blurred haze swarmed before his vision, and there was pain, so much pain, until he could not even so much as turn his head – oh yes, the healers had worked on him – with orders, he now knew, to fail him again and again, to leave him with a plague of senseless scars and phantom agonies. And, once out of his room, they would laugh, at the imagined success of their charade.

Well, he would deliver their gifts back into their laps, all those healers.

In this soft, warm darkness, he stared upward from where he lay on the cot. Things unseen creaked and groaned. A rat scuttled back and forth along one side of the cramped chamber. His sentinel, his bodyguard, his caged soul.

A strange smell reached him, sweet, cloying, numbing, and he felt his aches fading, the shrieking nerves falling quiescent.

'Who's there?' he croaked.

A rasping reply, 'A friend, Tene Baralta. One, indeed, whose visage matches your own. Like you, assaulted by betrayal. You and I, we are torn and twisted to remind us, again and again, that one who bears no scars cannot be trusted. Ever. It is a truth, my friend, that only a mortal who has been broken can emerge from the other side, whole once more. Complete, and to all his victims, arrayed before him, blindingly bright, yes? The searing white fires of his righteousness. Oh, I promise you, that moment shall taste sweet.'

'An apparition,' Tene Baralta gasped. 'Who has sent you? The Adjunct, yes? A demonic assassin, to end this —'

'Of course not – and even as you make such accusations, Tene Baralta, you know them to be false. She could kill you at any time—'

'My soldiers protect me—'

'She will not kill you,' the voice said. 'She has no need. She has already cast you away, a useless, pathetic victim of Y'Ghatan. She has no realization, Tene Baralta, that your mind lives on, as sharp as it has ever been, its judgement honed and eager to draw foul blood. She is complacent.'

'Who are you?'

'I am named Gethol. I am the Herald of the House of Chains. And I am here, for you. You alone, for we have sensed, oh yes, we have sensed that you are destined for greatness.'

Ah, such emotion here, at his words ... no, hold it back. Be strong ... show this Gethol your strength. 'Greatness,' he said. 'Yes, of that I have always been aware, Herald.'

'And the time has come, Tene Baralta.'

'Yes?'

'Do you feel our gift within you? Diminishing your pain, yes?'

'I do.'

'Good. That gift is yours, and there is more to come.'

'More?'

'Your lone eye, Tene Baralta, deserves more than a clouded, uncertain world, don't you think? You need a sharpness of vision to match the sharpness of your mind. That seems reasonable, indeed, just.'

'Yes.'
‘That will be your reward, Tene Baralta.’

‘If I do what?’

‘Later. Such details are not for tonight. Until we speak again, follow your conscience, Tene Baralta. Make your plans for what will come. You are returning to the Malazan Empire, yes? That is good. Know this, the Empress awaits you. You, Tene Baralta, more than anyone else in this army. Be ready for her.’

‘Oh, I shall, Gethol.’

‘I must leave you now, lest this visitation be discovered – there are many powers hiding in this army. Be careful. Trust no-one—’

‘I trust my Red Blades.’

‘If you must, yes, you will need them. Goodbye, Tene Baralta.’

Silence once more, and the gloom, unchanged and unchanging, inside and out. Destined, yes, for greatness. They shall see that. When I speak with the Empress. They shall all see that.

Lying in her bunk, the underside of the one above a mere hand's-breadth away, knotted twine and murky tufts of bedding, Lostara Yil kept her breathing slow, even. She could hear the beat of her own heart, the swish of blood in her ears.

The soldier in the bunk beneath her grunted, then said in a low voice, ‘He's now talking to himself. Not good.’

The voice from within Tene Baralta’s cabin had been murmuring through the wall for the past fifty heartbeats, but had now, it seemed, stopped.

Talking to himself? Hardly, that was a damned conversation. She closed her eyes at the thought, wishing she had been asleep and unmindful of the ever more sordid nightmare that was her commander’s world: the viscous light in his eye when she looked upon him, the muscles of his frame sagging into fat, the twisted face beginning to droop, growing flaccid where there were no taut scars. Pallid skin, strands of hair thick with old sweat.

What has burned away is what tempered his soul. Now, there is only malice, a mottled collection of stains, fused impurities.

And I am his captain once more, by his own command. What does he want with me? What does he expect?

Tene Baralta had ceased speaking. And now she could sleep, if only her mind would cease its frantic racing.

Oh Cotillion, you knew, didn’t you? You knew this would come. Yet, you left the choice to me. And now freedom feels like a curse.

Cotillion, you never play fair.

The western coast of the Catal Sea was jagged with fjords, high black cliffs and tumbled boulders. The mountains rising almost immediately behind the shoreline were thick with coniferous trees, their green needles so dark as to be almost black. Huge red-tailed ravens wheeled overhead, voicing strange, harsh laughter as they banked and pitched towards the fleet of ominous ships that approached the Malazans, swooping low only to lift with heavy, languid beats of their wings.

The Adjunct’s flagship was now alongside Nok’s own, and the Admiral had just crossed over to join Tavore as they awaited the arrival of the Perish.

Keneb stared with fascination at the massive warships drawing ever nearer. Each was in fact two dromons linked by arching spans, creating a catamaran of Cyclopean proportions. The sudden dying of the wind had forced oars into the becalmed waters, and this included a double bank of oars on the inward side of each dromon, foreshortened by the spans.
The Fist had counted thirty-one of the giant craft, arrayed in a broad, flattened wedge. He could see ballistae mounted to either side of the wolf-head prows, and attached to the outer rails along the length of the ships was a double row of overlapping rectangular shields, their bronze facings polished and glinting in the muted sunlight.

As the lead ship closed, oars were lifted, shipped.

One of Nok’s officers said, ‘Look beneath the surface between the hulls, Admiral. The spans above are matched by ones below the waterline ... and those possess rams.’

‘It would be unwise indeed,’ Nok said, ‘to invite battle with these Perish.’

‘Yet someone had done just that,’ the Adjunct said. ‘Mage-fire damage, there, on the one flanking the flagship. Admiral, what do you imagine to be the complement of soldiers aboard each of these catamarans?’

‘Could be as many as two hundred marines or the equivalent for each dromon. Four hundred per craft – I wonder if some of them are at the oars. Unless, of course, there are slaves.’

The flag visible beneath the crow’s nest on the lead ship’s mainmast showed a wolf’s head on a black field bordered in grey.

They watched as a long craft resembling a war canoe was lowered between the flagship’s two hulls, then armoured soldiers descended, taking up paddles. Three more figures joined them. All but one wore iron helms, camailed at the back, with sweeping cheek-guards. Grey cloaks, leather gauntlets. The lone exception was a man, tall, gaunt and bald, wearing a heavy woollen robe of dark grey. Their skins were fair, but all other characteristics remained unseen beneath armour.

‘That’s a whole lot of chain weighing down that canoe,’

the same officer muttered. ‘If she rolls, a score lumps rusting on the bottom ...’

The craft slid over the submerged ram, swiftly propelled by the paddlers whose blades flashed in perfect unison. Moments later a soft-voiced command triggered a withdrawal of the paddles, barring that of the soldier at the very stern, who rudded, bringing the canoe around to draw up alongside the Malazan flagship.

At Nok’s command, sailors rushed over to help the Perish contingent aboard.

First to appear was a tall, broad-shouldered figure, blackcloaked. Beneath the thick wool was a surcoat of blackened chain that glistened with oil. The longsword at the left hip revealed a silver wolf’s-head pommel. The Perish paused, looked round, then approached the Adjunct as others appeared from the rail. Among them was the robed man, who called out something to the one Keneb surmised was the commander. That person halted, half-turned, and the voice that emerged from behind the visored helm startled Keneb, for it was a woman’s.

She’s a damned giant – even the women heavies in our army would hesitate facing this one.

Her question was short.

The bald man replied with a single word, at which the woman in armour bowed and stepped to one side.

Keneb watched the robed man stride forward, eyes on the Adjunct. ‘Mezla,’ he said. ‘Welcome.’

He speaks Malazan. Well, that should make this easier.

The Adjunct nodded. ‘Welcome in return, Perish. I am Adjunct Tavore Paran, and this is Admiral Nok—’

‘Ah, yes, that name is known to us, sir.’ A low bow towards Nok, who seemed startled for a moment, before replying in kind.

‘You speak our language well,’ Tavore said.

‘Forgive me, Adjunct. I am Destrian Run’Thurvian.’ He gestured to the huge woman beside him. ‘This is the
Mortal Sword Krughava.' And then, stepping to one side, he bowed to another soldier standing two steps behind the Mortal Sword. 'Shield Anvil Tanakalian.' The Destriant added something in his own language, and in response both the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil removed their helms.

*Ah, these are hard, hard soldiers.* Krughava, iron-haired, was blue-eyed, her weathered face seamed with scars, yet the bones beneath her stern, angular features were robust and even. The Shield Anvil was, in contrast, quite young, and if anything broader of shoulder, although not as tall as the Mortal Sword. His hair was yellow, the colour of stalks of wheat; his eyes deep grey.

'Your ships have seen fighting,' Admiral Nok said to the Destriant.

'Yes sir. We lost four in the engagement.'

'And the Tiste Edur,' the Adjunct asked, 'how many did they lose?'

The Destriant suddenly deferred to the Mortal Sword, bowing, and the woman replied in fluent Malazan, 'Uncertain. Perhaps twenty, once their sorcery was fended aside. Although nimble, the ships were under-strength. Nonetheless, they fought well, without quarter.'

'Are you in pursuit of the surviving ships?'

'No, sir,' Krughava replied, then fell silent.

The Destriant said, 'Noble sirs, we have been waiting for you. For the Mezla.'

He turned then and walked to stand at the Shield Anvil's side.

Krughava positioned herself directly opposite the Adjunct. 'Admiral Nok, forgive me,' she said, holding her gaze on Tavore. The Mortal Sword then drew her sword.

As with every other Malazan officer witness to this, Keneb tensed, reaching for his own weapon.

But the Adjunct did not flinch. She wore no weapon at all.

The length of blue iron sliding from the scabbard was etched from tip to hilt, two wolves stretched in full charge, every swirl of fur visible, their fangs polished brighter than all else, gleaming, the eyes blackened smears. The artisanship was superb, yet that blade's edge was notched and battered. Its length gleamed with oil.

The Mortal Sword held the sword horizontally, against her own chest, and there was a formal rigidity to her words as she said, 'I am Krughava, Mortal Sword of the Grey Helms of the Perish, sworn to the Wolves of Winter. In solemn acceptance of all that shall soon come to pass, I pledge my army to your service, Adjunct Tavore Paran. Our complement: thirty-one Thrones of War. Thirteen thousand and seventy-nine brothers and sisters of the Order. Before us, Adjunct Tavore, awaits the end of the world. In the name of Togg and Fanderay, we shall fight until we die.'

No-one spoke.

The Mortal Sword settled onto one knee, and laid the sword at Tavore's feet.

On the forecastle, Kalam stood beside Quick Ben, watching the ceremony on the mid deck. The wizard beside the assassin was muttering under his breath, the sound finally irritating Kalam enough to draw his gaze from the scene below, even as the Adjunct, with a solemnity to match the Mortal Sword's, picked up the sword and returned it to Krughava.

*Will you be quiet, Quick!* Kalam hissed. 'What's wrong with you?'

The wizard stared at him with a half-wild look in his dark eyes. 'I recognize these ... these Perish. Those titles, the damned formality and high diction – I recognize these people!'

'And?'
'And ... nothing. But I will say this, Kal. If we ever end up besieged, woe to the attackers.'

The assassin grunted. 'Grey Helms—'

'Grey Helms, Swords ... gods below, Kalam – I need to talk to Tavore.'

'Finally!'

'I really need to talk to her.'

'Go on down and introduce yourself, High Mage.'

'You must be mad ...'

Quick Ben's sudden trailing away brought Kalam's gaze back round to the crowd below, and he saw the Destriant, Run'Thurvian, looking up, eyes locked with Quick's own. Then the robed man smiled, and bowed low in greeting.

Heads turned.

'Shit,' Quick Ben said at his side.

Kalam scowled. 'High Mage Ben Adaephon Delat,' he said under his breath, 'the Lord of High Diction.'
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With silver tongs, the servant set another disk of ground rustleaf atop the waterpipe. Felisin Younger drew on the mouthpiece, waving the servant away, watching bemused as the old woman – head bowed so low her forehead was almost scraping the floor – backed away on her hands and knees. More of Kulat's rules of propriety when in the presence of Sha'ik Reborn. She was tired of arguing about it – if the fools felt the need to worship her, then so be it. After all, for the first time in her life, she found that her every need was met, attended to with fierce diligence, and those needs – much to her surprise – were growing in count with every day that passed.

As if her soul was a vast cauldron, one that demanded filling, yet was in truth bottomless. They fed her, constantly, and she was growing heavy, clumsy with folds of soft fat – beneath her breasts, and on her hips and behind, the underside of her arms, her belly and thighs. And, no doubt, her face as well, although she had outlawed the presence of mirrors in her throne room and private chambers.

Food was not her only excess. There was wine, and rustleaf, and, now, there was lovemaking. There were a dozen servants among those attending her whose task it was to deliver pleasure of the flesh. At first, Felisin had been shocked, even outraged, but persistence had won out. More of Kulat's twisted rules – she understood that now. His desires were all of the voyeuristic variety, and many times she had heard the wet click of the stones in his mouth from behind a curtain or painted panel, as he spied on her with lascivious pathos.

She understood her new god, now. Finally. Bidithal had been entirely wrong – this was not a faith of abstinence. Apocalypse was announced in excess. The world ended in a glut, and just as her own soul was a bottomless cauldron, so too was the need of all humanity, and in this she was the perfect representative. As they devoured all that surrounded them, so too would she.

As Sha'ik Reborn, her task was to blaze bright, and quick – and then die. Into death, where lay the true salvation. Apocalyptic was announced in excess. The world ended in a glut, and just as her own soul was a bottomless cauldron, so too was the need of all humanity, and in this she was the perfect representative. As they devoured all that surrounded them, so too would she.

Kulat assured her she had no need to be concerned. In life, she was the embodiment of paradise, she was the symbol of promise. Yet, upon her death, there would be absolution. She was Sha'ik Reborn, after all, and that was a role she had not assumed by choice. It had been thrust upon her, and this was the most profound form of servitude of them all.

He was convincing, although a tiny sliver of doubt lodged deep inside her, a few thoughts, one tumbling after the next: without excess I might feel better, about myself. I would be as I once was, when I walked in the wildlands with Cutter and Scillara, with Greyfrog and Heboric Ghost Hands. Without all these servants, I would be able to fend for myself, and to see clearly that a measured life, a life tempered in moderation, is better than all this. I would see that this is a mortal paradise that cultivates flaws like flowers, that feeds only deathly roots, that chokes all life from me until I am left with ... with this.
Felisin Younger struggled to focus. Two men were standing before her. They had been standing there for some time, she realized. Kulat had announced them, although that had not been entirely necessary, for she knew that they were coming; indeed, she recognized both of them. Those hard, weathered faces, the streaks of sweat through a layer of dust, the worn leather armour, round shields and scimitars at their hips.

The one closest to her – tall, fierce. Mathok, who commanded the desert tribes in the Army of the Apocalypse. Mathok, Leoman's friend.

And, one pace behind the commander, Mathok's bodyguard T'morol, looking like some upright, hairless wolf, his eyes a hunter's eyes, cold, intense.

They had brought their army, their warriors.

They had brought that, and more ...

Felisin the Younger lowered her gaze from Mathok's face, down to the tattered hide-bound book in his hands. The Holy Book of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Whilst Leoman had led the Malazans on a wild chase, into the trap that was Y'Ghatan, Mathok and his desert warriors had travelled quietly, secretly, evading all contact. There had been intent, Mathok had explained, to rendezvous at Y'Ghatan, but then the plague had struck, and the shamans in his troop had been beset by visions.

Of Hanar Ara, the City of the Fallen. Of Sha'ik, reborn yet again. Leoman and Y'Ghatan, they told Mathok, was a dead end in every sense of the phrase. A feint, punctuated by annihilation. And so the commander had turned away with his army, and had set out on the long journey to find the City of the Fallen. To find her. To deliver the Holy Book into her hands.

A difficult journey, one worthy of its own epic, no doubt.

And now, Mathok stood before her, and his army was encamping in the city and Felisin sat amidst the cushions of her own fat, wreathed in smoke, and considered how she would tell him what he needed to hear – what they all needed to hear, Kulat included.

Well, she would be ... direct. 'Thank you, Mathok, for delivering the Book of Dryjhna. Thank you, as well, for delivering your army. Alas, I have no need of either gift.'

Mathok's brows rose fractionally. 'Sha'ik Reborn, with the Book, you can do as you like. For my warriors, however, you have great need. A Malazan army approaches—'

'I know. But you are not enough. Besides, I have no need for warriors. My army does not march in rank. My army carries no weapons, wears no armour. In conquering, my army kills not a single foe, enslaves no-one, rapes no child. That which my army wields is salvation, Mathok. Its promise. Its invitation.'

'And the Malazans?' T'morol demanded in his grating voice, baring his teeth. 'That army does carry weapons and wear armour. That army, Holy One, marches in rank, and right now they're marching right up our ass!'

'Kulat,' Felisin said. 'Find a place for the Holy Book. Have the artisans prepare a new one, the pages blank. There will be a second holy book. My Book of Salvation. On its first page, Kulat, record what has been said here, this day, and accord all present with the honour they have earned. Mathok, and T'morol, you are most welcome here, in the City of the Fallen. As are your warriors. But understand, your days of war, of slaughter, are done. Put away your scimitars and your shields, your bows. Unsaddle your horses and loose them to the high pastures in the hills at Denet'inar Spring. They shall live out their lives there, well and in peace. Mathok, T'morol, do you accept?'

The commander stared down at the ancient tome in his hands, and Felisin saw a sneer emerge on his features. He spread his hands. The book fell to the floor, landing on its spine. The impact broke it. Ancient pages skirled out. Ignoring Felisin, Mathok turned to T'morol. 'Gather the warriors. We will resupply as needed. Then we leave.'

T'morol faced the throne, and spat onto the floor before the dais. Then he wheeled and strode from the
chamber.

Mathok hesitated, then he faced Felisin once more. ‘Sha’ik Reborn, you will no doubt receive my shamans without the dishonour witnessed here. I leave them with you. To you. As for your world, your bloated, disgusting world and its poisonous salvation, I leave that to you as well. For all of this, Leoman died. For all of this, Y’Ghatan burned.’ He studied her a moment longer, then he spun about and walked from the throne room.

Kulat scurried to kneel beside the broken book. ‘It is ruined!’ he said in a voice filled with horror.

Felisin nodded. ‘Utterly.’ Then she smiled at her own joke.

’I judge four thousand,’ Fist Rythe Bude said.

The rebel army was positioned along a ridge. Horsewarriors, lancers, archers, yet none had readied weapons.

Round shields remained strapped to backs, quivers lidded, bows unstrung and holstered on saddles. Two riders had moved out from the line and were working their horses down the steep slope to where Paran and his officers waited.

’What do you think, High Fist?’ Hurlochel asked. ’This has the look of a surrender.’

Paran nodded.

The two men reached the base of the slope and cantered up to halt four paces from the Host’s vanguard.

’I am Mathok,’ the one on the left said. ’Once of Sha’ik’s Army of the Apocalypse.’

’And now?’ Paran asked.

A shrug. ’We dwelt in the Holy Desert Raraku, a desert now a sea. We fought as rebels, but the rebellion has ended.

We believed. We believe no longer.’ He unsheathed his scimitar and flung it onto the ground. ’Do with us as you will.’

Paran settled back in his saddle. He drew a deep breath and released it in a long sigh. ’Mathok,’ he said, ’you and your warriors are free to go where you please. I am High Fist Ganoes Paran, and I hereby release you. As you said, the war is over, and I for one am not interested in reparation, nor punishment. Nothing is gained by inflicting yet more atrocities in answer to past ones.’

The grizzled warrior beside Mathok threw a leg over his horse’s neck and slipped down to the ground. The impact made him wince and arch his lower back, grimacing, then he hobbled over to his commander’s scimitar. Collecting it, he wiped the dust from the blade and the grip, then delivered it back to Mathok.

Paran spoke again: ’You have come from the place of pilgrimage.’

’The City of the Fallen, yes. Do you intend to destroy them, High Fist? They are defenceless.’

’I would speak with their leader.’

’Then you waste your time. She claims she is Sha’ik Reborn. If that is true, then the cult has seen a degradation from which it will never recover. She is fat, poisoned. I barely recognized her. She is indeed fallen. Her followers are sycophants, more interested in orgies and gluttony than anything else. They are diseasc-scarred and half-mad. Her High Priest watches her sex acts from behind curtains and masturbates, and in both their energy is unbounded and insatiable.’

’Nonetheless,’ Paran said after a moment, ’I sense power there.’

’No doubt,’ Mathok replied, leaning to one side and spitting. ’Slaughter them, then, High Fist, and you will rid the world of a new kind of plague.’
'What do you mean?'

'A religion of the maimed and broken. A religion proffering salvation ... you just have to die first. I predict the cult will prove highly contagious.'

*He's probably right. 'I cannot slaughter innocents, Mathok.'*

'Then, one day, the most faithful and zealous among them will slaughter you, High Fist.'

'Perhaps. If so, I will worry about it then. In the meantime, I have other tasks before me.'

'You will speak with Sha'ik Reborn?'

Paran considered, then he shook his head. 'No. As you suggest, there is little point. While I see the possible wisdom of expunging this cult before it gains a foothold, I admit I find the notion reprehensible.'

'Then where, if I may ask, High Fist, will you go now?'

Paran hesitated. *Dare I answer? Well, now is as good as later for everyone to hear. 'We turn round, Mathok. The Host marches to Aren.'*

'Do you march to war?' the commander asked.

Paran frowned. 'We're an army, Mathok. Eventually, yes, there will be fighting.'

'Will you accept our service, High Fist?'

'What?'

'We are a wandering people,' Mathok explained. 'But we have lost our home. Our families are scattered and no doubt many are dead of plague. We have nowhere to go, and no-one to fight. If you should reject us now, and free us to go, we shall ride into dissolution. We shall die with our backs covered in straw and sand in our gauntlets. Or warrior will turn upon warrior, and blood will be shed that is without meaning. Accept us into your army, High Fist Ganoes Paran, and we will fight at your side and die with honour.'

'You have no idea where I intend to lead the Host, Mathok.'

The old warrior beside Mathok barked a laugh. 'The wasteland back of camp, or the wasteland few have ever seen before, what's the difference? He turned to his commander. 'Mathok, my friend, the shamans said this one here killed Poliel. For that alone, I would follow him into the Abyss, so long as he promises us heads to lop off and maybe a woman or two to ride on the way. That's all we're looking for, right, before we dance in a god's lap one last time. Besides, I'm tired of running.'

To all of this, Mathok simply nodded, his gaze fixed on Paran.

*Four thousand or so of this continent's finest light cavalry just volunteered, veterans one and all. 'Hurlochel,' he said, 'attach yourself as liaison to Commander Mathok. Commander, you are now a Fist, and Hurlochel will require a written compilation of your officers or potential officers. The Malazan army employs mounted troops in units of fifty, a hundred and three hundred. Adjust your command structure accordingly.'*

'It shall be done, High Fist.'

'Fist Rythe Bude, see the Host turned round. And Noto Boil, find me Ormulogun.'

'Again?' the healer asked.

'Go.'

Yes, again. I think I need a new card. I think I'll call it Salvation. At the moment it is in the House of Chains' sphere of influence. But something tells me it will claw free of that eventually. Such a taint will not last. This card is an Unaligned. In every sense of the word. Unaligned, and likely destined to be the most dangerous force
in the world.

Damn, I wish I was more ruthless. That Sha’ik Reborn, and all her twisted followers – I should ride up there and slaughter them all – which is precisely what Mathok wanted me to do.

To do what he himself couldn’t – we’re the same in that. In our ... weakness.

No wonder I already like the man.

As Hurlochel led his horse alongside Mathok, back up towards the desert warriors on the ridge, the outrider glanced over at the new Fist. ‘Sir, when you spoke of Sha’ik Reborn, you said something ... about barely recognizing her ...’

‘I did. She was one of Sha’ik’s adopted daughters, in Raraku. Of course, as Leoman and I well knew, even that one was ... not as she seemed. Oh, chosen by the Whirlwind Goddess, well enough, but she was not a child of the desert.’

‘She wasn’t?’

‘No, she was Malazan.’

‘What?’

The commander’s companion grunted and spat. ‘Mezla, yes. And the Adjunct never knew – or so we heard. She cut down a helmed, armoured woman. And then walked away. The corpse then vanished. A Mezla killing a Mezla – oh how the gods must have laughed ...’

‘Or,’ said Hurlochel in a low voice, ‘wept.’ He thought to ask more questions regarding this new Sha’ik Reborn, but a succession of tragic images, variants on that fated duel at Raraku, before the seas rose from the desert, raced through his mind. And so he rode in silence up the slope, beside the warriors, and before long was thoroughly consumed with the necessities of reorganizing Mathok’s horse-warriors.

So preoccupied, he did not report his conversation to the High Fist.

Three leagues from the City of the Fallen, Paran turned the Host away, and set them on their path for distant Aren. The road that would take them from Seven Cities.

Never to return.

Saur Bathrada and Kholb Harat had walked into an upland village four leagues inland from the harbour city of Sepik. Leading twenty Edur warriors and forty Letherii marines, they had gathered the enslaved degenerate mixed-bloods, ritually freeing the uncomprehending primitives from their symbolic chains, then chaining them in truth for the march back to the city and the Edur ships. Following this, Saur and Kholb had driven the Sepik humans into a sheep pen where a bonfire was built. One by one, mothers were forced to throw their babes and children into the roaring flames. Those women were then raped and, finally, beheaded. Husbands, brothers and fathers were made to watch. When they alone remained alive, they were systematically dismembered and left, armless and legless, to bleed out among bleating, blood-splashed sheep.

A scream had been birthed that day in the heart of Ahlrada Ahn, and it had not ceased its desperate, terrible cry. Rhulad’s shadow covered the Tiste Edur, no matter how distant that throne and the insane creature seated upon it. And in that shadow roiled a nightmare from which there could be no awakening.

That scream was echoed in his memories of that day, the shrieks wrung from the throats of burning children, the writhing forms in their bundled flames, the fires reflected on the impassive faces of Edur warriors. Even the Letherii had turned away, overcome with horror. Would that Ahlrada Ahn could have done the same, without losing face. Instead he stood, one among the many, and revealed nothing of what raged inside. Raged, breaking ... everything. Within me, he told himself that night, back in Sepik where the sounds of slaughter continued beyond the room he had found, within me, nothing is left standing. On that night, for the first time ever, he
considered taking his own life.

A statement of weakness. The others would have seen it in no other way – they could not afford to – so, not a protest, but a surrender, and they would line up to spit upon his corpse. And warriors like Saur Bathrada and Kholb Harat would draw their knives and crouch down, and with pleasure in their eyes they would disfigure the senseless body. For these two Edur had grown to love blood and pain, and in that they were not alone.

The king of Sepik was the last to die. He had been made to witness the obliteration of his cherished people. It was said that he was a benign ruler – oh how the Edur despised that statement, as if it was an insult, a grievous, vicious insult. That wretched man collapsing between two warriors who struggled to hold him upright, grasping his grey hair to force his head up, to see. Oh, how he'd shrieked and wailed. Until Tomad Sengar wearied of those cries and ordered the king flung from the tower. And, as he fell, his wail became a sound filled with relief. He looked upon those cobbles, rising fast to meet him, as salvation. And this is our gift. Our only gift.

Ahlrada Ahn drew out his Merude cutlasses once again, studied their deadly sharp edges. The grips felt good, felt proper, nestled in his large hands. He heard a stirring among the warriors gathered on the deck and looked up to see the one named Taralack Veed pushing through the crowd, at his side Atri-Preda Yan Tovis and in their wake the Jhag known as Icarium.

Taller than most Edur, the silent, sad-faced warrior carried naught but his old, single-edged sword. No bow, no scabbard for the weapon in his right hand, no armour of any kind. Yet Ahlrada Ahn felt a chill whisper through him. Is he in truth a champion? What will we see this day, beyond the gate?

Two hundred Edur warriors, the Arapay warlock Sathbaro Rangar – now dragging his malformed hulk on a route that would intercept Icarium – and sixty Letherii archers. All ready, all eager to begin the killing.

The warlock squinted up at the Jhag, who halted before him – not out of deference or even much in the way of attentiveness; rather, because the twisted old man blocked his path. 'I see,' Sathbaro Rangar said in a rasp, 'in you ... nothing. Vast emptiness, as if you are not even here. And your companion claims you to be a great warrior? I think we are deceived.'

Icarium said nothing.

The human named Taralack Veed stepped forward, pausing to spit on his hands and sweep them back through his hair. 'Warlock,' he said in passable trader's tongue, 'when the fight begins, you shall see the birth of all that waits within him. This I promise. Icarium exists to destroy, exists to fight, I mean to say, and that is all —'

'Then why does he weep at your words?' Tomad Sengar asked from behind Ahlrada Ahn.

Taralack Veed turned, then bowed low. 'Preda, he grieves for what is lost within him, for all that your warlock perceives ... the absence, the empty vessel. It is no matter.'

'It is no matter.' Ahlrada Ahn did not believe that. He could not. You fools. Look at him! What you see, Sathbaro Rangar, is nothing more than loss. Do none of you grasp the significance of that? What do we invite among us? And this Taralack Veed, this foul-smelling savage, see how nervous he looks, as if he himself dreads what is coming – no, I am not blind to the eager light in his eyes, but I see fear there, too. It cries out in his every gesture.

What are we about to do here?

Tomad Sengar said, 'Warlock, prepare the path.'

At that, everyone readied their weapons. Saur Bathrada and Kholb Harat would lead, followed by Sathbaro Rangar himself, and then Taralack and his charge, with the bulk of the Edur behind them, and the Letherii appearing last, arrows nocked.

This would be Ahlrada Ahn's first foray against the guardians of the throne. But he had heard enough tales. Battle without quarter. Battle as vicious as any the Edur had experienced. He adjusted his grip on the cutlasses and moved into position, in the front line of the main body. Low-voiced greetings reached him – every Edur
warrior emboldened by Ahlrada Ahn's presence in their ranks. Spearbreaker. Fearless, as if eager for death.

Oh yes, I am that indeed. Death. My own.

And yet ... do I not still dream of going home?

He watched the ragged gate blister the air, then split wide, limned in grey flames, its maw nothing but blurred darkness.

The warlock stepped to one side, and Saur and Kholb lunged into it, vanished into the gloom. Sathbaro Rangar followed, then Taralack and Icarium. And it was Ahlrada Ahn's turn. He pushed himself forward, into the void—

—and stumbled onto crackling loam, the air sweet with forest scents. As with the world they had just left, it was late afternoon. Continuing to move forward, Ahlrada Ahn looked around. They were alone, unopposed.

He heard Icarium ask, 'Where are we?'

And the Arapay warlock turned. 'Drift Avalii, warrior. Where resides the Throne of Shadow.'

'And who guards it?' Taralack Veed demanded. 'Where is this fierce enemy of yours?'

Sathbaro Rangar lifted his head, as if sniffing the air, then he grunted in surprise. 'The demons have fled. They have fled! Why? Why did they yield us the throne? After all those battles? I do not understand.'

Ahlrada Ahn glanced over at Icarium. Demons ... fleeing.

'I do not understand this,' the warlock said again.

Perhaps I do. Oh Sisters, who now walks among us?

He was startled, then, by a faint whispering sound, and he whirled, weapons lifting.

But it was naught but an owl, gliding away down the wide path before them.

He saw a flicker of motion among the humus, and the raptor's talons snapped down. The owl then flapped upward once more, a tiny broken form clutched in its reptilian grip.

'No matter,' the Arapay warlock was saying. 'Let us go claim our throne.' And he set off, hobbling, dragging one bent leg, down the trail.

Baffled, Taralack Veed faced Icarium. 'What do you sense? Of this place?'

The eyes that regarded him were flat. 'The Shadow demons left with our arrival. There was ... someone ... a man, but he too is gone. Some time past. He is the one I would have faced.'

'Skilled enough to unleash you, Icarium?'

'Skilled enough, perhaps, to kill me, Taralack Veed.'

'Impossible.'

'Nothing is impossible,' Icarium said.

They set off after the half-dozen Edur who had hastened ahead to join Sathbaro Rangar.

Fifteen paces down the path they came upon the first signs of past battle. Bloated bodies of dead aptorians and azalan demons. They would not have fallen easily, Taralack Veed knew. He had heard of egregious losses among the Edur and, especially, the Letherii. Those bodies had been recovered.

A short distance beyond rose the walls of an overgrown courtyard. The gate had been shattered. Icarium
trailing a step behind, Taralack Veed followed the others into the compound, then the Jhag reached out and halted the Gral.

'No further.'

'What?'

There was an odd expression on Icarium's face. 'There is no need.'

Ahlrada Ahn, along with Saur and Kholb, accompanied the Arapay warlock into the shadowy, refuse-filled chamber of the throne room. The Seat of Shadow, the soul of Kurald Emurlahn, the throne that needed to be claimed, before the sundered realm could be returned to what it once was, a warren whole, seething with power.

Perhaps, with this, Rhulad could break the—

Sathbaro Rangar cried out, a terrible sound, and he staggered.

Ahlrada Ahn's thoughts fell away. He stared.

The Throne of Shadow, there on a raised dais at the far end of the room...

It has been destroyed.

Smashed to pieces, the black wood splintered to reveal its blood-red heartwood. The demons yielded us ... nothing. The Throne of Kurald Emurlahn is lost to us.

The warlock was on his knees, shrieking at the stained ceiling. Saur and Kholb stood, weapons out, yet seemingly frozen in place.

Ahlrada Ahn strode up to Sathbaro Rangar and grasped the warlock by the collar, then pulled him onto his feet. 'Enough of this,' he said. 'Gather yourself. We may be done here, but we are not done – you know this. The warriors will be thirsting for slaughter, now. You must return to the gate – there is another throne to be won, and those defending it will not flee as these ones have done here. Attend to yourself, Sathbaro Rangar!

'Yes,' the warlock gasped, tugging free from Ahlrada Ahn's grip. 'Yes, you speak truth, warrior. Slaughter, yes, that is what is needed. Come, let us depart – ah, in the name of Father Bloodeye, let us leave this place!'

'They return,' Taralack Veed said, as the Tiste Edur reappeared at the entrance to the temple. 'The warlock, he looks ... aggrieved. What has happened?'

Icarium said nothing, but something glittered in his eyes.

'Jhag,' snarled Sathbaro Rangar as he limped past, 'gather yourself. A true battle awaits us.'

Confusion among the ranks of Edur, words exchanged, then an outcry, curses, bellows of fury. The anger spread out, a wildfire suddenly eager to devour all that would dare oppose it. Wheeling about, hastening towards the flickering gate.

They were not returning to the ships.

Taralack Veed had heard, from Twilight, that an Edur commander named Hanradi Khalag had been sending his warriors against another foe, through a gate – one that led, in a journey of days, to yet another private war. And it was these enemies who would now face the wrath of these Edur here. And that of Icarium.

So they shall see, after all. That is good.

At his side there came a sound from the Jhag that drew Taralack Veed around in surprise. Low laughter.
'You are amused?' he asked Icarium in a hoarse whisper.

'Of Shadow both,' the Jhag said enigmatically, 'the weaver deceives the worshipper. But I will say nothing. I am, after all, empty.'

'I do not understand.'

'No matter, Taralack Veed. No matter.'

The throne room was abandoned once more, dust settling, shadows slinking back to their predictable haunts. And, from the shattered throne itself, there grew a faint shimmering, a blurring of edges, then a wavering that would have alarmed any who witnessed it – but of such sentient creatures there were none.

The broken, crushed fragments of wood melted away.

And once more there on the dais stood the Throne of Shadow. And stepping free of it, a shadowy form more solid than any other. Hunched, short, shrouded in folds of midnight gauze. From the indistinct smudge where a face belonged, only the eyes were visible, momentarily, a glinting flash.

The figure moved away from the throne, towards the doorway ... silver and ebony cane tapping on the pavestones.

A short while later it reached the temple's entrance and looked out. There, at the gate, walked the last of them. A Gral, and the Chilling, dread apparition that was Icarium.

A catch of breath from the huddling shadow beneath the arched frame, as the Jhag paused once to glance back.

And Shadowthrone caught, in Icarium's expression, something like a smile, then the faintest of nods, before the Jhag turned away.

The god cocked his head, listening to the party hurry back up the path.

A short time later and they were gone, back through their gate.

Meticulous illusion, crafted with genius, triggered by the arrival of strangers – of, indeed, any but Shadowthrone himself – triggered to transform into a shattered, powerless wreck. Meanas, bound with Mockra, flung across the span of the chamber, invisible strands webbing the formal entrance. Mockra, filaments of suggestion, invitation, the surrendering of natural scepticism, easing the way to witness the broken throne.

Lesser warrens, yet manipulated by a god's hands, and not any god's hands, either. No ... mine!

The Edur were gone.

'Idiots.'

'Three sorcerer kings,' Destriant Run'Thurvian said, 'rule Shal-Morzinn. They will contest our passage, Adjunct Tavore Paran, and this cannot be permitted.'

'We would seek to negotiate,' the Adjunct said. 'Indeed, to purchase supplies from them. Why would they oppose this?'

'Because it pleases them to do so.'

'And they are formidable?'

'Formidable? It may well prove,' the Destriant said, 'that even with the assistance of your sorcerers, including your High Mage here, we will suffer severe, perhaps devastating losses should we clash with them. Losses sufficient to drive us back, even to destroy us utterly.'
The Adjunct frowned across at Admiral Nok, then at Quick Ben.

The latter shrugged. 'I don't even know who they are and I hate them already.'

Keneb grunted. Some High Mage.

'What, Destriant Run'Thurvian, do you suggest?'

'We have prepared for this, Adjunct, and with the assistance of your sorcerers, we believe we can succeed in our intention.'

'A gate,' Quick Ben said.

'Yes. The Realm of Fanderay and Togg possesses seas. Harsh, fierce seas, but navigable nonetheless. It would not be wise to extend our journey in that realm overlong – the risks are too vast – but I believe we can survive them long enough to, upon re-emerging, find ourselves off the Dal Honese Horn of Quon Tali.'

'How long will that take?' Admiral Nok asked.

'Days instead of months, sir,' the Destriant replied.

'Risks, you said,' Keneb ventured. 'What kind of risks?'

'Natural forces, Fist. Storms, submerged ice; in that realm the sea levels have plunged, for ice grips many lands. It is a world caught in the midst of catastrophic changes. Even so, the season we shall enter is the least violent – in that, we are most fortunate.'

Quick Ben snorted. 'Forgive me, Destriant, but I sense nothing fortuitous in all this. We have some savanna spirit driving us along with these winds, as if every moment gained is somehow crucial. A savannah spirit, for Hood's sake. And now, you've worked a ritual to fashion an enormous gate on the seas. That ritual must have been begun months ago—'

'Two years, High Mage.'

'Two years! You said you were waiting for us – you knew we were coming – two years ago? Just how many spirits and gods are pushing us around here?'

The Destriant said nothing, folding his hands together before him on the map-table.

'Two years,' Quick Ben muttered.

'From you, High Mage, we require raw power – taxing, yes, but not so arduous as to leave you damaged.'

'Oh, that's nice.'

'High Mage,' the Adjunct said, 'you will make yourself available to the Grey Helms.'

He sighed, then nodded.

'How soon, Destriant?' Admiral Nok asked. 'And how shall we align the fleet?'

'Three ships across at the most, two cables apart, no more – the span of a shortbow arrow's flight between each. I suggest you begin readying your fleet immediately, sir. The gate shall be opened at dawn tomorrow.'

Nok rose. 'Then I must take my leave. Adjunct.'

Keneb studied Quick Ben on the other side of the table. The High Mage looked miserable.

Kalam waited until Quick Ben emerged onto the mid deck, then made his way over. 'What's got you shaking in your boots?' he asked.
'Never mind. If you're here to badger me about something – anything – I'm not in the mood.'

'I just had a question,' the assassin said, 'but I need to ask it in private.'

'Our hole in the knuckle below.'

'Good idea.'

A short time later they crouched once more in the narrow unlit aisle between crates and bales. 'It's this,' Kalam said, dispensing with any small talk. 'The Adjunct.'

'What about her?'

'I'm nervous.'

'Oh, how sad for you. Take it from me, it beats being scared witless, Kalam.'

'The Adjunct.'

'What is that? A question?'

'I need to know, Quick. Are you with her?'

'With her? In what? In bed? No. T'amber would kill me. Now, maybe if she decided to join in it'd be a different matter—'

'What in Hood's name are you going on about, Quick?'

'Sorry. With her, you asked.' He paused, rubbed at his face. 'Things are going to get ugly.'

'I know that! That's why I'm asking, idiot!'

'Calm down. No reason to panic—'

'Isn't there?'

Quick Ben shifted from rubbing his face to scratching it, then he pulled his hands away and blinked tearily at the assassin. 'Look what's happening to me, and it's all your damned fault—'

'Mine?'

'Well, it's somebody's, is what I'm saying. You're here so it might as well be you, Kal.'

'Fine, have it that way. You haven't answered me yet.'

'Are you?' the wizard countered.

'With her? I don't know. That's the problem.'

'Me neither. I don't know. She's a hard one to like, almost as hard to hate, since if you look back, there's nothing really to do either with, right?'

'You're starting to not make sense, Quick.'

'So what?'

'So you don't know, and I don't know. I don't know about you,' Kalam said, 'but I hate not knowing. I even hate you not knowing.'

'That's because, back then, Laseen talked you onto her side. You went to kill her, remember? And she turned you round. But now you're here, with the Adjunct, and we're on our way back, to her. And you don't know if anything's changed, or if it's all changed. It was one thing standing with Whiskeyjack. Even Dujek. We knew them. But the Adjunct ... well ... things aren't so simple.'
'Thank you, Quick, for reiterating everything I've just been telling you.'

'My pleasure. Now, are we done here?'

'Sorry, in need of changing your loincloth again, are you?'

'You have no idea what we're about to do, Kal. What I suggest is, come tomorrow morning, you head back down here, close your eyes and wait. Wait, and wait. Don't move. Or try not to. You might get tossed round a bit, and maybe these bales will come down on you. In fact, you might end up getting crushed like a gnat, so better you stay up top. Eyes closed, though. Closed until I say otherwise.'

'I don't believe you.'

The High Mage scowled. 'All right. Maybe I was trying to scare you. It'll be rough, though. That much is true. And over on the Silanda, Fiddler will be heaving his guts out.'

Kalam, thinking on it, suddenly smiled. 'That cheers me up.'

'Me too.'

Like a tidal flow clashing at the mouth of a raging river, walls of water rose in white, churning explosions on all sides as the Silanda lunged, prow plunging, into the maelstrom of the massive gate. Beyond was a sky transformed, steel, silver and grey, the tumult of atmospheric convulsions seeming to tumble down, as if but moments from crushing the score of ships already through. The scale to Bottle's eyes was all wrong. Moments earlier their warship had been but a cable behind the Froth Wolf, and now the Adjunct's flagship was a third of a league distant, dwarfed by the looming clouds and heaving swells.

Huddled beside Bottle, hands gripping the rail, Fiddler spat out the last of his breakfast, too sick to curse, too miserable to even so much as look up—

Which was likely a good thing, Bottle decided, as he listened to other marines being sick all around him, and the shouts – close to panic – from the scrambling sailors on the transport wallowing in their wake.

Gesler began blasting on that damned whistle as the ship rose above a huge swell – and Bottle almost cried out to see the stern of the Froth Wolf rearing immediately in front of them. Twisting round, he looked back, to see the sorcerous gate far away, its raging mouth filled with ships – that worked clear, then plunged, suddenly close, behind the Silanda.

By the Abyss! We're damned near flying here!

He could see, to starboard, a mass of icebergs spilling out from the white-lined horizon – a wall of ice, he realized. Whilst to port rose a wind-battered coastline, thrashing deciduous trees – oak, arbutus – and here and there clumps of white pine, their tall trunks rocking back and forth with every savage gust. Between the fleet and that shore, there were seals, their heads dotting the waves, the rocky beaches crowded with the beasts.

'Bottle,' Fiddler croaked, still not looking up, 'tell me some good news.'

'We're through the gate, Sergeant. It's rough, and it looks like we got a sea full of icebergs closing in to starboard – no, not that close yet, I think we'll outrun them. I'll wager the whole fleet's through now. Gods, those Perish catamarans look like they were made for this. Lucky bastards. Anyway, rumour is this won't be long, here in this realm – Sergeant?'

But the man was crawling away, heading for the hatch.

'Sergeant?'

'I said good news, Bottle. Like, we're all about to drop off the world's edge. Something like that.'

'Oh. Well,' he called out as the man slithered across the deck, 'there's seals!'
The night of the green storm far to the north, four Malazan dromons slid into the harbour of Malaz City, the flags upon their masts indicating that they were from the Jakatakan Fleet, whose task it was to patrol the seas from Malaz Island west, to the island of Geni and on to the Horn of the mainland. There had been clashes a few months past with some unknown fleet, but the invaders had been driven away, albeit at some cost. At full strength, the Jakatakan Fleet sailed twenty-seven dromons and sixteen resupply ships. It was rumoured that eleven dromons had been lost in the multiple skirmishes with the foreign barbarians, although Banaschar, upon hearing all this, suspected that the numbers were either an exaggeration or – in accordance with the policy of minimizing imperial losses – the opposite. The truth of the matter was, he didn't believe much of anything any more, no matter the source.

Coop's was crowded, with a lot of in and out as denizens repeatedly tramped outside to watch the northern night sky – where there was no night at all – then returned with still more expostulations, which in turn triggered yet another exodus. And so on.

Banaschar was indifferent to the rushing about – like dogs on the trail, darting from master to home and back again. Endless and brainless, really.

Whatever was going on up there was well beyond the horizon. Although, given that, Banaschar reluctantly concluded, it was big.

But far away, so far away he quickly lost interest, at least after the first pitcher of ale had been drained. In any case, the four dromons that had just arrived had delivered a score of castaways. Found on a remote reef island southwest of the Horn (and what, Banaschar wondered briefly, were the dromons doing out there?), they had been picked up, brought to Malaz Island with four ships that had been losing a battle with shipping water, and this very night the castaways had disembarked into the glorious city of Malaz.

Now finding castaways was not entirely uncommon, but what made these ones interesting was that only two of them were Malazans. As for the others ... Banaschar lifted his head from his cup, frowned across at his now regular drinking partner, Master Sergeant Braven Tooth, then over at the newcomers huddled round the long table at the back. The ex-priest wasn't alone in casting glances in that direction, but the castaways clearly weren't interested in conversation with anyone but themselves – and there didn't seem to be much of that, either, Banaschar noted.

The two Malazans were both drunk, the quiet kind, the miserable kind. The others were not drinking much – seven in all to share a single carafe of wine.

Damned unnatural, as far as Banaschar was concerned. But that in itself was hardly surprising, was it? Those seven were Tiste Andii.

'I know one of those two, you know,' Braven Tooth said.

'What?'

'Them Malazans. They saw me. Earlier, when they came in. One of them went white. That's how I could tell.'

Banaschar grunted. 'Most veterans who come in here do that the first time they see you, Braven Tooth. Some of them do that every time. How's that feel, b'the way? Striking terror in everyone you ever trained?'

'Feels good. Besides, it's not everyone I trained. Jus' most of 'em. I'm used to it.'

'Why don't you drag them two over here, then? Get their story – what in Hood's name are they doing with damned Tiste Andii, anyway? Of course, with the feel in the air outside, there's a good chance those fools won't last the night. Wickans, Seven Cities, Korelri, Tiste Andii – foreigners one and all. And the mob's got its nose up and hackles rising. This city is about to explode.'

'Ain't never seen this afore,' Braven Tooth muttered. 'This ... hate. The old empire was never like that. Damn, it was the bloody opposite. Look around, Banaschar, if y'can focus past that drink in your hand, and you'll see it. Fear, paranoia, closed minds and bared teeth. You voice a complaint out loud these days and you'll end up cut to pieces in some alley. Was never like this afore, Banaschar. Never.'
'Drag one over.'

'I heard the story already.'

'Really? Wasn't you sitting here wi'me all night tonight?'

'No, I was over there for most of a bell – you never noticed – I don't even think you looked up. You're a big sea sponge, Banaschar, and the more you pour in the thirstier you get.'

'I'm being followed.'

'So you keep saying.'

'They're going to kill me.'

'Why? They can just sit back and wait for you to kill yourself.'

'They're impatient.'

'So I ask again, Banaschar, why?'

'They don't want me to reach through to him. To Tayschrenn, you see. It's all about Tayschrenn, locked up there in Mock's Hold. They brought the bricks, but he's mixed the mortar. I got to talk to him, and they won't let me. They'll kill me if I even try.' He waved wildly towards the door. 'I head out, right now, and start walking to the Stairs, and I'm dead.'

'That damned secret of yours, that's what's going to kill you, Banaschar. It's what's killing you right now.'

'She's cursed me.'

'Who has?'

'D'rek, of course. The Worm in my gut, in my brain, the worm that's eating me from the inside out. So what was the story?'

Braven Tooth scratched the bristling hair beneath his throat, then leaned back. 'Marine recruit Mudslinger. Forget the name he started with, Mudslinger is the one I gave 'im. It fits, 'course. They always fit. He was a tough one, though, a survivor, and tonight's proof of that. The other one's named Gentur. Kanese, I think – not one of mine. Anyway, they was shipwrecked after a battle with the grey-skinned barbarians. Ended up on Drift Avalii, where things got real messy. Seems those barbarians, they was looking for Drift Avalii all along. Well, there were Tiste Andii living on it, and before anyone could spit there was a huge fight between them and the barbarians. An ugly one. Before long Mudslinger and the others with 'im were fighting alongside those Tiste Andii, along with someone named Traveller. The short of it is, Traveller told them all to leave, said he'd take on the barbarians by 'imself and anybody else around was jus' in the way. So they did. Leave, I mean. Only t'get hit by a damned storm, and what was left of 'em fetched up on an atoll, where they spent months drinking coconut milk and eating clams.' Braven Tooth reached for his tankard. 'And that's Mudslinger's story, when he was sober, which he's not any more. The one named Traveller, he's the one that interests me ... something familiar about him, the way 'Slinger d'scribes 'im, the way he fought – killing everything fast, wi'out breaking a sweat. Too bad he didn't come wi' these ones.'

Banaschar stared at the huge man opposite him. What was he talking about? Whatever it was, it went on, and on, and on. Travelling fast? Slingers and fights with barbarians. The man was drunk. Drunk and incomprehensible. 'So, what was Mud's story again?'

'I just told you.'

'And what about those Tiste Andii, Braven Tooth? They're going to get killed—'

'No they ain't. See the tallest one there, with the long white hair. His name is Nimander Golit. And that pretty woman beside him, that's Phaed, his first daughter. All seven of 'em are cousins, sisters, brothers, but it's Nimander who leads, since he's the oldest. Nimander says he is the first son of the Son.'
'The what?'

'The Son of Darkness, Banaschar. Know who that is? That's Anomander Rake. Look at 'em, they're all Rake's brood – grandchildren mostly, except for Nimander, who's father to a lot of 'em, but not all. Now, maybe someone's got a hate on for foreigners – you really think that someone would be stupid enough to go after the whelps of Anomander Rake?'

Banaschar turned slightly, stared over at the figures. He slowly blinked, then shook his head. 'Not unless they're suicidal.'

'Right, and that's something you'd know all about, ain't it?'

'So, if Anomander Rake is Nimander's father, who was the mother?'

'Ah, you're not completely blind, then. You can see, can't you? Different mothers, for some of 'em. And one of those mothers wasn't no Tiste Andii, was she? Look at Phaed—'

'I can only see the back of her head.'

'Whatever. I looked at her, and I asked her that very same question you just asked me.'

'What?'

'Who was your mother?"

'Mine?'

'And she smiled – and I nearly died, Banaschar, and I mean it. Nearly died. Bursting blood vessels in my brain, toppling over nearly died. Anyway, she told me, and it wasn't no Tiste Andii kind of name, and from the looks of her I'd say the other half was human, but then again, can you really tell with these things? Not really.'

'No, really, what was the name?'

'Lady Envy, who used to know Anomander Rake himself, and got her revenge taking his son as a lover. Messy, eh? But if she was anything like that Phaed there, with that smile, well, envy's the only word – for every other woman in the world. Gods below ... hey, Banaschar, what's wrong? You suddenly look real sick. The ale's not that bad, not like what we had last night, anyway. Look, if you're thinking of fillin' a plate on the tabletop, there ain't no plate, right? And the boards are warped, and that means it'll sluice onto my legs, and that'll get me very annoyed – for Hood's sake, man, draw a damned breath!'

Leaning on the scarred, stained bartop fifteen paces away, the man Banaschar called Foreigner nursed a flagon of Malaz Dark, a brew for which he had acquired a taste, despite the expense. He heard the ex-priest and the Master Sergeant arguing back and forth at a table behind him, something they had been doing a lot of lately. On other nights, Foreigner reflected, he would have joined them, leaning back to enjoy what would be an entertaining – if occasionally sad – performance.

But not tonight.

Not with them, sitting back there.

He needed to think, now, and think hard. He needed to come to a decision, and he sensed, with a tremor of fear, that upon that decision rode his destiny.

'Coop, another Dark here, will you?'

The carrack **Drowned Rat** looked eager to pull away from the stone pier south of the rivermouth as the tide tugged fitfully on its way out. Scrubbed hull, fresh paint, and a bizarre lateen rig and centre-stern steering oar had garnered the curious attention of more than a few sailors and fisher folk who'd wandered past in the last few days. Irritating enough, the captain mused, but Oponn was still smiling nice twin smiles, and before long
they’d be on their way, finally. Out of this damned city and the sooner the better.

First Mate Palet was lying curled up on the mid deck, still nursing the bruises and knocks he’d taken from a drunken mob the night before. The captain’s lizard gaze settled on him for a moment, before moving on. They were docked, trussed up neat, and Vole was perched in his oversized crow’s nest – the man was mad as a squirrel with a broken tail – and everything seemed about right, so right, in fact, that the captain’s nerves were a taut, tangled mess.

It wasn’t just the fever of malice afflicting damned near everyone – with all those acid rumours of betrayal and murder in Seven Cities, and now the unofficial pogrom unleashed against the Wickans – there was, in addition, all that other stuff.

Scratching at the stubble on his scalp, Cartheron Crust turned and fixed narrow eyes on Mock’s Hold. Mostly dark, of course. Faint glow from the gatehouse top of the Stairs – that would be Lubben, the old hunchback keeper, probably passed out by now as was his wont whenever the Hold had uninvited guests. Of course, all guests were uninvited, and even though a new Fist had arrived a month ago, that man Aragan had been posted here before and so he knew the way things worked best – and that was lying as low as you could, not once lifting your head above the parapet. Who knows? Aragan’s probably sharing that bottle with Lubben.

Uninvited guests … like High Mage Tayschrenn. Long ago, now, Crust had found himself in that snake’s company all too often, and he’d struggled hard not to do something somebody’d probably regret. Not me, though. The Emperor, maybe. Tayschrenn himself, definitely, but not me. He would dream of a moment alone, just the two of them. A moment, that was all he’d need. Both hands on that scrawny neck, squeeze and twist. Done. Simple. Problem solved.

What problem? That’s what Kellanved would have asked, in his usual apoplectic way. And Crust had an answer waiting. No idea, Emperor, but I’m sure there was one, maybe two, maybe plenty. A good enough reply, he figured, although Kellanved might not have agreed. Dancer would’ve, though. Hah.

‘Four dromons!’ Vole called down suddenly.

Crust stared up at the idiot. ‘We’re in the harbour! What did you expect? That’s it, Vole, no more sending your meals up there – haul your carcass down here!’

‘Cutting in from the north, Captain. ‘Top the masts … something glinting silver …’

Crust’s scowl deepened. It was damned dark out there. But Vole was never wrong. Silver … that’s not good. No, that’s plain awful. He strode over to Palet and nudged the man. ‘Get up. Send what’s left of the crew back to those warehouses – I don’t care who’s guarding them, bribe the bastards. I want us low in the water and scuttling outa here like a three-legged crab.’

The man looked up at him with owlish eyes. ‘Captain?’

‘Did they knock all sense from your brain, Palet? Trouble’s coming.’

Sitting up, the First Mate looked round. ‘Guards?’

‘No, a whole lot troubler.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like the Empress, you fool.’

Palet was suddenly on his feet. ‘Supplies, aye, sir. We’re on our way!’

Crust watched the fool scamper. The crew was drunk. Too bad for them. They were sorely undermanned, too. It’d been a bad idea, diving into the bay when old Ragstopper went down, what with all those sharks. Four good sailors had been lost that night. Good sailors, bad swimmers. Funny how that goes together.

He looked round once more. Damn, done forgot again, didn’t I? No dinghies. Well, there’s always
something.

Four dromons, visible now, rounding into the bay, backlit by one of the ugliest storms he'd ever seen. Well, not entirely true – he'd seen the like once before, hadn't he? And what had come of it? *Not a whole lot ... except, mat is, a mountain of otataral ...*

The lead dromon – Laseen's flagship, *The Surly*. Three in her wake. Three, that was a lot – *who in Hood's name has she brought with her? A damned army?*

Uninvited guests.

*Poor Aragan.*
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Who are these strangers, then, with their familiar faces? Emerging from the crowd with those indifferent eyes, and the blood streaming down from their hands. It is what was hidden before, masked by the common and the harmless, now wrenching features revealed in a conflagration of hate and victims tumble underfoot.

Who led and who followed and why do flames thrive in darkness and all gaze, insensate and uncomprehending, come the morning light, upon the legacy of unleashed spite? I am not fooled by wails of horror. I am not moved by expostulations of grief. For I remember the lurid night, the visage flashing in firelit puddles of blood was my own.

Who was this stranger, then, with that familiar face? Melting into the crowd in the fraught, chaotic heave, and the blood raging in the storm of my skull boils frantic as I plunge down and lay waste all these innocent lives, my hate at their weakness a cauldron overturned, whilst drowning in my own, this stranger, this stranger ...

On the Dawn I Take My Life
The Wickan Pogrom
Kayessan

As the longboat from the Jakatakan fleet's flagship drew up alongside, the commander and four marines quickly clambered aboard the Froth Wolf.

They were Untan, one and all, bedecked in elaborate, expensive armour, the commander tall, weak-chinned with a watery, uneasy look in his pale eyes. He saluted Admiral Nok first, and then the Adjunct.

'We were not expecting you for months, Adjunct Tavore.'

Arms crossed, Fist Keneb stood a short distance away, leaning against the mainmast. After the commander's words, Keneb shifted his attention to the marines. Is that parade kit you're wearing? And then he noticed their expressions of disdain and hatred as the soldiers stared over to where stood Nil and Nether. Keneb glanced round, then hesitated.

The Adjunct spoke, 'Your name, Commander?'

A slight bow. 'My apologies, Adjunct. I am Exent Hadar, of House Hadar in Unta, firstborn—'

'I know the family,' Tavore cut in, rather sharply. 'Commander Hadar, tell your marines to stand down immediately – if I see one more hand casually touch a sword grip they can swim back to your ship.'

The commander's pale eyes flicked to Admiral Nok, who said nothing.

Keneb relaxed – he had been about to walk over to strip the hides from those fools. Adjunct Tavore, you miss nothing, do you? Ever. Why do you continue to surprise me? No, wrong way of putting that – why am I constantly surprised?

'Apologies again,' Hadar said, his insincerity obvious as he gestured to his guards. 'There have been a succession of, uh, revelations—'

'Regarding what?'

'Wickan complicity in the slaughter of Pormqual's Loyal Army at Aren, Adjunct.'

Keneb stared at the man, dumbfounded. 'Complicity?' His voice was hoarse and the word barely made it out.

The Adjunct's expression was as fierce as Keneb had ever seen on the woman, but it was Admiral Nok who
spoke first. 'What insanity is this, Commander Hadar? The loyalty and service of the Wickans was and remains beyond reproach.'

A shrug. 'As I said, Admiral. Revelations.'

'Never mind that,' the Adjunct snapped. 'Commander, what are you doing patrolling these waters?'

'The Empress commanded that we extend our range,' Hadar replied, 'for two reasons. Foremost, there have been incursions from an unknown enemy in black warships. We have had six engagements thus far. Initially, our ship mages were not able to contend with the sorcery the black ships employed, and accordingly we suffered in the exchanges. Since then, however, we have increased the complement and the calibre of our own cadres. Negating the sorcery in the battles evened matters considerably.'

'When was the last encounter?'

'Two months past, Adjunct.'

'And the other reason?'

Another slight bow. 'Intercepting you, Adjunct. As I said, however, we were not expecting you for some time. Oddly enough, our precise position right now came by direct command from the Empress herself, four days ago. Needless to say, against this unseasonal gale, we were hard pressed to make it here in time.'

'In time for what?'

Another shrug. 'Why, it turns out, to meet you. It seems obvious,' he added with condescension, 'that the Empress detected your early arrival. In such matters, she is all-knowing, and that is, of course, only to be expected.'

Keneb watched as the Adjunct mulled on these developments, then she said, 'And you are to be our escort to Unat?'

'No, Adjunct. I am to instruct you to change the course of the imperial fleet.'

'To where?'

'Malaz City.'

'Why?'

Commander Hadar shook his head.

'Tell me, if you know,' Tavore said, 'where is the Empress right now?'

'Well, Malaz City, I would think, Adjunct.'

'See that marine on the left?' Kalam asked in a low whisper.

'What of him?' Quick Ben asked with a shrug.

'He's a Claw.'

They stood on the forecastle deck, watching the proceedings below. The air was fresh, warm, the seas surprisingly gentle despite the hard, steady wind. Damned near paradise, the assassin considered, after that wild three days in the raw, tumultuous warren of Togg and Fanderay. The ships of the fleet, barring those of the Perish, were badly battered, especially the transports. None had gone down, fortunately, nor had any sailor or marine been lost. A few dozen horses, alas, had broken legs during the storms, but such attrition was expected, and no-one begrudged fresh meat in the stew-pots. Now, assuming this wind stayed at their backs, Malaz Island was only two days away, maybe a touch more.
With his message delivered, Commander Hadar's haste to leave was pathetically obvious, and it seemed neither the Adjunct nor the Admiral was inclined to stretch out his stay.

As the visitors returned to their longboat, a voice spoke quietly behind Kalam and Quick Ben. 'Did I hear correctly? We are now sailing for Malaz City?'

Kalam fought down a shiver – he'd heard nothing. Again. 'Aye, Apsalar—'

But Quick Ben had wheeled round in alarm and, now, anger. 'The damned steps up here are right in front of us! How in Hood's name did you get there, Apsalar? Breathing down our damned backs!'

'Clearly,' the Kanese woman replied, her almond-shaped eyes blinking languidly, 'you were both distracted. Tell me, Kalam Mekhar, have you any theories as to why an agent of the Claw accompanied the Jakatakran commander?'

'Plenty, but I'm not sharing any of them with you.'

She studied him for a moment, then said, 'You are still undecided, aren't you?'

Oh how I want to hit her. Right here, right now. 'You don't know what you're talking about, Apsalar. And I don't, neither.'

'Well, that hardly makes sense—'

'You're right,' Quick Ben snapped, 'it doesn't. Now get out of our shadows, damn you!'

'High Mage, it occurs to me that you are under a certain misapprehension. The Hounds of Shadow, in G'danisban, were after you.'

'Opportunistic!'

'Certainly, if you care to believe that. In any case, it should then follow – even for one as immune to logic as you – that I acted then. Alone. The choice was mine, High Mage, and mine alone.'

'What's she talking about, Quick?' Kalam demanded.

But his friend was silent, studying the woman before him. Then he asked, 'Why?'

She smiled. 'I have my reasons, but at the moment, I see no reason to share any of them with you.'

Apsalar then turned away, walked towards the prow.

'It's just that, isn't it?' Quick Ben muttered under his breath.

'What do you mean?'

'Undecided, Kal. We're all undecided. Aren't we?' Then he swung round and looked back down at the Adjunct.

The assassin did the same.

Tavore and Nok were talking, but quietly, their words stolen by the wind.

'Now,' Quick Ben continued, 'is she?'

Undecided? Not about anything, it seems. Kalam grimaced. 'Malaz City. I didn't have much fun the last time I visited. Your skin crawling, Quick? Mine is. Crawling bad.'

'You notice something?' the wizard asked. 'That commander – he didn't ask a damned thing about the Perish ships with us. Now, that Claw, he must have made his report already, by warren, to Topper or the Empress herself. So ...'
'So, she knows we've got guests. Maybe that's why she doesn't want us sailing into Unta's harbour.'

'Right, Laseen's rattled.'

Then Kalam grunted. 'I just realized something else,' he said in a low voice.

'What?'

'The Adjunct, she sent the Destriant to her cabin. And she made no formal invitation to the commander the way she's supposed to – no, she made them all discuss things out here, in the open. Anyway, maybe the Adjunct didn't want the commander or that Claw to see Run'Thurvian, or talk to him, about anything.'

'She's no fool.'

'A damned game of Troughs between them, isn't it? Quick Ben, what is going on here?'

'We'll find out, Kal.'

'When?'

The High Mage scowled, then said, 'The moment, friend, we stop being undecided.'

Aboard the *Silanda*, Fiddler had crawled from the hold like a crippled rat, dishevelled, pale and greasy. He spied Bottle and slowly, agonizingly, made his way over. Bottle was feeding out line. There were shoals out there, and he'd seen fish leaping clear of whatever chased them beneath the surface. One of the Jakatakan dromons was sidling past to port, a rock's throw away, and the rest of the squad had lined up to give them a show.

Bottle shook his head, then glanced over as his sergeant arrived. 'Feeling any better?'

'I think so. Gods, I think that nightmare realm cured me.'

'You don't look any better.'

'Thanks, Bottle.' Fiddler pulled himself into a sitting position, then looked over at the rest of the squad. 'Hood's breath!' he exploded. 'What are you doing?!!'

Koryk, Smiles, Cuttle and Tarr had joined up with Deadsmell, Throatslitter and Widdershins, standing in a row at the rail, looking across at the passing dromon, and under each soldier's left arm was a Tiste Andii head.

At Fiddler's outburst, Gesler and Stormy appeared on deck.

Bottle watched them take it all in, then Gesler called out, 'Give 'em a wave!'

The soldiers complied, began waving cheerfully across at what seemed to be a mass of staring sailors and marines and – Bottle squinted – officers.

Smiles said, 'It's all right, Sergeant. We just thought they'd appreciate a change of scenery.'

'Who?'

'Why, these heads, of course.'

Then Stormy was running past, towards the stern, where he dragged down his breeches and sat over the rail, his back end hanging open, exposed. With a savage grunt, he began defecating.

And while his comrades lining the rail all turned to stare at the mad corporal, Bottle was transfixed by the ghastly expressions of delight on those severed heads. *Those smiles* – the line in Bottle's hands kept spinning out, then vanished, unnoticed, as sudden nausea clenched his gut.

And he bolted for the opposite rail.
Captain Kindly made a gagging sound. 'That is disgusting.'

Lieutenant Pores nodded. 'I'll say. Gods, what did that man eat to produce those?'

A crowd was gathering on the deck as laughing marines and sailors all watched the antics proceeding apace on the Silanda half a cable ahead. The Jakatakan dromon was now to port, a mass of onlookers on the decks, silent, watching.

'That is highly unusual,' Pores commented. 'They're not rising to the bait.'

'They look scared witless,' Kindly said.

'So those marines have got themselves a collection of heads,' Pores said, shrugging.

'You idiot. Those heads are still alive.'

'They're what?'

'Alive, Lieutenant. I have this from reliable sources.'

'Even so, sir, since when did Malazans get so soft?'

Kindly regarded him as he would a skewered grub. 'Your powers of observation are truly pathetic. That ship is filled with Untans. Coddled noble-born pups. Look at those damned uniforms, will you? The only stains they got on 'em is gull shit, and that's because the gulls keep mistaking them for dead, bloated seals.'

'Nice one, sir.'

'Another comment like that,' Kindly said, 'and I'll get the stitcher to sew up your mouth, Lieutenant. Ha, we're changing course.'

'Sir?'

'For Hood's sake, what are those fools doing?'

Pores followed his captain's glare, to the stern of their own ship, where two heavy infantry soldiers were seated side by side, their leggings round their ankles. 'I would hazard a guess, sir, that Hanfeno and Senny are adding their stone's worth.'

'Get back there and make them stop, Lieutenant. Now!'

'Sir?'

'You heard me! And I want those two on report!'

'Stop them, sir? How do I do that?'

'I suggest corks. Now move!'

Pores scrambled.

Oh please, please be finished before I arrive. Please ...

The send-off to the Jakatakan Fleet encompassed every Malazan ship, a cavalcade of defecation that brought seagulls for leagues round with mad shrieks and wheeling plunges. The Adjunct had not remained on deck for very long, but issued no orders to halt the proceedings. Nor did Admiral Nok, although Keneb noticed that the sailors of the dromon escorts and the transports did not participate. This gesture belonged exclusively to the Fourteenth Army.
And maybe it had some value. Hard to tell with things like this, Keneb knew.

The wind drove them onward, east by southeast now, and before a quarter bell was sounded, the Jakatakans were far behind.

Destriant Run’Thurvian had appeared earlier, and had watched the escapades of the marines on the surrounding ships. Frowning for some time, he eventually spotted Keneb and approached. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I am somewhat confused. Is there no honour between elements of the Mezla military?’

‘Honour? Not really, Destriant. Rivalries provide the lifeblood, although in this case matters proved somewhat one-sided, and for the reason for that you will have to look to the Silanda.’

A sage nod. ‘Of course, the ship woven in sorceries, where time itself is denied.’

‘Do you know the manner of those sorceries, Destriant?’

‘Kurald Emurlahn, Tellann, Telas and a residue of Toblakai, although in this latter case the nature of the power is ... uncertain. Of course,’ he added, ‘there is nothing unusual in that. Among the ancient Toblakai — according to our own histories — there could arise individuals, warriors, who became something of a warren unto themselves. Such power varies in its efficacy, and it would appear that this sort of blood talent was waning in the last generations of the Toblakai civilization, growing ever weaker. In any case,’ the Destriant added, shrugging, ‘as I said, a residue remains on this Silanda. Toblakai. Which is rather interesting, since it was believed that the giant race was extinct.’

‘There are said to be remnants,’ Keneb offered, ‘in the Fenn Range of north Quon Tali. Primitive, reclusive ...’

‘Oh yes,’ Run’Thurvian said, ‘of mixed bloods there are known examples, vastly diminished, of course. The Trell, for example, and a tribe known as the Barghast. Ignorant of past glories, as you suggest. Fist, may I ask you a question?’

‘Of course.’

‘The Adjunct Tavore. It appears that the relationship with her Empress has become strained. Have I surmised correctly? This is disturbing news, given what awaits us.’

Keneb looked away, then he cleared his throat. ‘Destriant, I have no idea what awaits us, although it seems that you do. As for the Empress, again, there is nothing I can imagine to give rise to mutual distrust. The Adjunct is the Hand of the Empress. An extension of Laseen’s will.’

‘The Empress would not be inclined, therefore,’ Run’Thurvian said, ‘to sever that hand, yes? I am relieved to hear this.’

‘Good ... why?’

‘Because,’ the Destriant said, turning away, ‘your Fourteenth Army will not be enough.’

If wood could be exhausted by unceasing strain, the ships of the imperial fleet were at their very limits, two bells out from Malaz Island on the night of the second day, when the wind suddenly fell away, a coolness coming into the air, and it seemed that every ship sagged, settling deeper into the swells, and now, in place of the hot dry gale, a softer breeze arrived.

Kalam Mekhar had taken to pacing the deck, restless, his appetite gone and a tightness gripping his guts. As he made his way aft for the thirtieth time since dusk, Quick Ben appeared alongside him.

‘Laseen’s waiting for us,’ the High Mage said. ‘And Tayschrenn’s there, like a scorpion under a rock. Kal, everything I’m feeling ...’

‘I know, friend.’

‘Like I did back outside Pale.’
They turned about and slowly walked forward. Kalam scratched at his beard. 'We had Whiskeyjack, back then. Even Dujek. But now...' He growled under his breath, then rolled his shoulders.

'Ain't seen you do that in a long time, Kal, that shrug of yours.'

'Well.'

'That's what I thought.' The High Mage sighed, then he reached out and grasped the assassin's arm as a figure emerged from the gloom before them.

The Adjunct. 'High Mage,' she said in a low voice, 'I want you to cross over to the Silanda, by warren.'

'Now?'

'Yes. Is that a problem?'

Kalam sensed his friend's unease, and the assassin cleared his throat. 'Adjunct. The Imperial High Mage Tayschrenn is, uh, dead ahead.'

'He does not quest,' she replied. 'Does he, Quick Ben?'

'No. How did you know that?'

She ignored the question. 'By warren, immediately, High Mage. You are to collect Fiddler, and the soldier named Bottle. Inform the sergeant that the time has come.'

'Adjunct?'

'For a game. He will understand. Then, the three of you are to return here, where you will join myself, Kalam, Fist Keneb, T'amber and Apsalar, in my cabin. You have a quarter of a bell, High Mage. Kalam, come with me now, please.'

*One of Fiddler's games.*

*Gods below, a game.*

A moccasined foot thumped into Bottle's side. Grunting, he sat up, still mostly asleep. 'That you, Smiles? Not now ...' but no, it wasn't Smiles. His heart thumped awake in a savage drumbeat. 'Oh, High Mage, uh. Um. What is it?'

'On your feet,' Quick Ben hissed. 'And quietly, damn you.'

'Too late,' muttered Koryk from his bedroll nearby.

'It had better not be, soldier,' the wizard said. 'Another sound from you and I'll push your head up the next soldier's backside.'

A head lifted from blankets. 'That'd beat the view I got now ... sir.' Then he settled back down.

Bottle climbed to his feet, chilled yet sweating.

And found himself looking at Fiddler's miserable face, hovering there behind the High Mage. 'Sergeant?'

'Just follow us aft, Bottle.'

The three of them picked their way clear of the sleeping forms on the mid deck.

There was a strange scent in the air, Bottle realized.

Familiar, yet ... 'Sergeant, you're carrying that new Deck of yours ...'
'You and your damned rat,' muttered Fiddler. 'I knew it, you lying bastard.'

'Wasn't me,' Bottle began, then fell quiet. Gods below, even for me that was lame. Try something better. 'Just looking out for you, Sergeant. Your shaved knuckle in the hole, that's me.'

'Hah, where have I heard that before, eh Quick?'

'Quiet, you two. We're going across now. Grab belts ...'

Bottle blinked, and found himself on another deck, and directly ahead, steps leading down. Abyss take me, that was fast. Fast and ... appalling. Quick Ben waved them into his wake as he descended, ducking the frame, then halting three strides down the corridor, knocking upon a door to his left. It opened at once.

T'amber, the eyes that gave her her name scanning the three men cramped in the narrow corridor. Then she stepped back.

The Adjunct stood behind her chair at the map-table. The rest were seated, and Bottle stared wildly from one to the next. Fist Keneb. Apsalar. Kalam Mekhar.

A low moan from Fiddler.

'Sergeant,' the Adjunct said, 'you have your players.'

Players?

Oh.

Oh no.

'I really don't think this is a good idea,' the sergeant said.

'Perhaps,' the Adjunct replied.

'I agree,' T'amber said. 'Or, rather, my participation ... as a player. As I said earlier, Tavore—'

'Nonetheless,' the Adjunct cut in, drawing out the empty chair opposite the one reserved for Fiddler and sitting herself down on Keneb's left. She pulled her gloves free. 'Explain the rules, please.'

Keneb watched as Fiddler cast helpless, desperate looks to both Kalam and Quick Ben, but neither would meet his eyes, and both were clearly miserable. Then the sergeant slowly walked over to the last chair. He settled into it. 'That's just it, Adjunct, there ain't no rules, except those I make up as I go.'

'Very well. Begin.'

Fiddler scratched at his greying beard, his eyes fixing on T'amber who sat to the Adjunct's left, directly opposite Keneb. 'This is your Deck,' he said, lifting it into view and setting it down on the tabletop. 'It has new cards in it.'

'Your point?' the young woman demanded.

'Just this. Who in Hood's name are you?'

A shrug. 'Does it matter?'

A grunt from Kalam Mekhar on Keneb's right. Beyond the assassin, on the same side and immediately to Fiddler's left was Apsalar. Bottle was on the sergeant's right, with the High Mage beside him. The only one who really doesn't belong is me. Where's Blistig? Nok? Temul, Nil and Nether?

'Last chance,' Fiddler said to the Adjunct. 'We stop this now—'

'Begin, Sergeant.'
'Bottle, find us some wine.'

'Sergeant?'

'First rule. Wine. Everybody gets a cup. Except the dealer, he gets rum. Go to it, Bottle.'

As the young soldier rose Fiddler collected the cards. 'Player on dealer's right has to serve drinks during the first hand.' He flung out a card, face-down, and it slid crookedly to halt in front of Quick Ben. 'High Mage has last card. Last card's dealt out first, but not shown until the end.'

Bottle came back with cups. He set the first one down in front of the Adjunct, then T’amber, Keneb, Quick, Kalam, Apsalar, Fiddler and finally one into the place before his empty chair. As he returned with two jugs, one of wine and the other Falari rum, Fiddler held up a hand and halted him.

In quick succession the sergeant flung out cards, matching the order Bottle had used in setting down the cups.

Suddenly, eight face-up cards marked the field, and Fiddler, gesturing Bottle over with the rum, began talking. 'Dealer gets Soldier of High House Life but it's bittersweet, meaning it's for him and him alone, given this late hour. Empty chair gets Weaver of Life and she needs a bath but nobody's surprised by that. So we got two Life's to start.' Fiddler watched as Bottle poured rum into his cup. 'And that's why Kalam's looking at an Unaligned. Obelisk, the Sleeping Goddess - you're getting a reversed field, Kal, sorry but there's nothing to be done for it.' He downed his rum and held out his cup again, interrupting Bottle's efforts to fill the others with wine. 'Apsalar's got Assassin of High House Shadow, oh, isn't that a surprise. It's the only card she gets—'

'You mean I win?' she asked, one brow lifting sardonically.

'And lose, too. Nice move, interrupting me like that, you're catching on. Now, nobody else say a damned thing unless you want to up the ante.' He drank down his second cupful. 'Poor Quick Ben, he's got Lifeslayer to deal with, and that puts him in a hole, but not the hole he thinks he's in – a different hole. Now Tamber, she's opened the game with that card. Throne, and it's shifting every which way. The pivot card, then—'

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'What's a pivot card?' Bottle asked, finally sitting down.

'Bastard – knew I couldn't trust you. It's the hinge, of course. Finish that wine – you got to drink rum now. You're a sharp one, ain't you? Now Fist Keneb, well, that's a curious one. Lord of Wolves, the throne card of High House War, and aren't they looking baleful – Fist, where's Grub hiding these days?'

'On Nok's ship,' Keneb replied, bewildered and strangely frightened.

'Well, that knocks you outta the game, though you still get four more cards, since we've made a course correction and the northeast headland's rising up two pegs to starboard. In seventy heartbeats we'll be sliding closest to that rocky coast, and Nok's ship will be even closer, and Grub will dive overboard. He's got three friends living in the caves in the cliff and here are their cards—' Three more skidded out to just beyond the centre of the table. 'Crown, Sceptre, Orb. Hmm, let's ignore those for now.'

Keneb half-rose. 'Diving overboard?'

'Relax, he'll be back. So, we get to the Adjunct's card. House of War, Guardians of the Road, or the Dead – title's uncertain so take your pick.' He threw another card and it slid up beside it. 'Oponn. As I thought. Decisions yet to be made. Will it be the Push or the Pull? And what's that got to do with this one?' A skitter, ending up in the middle, opposite both Kalam and Quick Ben – 'Herald of High House Death. A distinctly inactive and out-of-date card in this field, but I see a Rusty Gauntlet—'

'A what?' demanded Kalam Mekhar.

'Right here before me. A new drink that Bottle in his inebriated state just invented. Rum and wine – half and half, soldier, fill us up – you too, that's what you get for making that face.'

Keneb rubbed at his own face. He'd taken but a single mouthful of the wine, but he felt drunk. Hot in here.
He started as four cards appeared in a row in front of the one already before him.

'Spinner of Death, Queen of Dark, Queen of Life and, ho, the King in Chains. Like hopping stones across a stream, isn't it? Expecting to see your wife any time soon, Fist? Forget it. She's set you aside for an Untan noble, and my, if it isn't Exent Hadar – I bet he kept his gaze averted back then, probably ignored you outright, that's both guilt and smugness, you know. Must have been the weak chin that stole her heart – but look at you, sir, you look damned relieved and that's a hand that tops us all and even though you were out when it comes to winning you're back in when it comes to losing, but in this case you win when you lose, so relax.'

'Well,' muttered Bottle, 'hope I nev' win one a theez'ands.'

'No,' Fiddler said to him, 'you got it easy. She plays and she takes, and so—' A card clattered before the owl-eyed soldier, 'Deathslayer. You can sleep now, Bottle, you're done as done for the night.'

The man's eyes promptly closed and he slid down from his chair, the piece of furniture scraping back. Keneb heard the man's head thump on the boards, once.

Yes, that'd be nice. Exent Hadar. Gods, woman, really!

'So how does Kalam get from Herald Death to Obelisk? Let's see. Ah, King of High House Shadows! That shifty slime bung, oh, doesn't he look smug! Despite the sweat on his upper lip – who's gone all chilled in here? Hands up, please.'

Reluctantly ... Kalam, T'amber, then Apsalar all lifted hands.

'Well, that's ugly as ugly gets – you've got the bottles now, Apsalar, now that Bottle's corked. This one's for you, T'amber. Virgin of Death, as far as you go. You're out, so relax. Kalam's cold, but he don't get another card 'cause he don't need one and now I know who gets pushed and who gets pulled and I'll add the name to the dirge to come. Now for the hot bloods. Quick Ben gets the Consort in Chains but he's from Seven Cities and he just saved his sister's life so it's not as bad as it could've been. Anyway, that's it for you. And so, who does that leave?'

Silence for a moment. Keneb managed to lift his leaden head, frowning confusedly at the scatter of cards all over the table.

'That would be me and you, Sergeant,' the Adjunct said in a low voice.

'You cold?' Fiddler asked her, drinking down yet another cup of Rusty Gauntlet.

'No.'

'Hot?'

'No.'

Fiddler nodded, slamming his empty cup down for Apsalar to refill with wine and rum. 'Aye,' He floated a card down the length of the table. It landed atop the first card. 'Master of the Deck. Ganoes Paran, Adjunct. Your brother. Even cold iron, Tavore Paran, needs tempering.' He lifted up another card and set it down before him. 'Priest of Life, hah, now that's a good one. Game's done.'

'Who wins?' the Adjunct, her face pale as candlewax, asked in a whisper.

'Nobody,' Fiddler replied. 'That's Life for you.' He suddenly rose, tottered, then staggered for the door.

'Hold it!' Quick Ben demanded behind him. 'There's this face-down card in front of me! You said it closes the game!'

'It just did,' mumbled the sergeant as he struggled with the latch.

'Do I turn it over, then?'
'No.'

Fiddler stumbled out into the corridor and Keneb listened to the man's ragged footsteps receding towards the stairs leading to the deck. The Fist, shaking his head, pushed himself upright. He looked at the others.

No-one else had moved.

Then, with a snort, Apsalar rose and walked out. If she was as drunk as Keneb felt, she did not show any signs of it.

A moment later both Quick Ben and Kalam followed.

Under the table, Bottle was snoring.

The Adjunct and T'amber, Keneb slowly realized, were both looking at the unturned card. Then, with a hiss of frustration, Tavore reached out and flipped it over. After a moment, she half-rose and leaned forward on the table to read its title. 'Knight of Shadow. I have never heard of such a card. T'amber, who, what did you—'

'I didn't,' T'amber interrupted.

'You didn't what?'

She looked up at the Adjunct. 'Tavore, I have never seen that card before, and I certainly didn't paint it.'

Both women were silent again, both staring down at the strange card. Keneb struggled to focus on its murky image. 'That's one of those Greyskins,' he said.

'Tiste Edur,' T'amber murmured.

'With a spear,' the Fist continued. 'A Greyskin, like the ones we saw on those black ships ...' Keneb leaned back, his head swimming. 'I don't feel very well.'

'Please stay for a moment, Fist. T'amber, what just happened here?'

The other woman shook her head. 'I have never seen a field laid in such a manner. It was ... chaotic – sorry, I did not mean that in an elemental sense. Like a rock bouncing down a gorge, ricocheting from this and that, yet, everywhere it struck, it struck true.'

'Can you make sense of it?'

'Not much. Not yet.' She hesitated, scanning the cards scattered all over the map-table. 'Oponn's presence was ... unexpected.'

'The push or the pull,' Keneb said. 'Someone's undecided about something, that's what Fiddler said. Who was it again?'

'Kalam Mekhar,' the Adjunct replied. 'But the Herald of Death intervenes—'

'Not the Herald,' cut in T'amber, 'but an inactive version, a detail I believe is crucial.'

Muted shouts from beyond announced the sighting of Malaz Harbour. The Adjunct faced Keneb. 'Fist, these are your orders for this night. You are in command of the Fourteenth. No-one is to disembark, barring those I will dispatch on my own behalf. With the exception of the Froth Wolf all other ships are to remain in the harbour itself – all commands directing the fleet to tie up at a pier or jetty are to be ignored until I inform you otherwise.'

'Adjunct, any such orders, if they reach me, will be from the Empress herself. I am to ignore those?'

'You are to misunderstand, Fist. I leave the details of that misunderstanding to your imagination.'

'Adjunct, where will you be?'
The woman studied him for a moment, then it seemed she reached a decision. ‘Fist Keneb, the Empress awaits me in Mock’s Hold. I expect she will not wait until morning to issue her summons.’ A flicker of emotion in her face. The soldiers of the Fourteenth Army do not return as heroes, it would appear. I will not expose their lives to unnecessary risks. In particular I speak of the Wickans and the Khundryl Burned Tears. As for the Perish, the nature of their alliance depends upon my conversation with the Empress. Unless circumstances warrant a change, I assume their disposition rests with Laseen, but I must await her word on that. Ultimately, Fist, it is for Mortal Sword Krughava – do the Perish disembark and present to the Empress as they did with us, or, if events turn unfortunate, do they leave? My point is this, Keneb, they must be free to choose.’

‘And Admiral Nok’s view on that?’

‘We are agreed.’

‘Adjunct,’ said Keneb, ‘if the Empress decides to attempt to stay the Perish, we could end up with a battle in Malaz Harbour. Malazan against Malazan. This could start a damned civil war.’

Tavore frowned. ‘I do not anticipate anything so extreme, Fist.’

But Keneb persisted. ‘Forgive me, but I believe it is you who misunderstand. The Perish swore service to you, not the Empress.’

‘She will not listen to that,’ T’amber said, with an unexpected tone of frustration in her voice, even as she walked to where Bottle slept. A kick elicited a grunt, then a cough. ‘Up, soldier,’ T’amber said, seemingly unmindful of the glare the Adjunct had fixed upon her.

No you fool, Keneb, hardly unmindful.

‘You have your orders, Fist,’ Tavore said.

‘Aye, Adjunct. Do you wish me to drag this marine here out with me?’

‘No. I must speak with Bottle in private. Go now, Keneb. And thank you for attending this night.’

I’m fairly certain I had no choice. At the doorway he looked back once more at the cards. Lord of Wolves, Spinner of Death, Queens of Dark and Life, and the King in Chains. Lord of Wolves ... that has to be the Perish.

Gods below, I think it’s begun.

On the harbour-facing wall of Mock’s Hold, Pearl stood at the parapet, watching the dark shapes of the imperial fleet slowly swing round into the calm waters of the bay. Huge transports, like oversized bhederin, and the dromon escorts on the flanks lean as wolves. The Claw’s eyes narrowed as he attempted to make out the foreign ships in the midst of the others. Enormous, twin-hulled ... formidable. There seemed to be a lot of them.

How had they come here so quickly? And how did the Empress know that they would? The only possibility in answer to the first question was: by warren. Yet, who among the Adjunct’s retinue could fashion a gate of such power and breadth? Quick Ben? Pearl did not think that likely. That bastard liked his secrets, and he liked playing both a weakling and something considerably deadlier, but neither conceit impressed Pearl. No, Tavore’s High Mage didn’t have what was necessary to open such a massive rift.

Leaving those damned foreigners. And that was very troubling indeed. Perhaps it might prove a propitious moment for some kind of pre-emptive, covert action. Which would, now that the Empress had arrived, be possible after all. And expedient – for we have no idea who has now come among us, right to the heart of the empire. A foreign navy, arriving virtually unopposed ... within striking distance of the Empress herself.

It was going to be a busy night.

‘Pearl.’
The voice was low, yet he did not need to turn round to know who had spoken. He knew, as well, that Empress Laseen would frown disapprovingly should he turn to face her. Odd habits, that way. No, just paranoia. 'Good evening, Empress.'

'Does this view please you?'

Pearl grimaced. 'She has arrived. In all, well timed for everyone concerned.'

'Do you look forward to seeing her again?'

'I travelled in her company for some time, Empress.'

'And?'

'And, to answer your question, I am ... indifferent.'

'My Adjunct does not inspire loyalty?'

'Not with me, Empress. Nor, I think, with the soldiers of the Fourteenth Army.'

'And yet, Pearl, has she failed them? Even once?'

'Y'Ghatan—'

The seemingly disembodied voice interrupted him. 'Do not be a fool. This is you and I, Pearl, speaking here. In absolute private. What occurred at Y'Ghatan could not have been anticipated, by anyone. Given that, Adjunct Tavore's actions were proper and, indeed, laudable.'

'Very well,' Pearl said, remembering that night of flames ... the distant screams he could hear from inside his tent – when in my anger and hurt, I hid, like some child. 'Facts aside, Empress, the matter hinges upon how one is perceived.'

'Assuredly so.'

'Adjunct Tavore rarely emerges from an event – no matter how benign or fortuitous – untarnished. And no, I do not understand why this should be so.'

'The legacy of Coltaine.'

Pearl nodded in the darkness. Then, he frowned. Ah, Empress, now I see ... 'And so, the dead hero is ... unmanned. His name becomes a curse. His deeds, a lie. No, damn you, I was close enough to know otherwise. No. 'Empress, it will not work.'

'Will it not?'

'No. Instead, we all are tainted. Faith and loyalty vanish. All that gifts us with pride becomes stained. The Malazan Empire ceases to have heroes, and without heroes, Empress, we will self-destruct.'

'You lack faith, Pearl.'

'In what, precisely?'

'The resilience of a civilization.'

'The faith you suggest seems more a wilful denial, Empress. Refusing to acknowledge the symptoms because it's easier that way. Complacency serves nothing but dissolution.'

'I may be many things,' Laseen said, 'but complacent is not one of them.'

'Forgive me, Empress, I did not mean to suggest that.'

'That fleet of catamarans,' she said after a moment, 'looks rather ominous. Can you sense the power
emanating from it?"

'Somewhat.'

'Does it not follow, given their appearance, Pearl, that in allying themselves with Adjunct Tavore, these foreigners perceived in her something we do not? I wonder what it might be.'

'I cannot imagine their motives, Empress, for I have yet to meet them.'

'Do you wish to, Pearl?'

As I anticipated. 'In truth, those motives are of little interest to me.'

'It would seem that not much is these days, Pearl. With you.'

And who has made that particular report, Empress? He shrugged, said nothing.

'The fleet is anchoring in the bay,' the Empress suddenly said, and she stepped up to stand beside Pearl, her gloved hands resting on the battered stone. 'There, two ships only, sliding forward to dock. What does she believe, to have issued such orders? And, perhaps more significantly, why has Admiral Nok not countermanded her – the signal flags are lit, after all. There can be no mistaking my command.'

'Empress,' said Pearl, 'there are not enough berths for this fleet in the entire harbour. It may be that the ships will dock in a particular order—'

'No.'

He fell silent, but he could feel sweat prickling beneath his clothes.

'Her first move,' the Empress whispered, and there was something like excitement – or dark satisfaction – in her tone.

A squeal sounded from the weather vane atop the tower behind them, and Pearl shivered. Aye, on a night with no wind ... He looked down upon the city, and saw torchlight in the streets. Sparks to tinder, the word of the arrival in the bay races from mouth to mouth, eager as lust. The Wickans have returned, and now the mob gathers ... the rage awakens.

Thus, Empress – you need those ships to close, you need the lines drawn fast.

You need the victims to disembark, to bring the flames to a roar.

She turned about then. 'Follow me.'

Back along the watch-mount, across the causeway span to the keep itself. Her strides sure, almost eager. Beneath the arched entranceway, between the two cloaked, hooded forms of Claws – he felt their warrens held open, power roiling invisibly from their unseen hands.

A long, poorly lit corridor, the pavestones humped where subsurface settling had occurred, marking where an enormous crack was riven through the entire fortress. One day, this whole damned place will tumble into the bay, and good riddance. Of course, the engineers and mages had assured everyone that such a risk was half a century away, or longer. Too bad.

An intersection, the Empress leading him to the left – oh yes, she was familiar with this place. Where she had, years ago, assassinated the Emperor and Dancer. Assassination. If you could call it that. More like inadvertently aided and abetted. Along another canted corridor, and finally to the doors of a meeting chamber. Where stood two more Claws, the one on the left turning upon sighting them and tugging open the left door, in time for the Empress to pass within without change of pace.

Pearl followed, his steps suddenly slowing as soon as he stepped into the room.

Before him, a long T-shaped table. A tribunal arrangement. He found himself at its intersection. A raised
chair marked the head, up the length of the axis, and that modest throne was flanked by figures already seated, although they both rose with Laseen's arrival.

Mallick Rel.

And Korbolo Dom.

Pearl struggled to keep the disgust from his face. Immediately before him were the backs of three chairs along the horizontal span. He hesitated. 'Where, Empress,' he asked, 'shall I sit?'

Settling into the throne, she regarded him for a moment, then one thin brow rose. 'Pearl, I do not expect you to be present. After all, you indicated you had no particular interest in seeing the Adjunct again, and so I shall relieve you of that burden.'

'I see. Then what would you have me do?'

The Jhistal priest on her right cleared his throat, then said, 'A burdensome but essential mission, Pearl, falls upon you. Organization is required, yes? The dispatch of a Hand, which you will find assembled at the Gate. A solitary killing. A drunkard who frequents Coop's Hanged Man Inn. His name: Banaschar. Thereafter, you may return to your quarters to await further instruction.'

Pearl's eyes remained fixed on the Empress, locked with her own, but she gave nothing away, as if daring him to ask what he so longed to: Does a Claw take his orders from a Jhistal priest of Mael now? A man delivered here in chains not so long ago? But, he knew, her silence gave him his answer. He broke his gaze from her and studied Korbolo Dom. The Napan bastard was wearing the regalia of a High Fist. Seeing the man's smug, contemptuous expression, Pearl's palms itched. Two knives, my favourite ones, slowly slicing that face away – all of it – gods, never mind that – I could bury a blade in his damned throat right now – maybe I'd be fast enough, maybe not. That's the problem. The hidden Claw in this room will take me down, of course, but maybe they're not anticipating ... no, don't be a fool, Pearl. He glanced once more at the Empress and something in her look told him she had comprehended, in full, the desires with which he struggled ... and was amused.

Still, he hesitated. Now was the time, he realized, to speak out against this. To seek to convince her that she'd invited two vultures, perched now on each shoulder, and what they hungered for was not the ones who would in a short time be seated before them – no, they wanted the throne they flanked. And they will kill you, Laseen. They will kill you.

'You may now go,' Mallick Rel said in a sibilant voice.

'Empress,' Pearl forced himself to say, 'please, consider well Tavore's words this night. She is your Adjunct, and nothing has changed that. No-one can change that—'

'Thank you for the advice, Pearl,' Laseen said.

He opened his mouth to add more, then closed it again. He bowed to his Empress, turned about and strode from the chamber. And so, Pearl, you fling it into Tavore's lap. All of it. You damned coward.

Still, who killed Lostara Yil? Well, Adjunct, such disregard ever comes home to roost.

So be it. Tonight belonged to them. Korbolo Dom he could take another night, at his leisure, and yes indeed, he would do just that. And maybe that grinning lizard of a priest as well. Why not? Topper was missing, probably dead. So, Pearl would act, in the name of the empire. Not in Laseen's name, but in the empire's, and this was one instance – clearer than any other he could think of – where the two loyalties clashed. But, as ever with the Claw, as with you once, long ago, Empress, the choice is obvious. And necessary.

For all the bravado of his thoughts, as he made his way down to the courtyard, another voice whispered over and over, cutting through again and again. One word, burning like acid, one word ...

Coward.
Scowling, Pearl descended the levels of the keep. A Hand was waiting, to be given the task of assassinating a drunk ex-priest. And in this, as well, Pearl had waited too long. He could have forced things into the open, reached through to Tayschrenn – that bastard had virtually entombed himself, never mind that nest of hidden helpers. Oh, the Imperial High Mage wanted to be close to things. Just not involved.

Poor Banaschar, a haunted, befuddled scholar who simply wanted to talk to an old friend. But Mallick Rel did not want Tayschrenn disturbed. \textit{Because the Jhistal priest has plans.}

Was Laseen truly a fool? There was no possible way she trusted them. So, what was the value in placing those two men in that chamber? To unbalance Tavore? \textit{Unbalance? More like a slap in the face. Is that really necessary, Empress? Never mind Tavore, you cannot just use men like Mallick Rel and Korbolo Dom. They will turn on you, like the vipers they are.}

The risk in unleashing false rumours was when they proved too successful, trapping the liar in the lie, and Pearl began to realize something ... a possibility. To ruin the name of Coltaine, that of his enemy must be raised. Korbolo Dom, from traitor to hero. Somehow ... no, I \textit{don't want to know the details}. Laseen could not then execute or even imprison a hero, could she? Indeed, she'd have to promote him. \textit{Empress, you have trapped yourself. Now, I cannot believe you are not aware of it ...}

His steps slowed. He had reached the main floor, was ten paces from the postern door that would take him out along the base of the wall, a path of shadows leading him to the Gate.

\textit{What do you seek to tell your Adjunct, then? The extremity of the danger you are in? Do you ask Tavore ... for help? Will she, upon walking into that chamber, be in any condition to see and understand your plea? For Hood's sake, Laseen, this could go very, very wrong.}

Pearl halted. He could do what was necessary, right now. Walk to the east tower and kick down Tayschrenn's door. And tell the fool what he needed to hear. He could—

Two hooded figures stepped into view before him. Claws. Both bowed, then the one on the left spoke. 'Claw, we are informed that our target is ensconced in the Hanged Man Inn. There is a piss trough in the alley behind it, which he will frequent throughout the night.'

'Yes,' Pearl said, suddenly exhausted. 'That would be ideal.'

The two cowled figures before him waited.

'There is more?' Pearl asked.

'Such matters are for you to command.'

'What matters?'

'Sir, killing undesirables.'

'Yes. Go on.'

'Just that, sir. This target was delivered to us ... from elsewhere. From one who expected unquestioned compliance.'

Pearl's eyes narrowed, then he said, 'This assassination tonight ... you would not accede to it without my direct command.'

'We seek ... affirmation.'

'Did not the Empress herself confirm the Jhistal's words?'

'Sir, she did not. She ... said nothing.'

'Yet she was present.'
'She was.'

Now what am I to make of that? Was she just feeding out enough rope? Or was she, too, frightened of Tayschrenn and so was pleased to unleash Mallick Rel on Banaschar? Damn! I don’t know enough about all of this. No choice, then, for now. 'Very well. The command is given.'

The Claw, Mallick Rel, are not yours. And the Empress has ... abstained. No, it seems that, until – or if – Topper returns, the Claw are mine. Convenient as well, Laseen, that you brought six hundred with you ...

The two assassins bowed, then departed through the postern door.

Then again, why did it feel as if he was the one being used? And worse, why did it seem that he no longer cared? No, it was well. Tonight he would not think, simply obey. Tomorrow, well, that was another matter, wasn’t it? Tomorrow, then, I will kick through what’s left. And decide what needs to be decided. There you have it, Empress. Tomorrow, the new Clawmaster once more cleans house. And maybe ... maybe that is what you ask from me. Or you have asked it already, for it wasn’t just the Adjunct for whom you assembled that tribunal, was it? You just gave me command of six hundred assassin-mages, didn’t you? What else would they be for?

The truth was, he could not guess the mind of Empress Laseen, and in that he most certainly was not alone.

Nerves slithered awake in his stomach, born of sudden fears he could not comprehend. Six hundred ...

Face it, Pearl. The Adjunct did not kill Lostara. You did. You sent her away, and she died. And that’s that.

But that changes nothing. It makes no real difference what I do now.

Let them all die.

Pearl turned about and made his way to his rooms. To await more orders. Six hundred killers to unleash ...

but upon whom?

Hellian decided she hated rum. She wanted something else, something not so sweet, something better suited to her nature. It was dark, the wind warm and humid but falling off, and the harbourfront of Malaz seemed to whisper an invitation, like a lover’s breath on the back of her neck.

The sergeant stood watching as the Froth Wolf moved ahead of the rest of the ships, the Silanda following in its wake. Yet, from all around now came the liquid rattle of anchor chains sliding down, and the craft beneath her was tugged to a halt. Staring wildly about, Hellian cursed. 'Corporal,' she said.

'Me?' asked Touchy behind her.

'Me?' asked Brethless.

'That’s right, you. What’s going on here? Look, there’s soldiers on the jetties, and well-wishers. Why aren’t we heading in? They’re waving! Hellian waved back, but it was unlikely they could see that – there were hardly any lights from the fleet at all. ‘Gloom and gloom,’ she muttered, ‘like we was some beaten dog creeping home.’

‘Or like it’s real late,’ Brethless said, ‘and you was never supposed to be with your mother’s friend at all especially when Ma knows and she’s waiting up with that dented skillet but sometimes, you know, older women, they come at you like a fiend and what can you do?’

‘Not like that at all, you idiot,’ Touchy hissed. ‘More like that daughter of that priest and gods below you’re running but there ain’t no escaping curses like those, not ones from a priest, anyway, which means your life is doomed for ever and ever, as if Burn cares a whit she’s sleeping anyway, right?’

Hellian turned round and stared at a space directly between the two men. ‘Listen, Corporal, make up your damned mind, but then again don’t bother. I wasn’t interested. I was asking you a question, and if you can’t answer then don’t say nothing.’

The two men exchanged glances, then Brethless shrugged. ‘We ain’t disembarking, Sergeant,’ he said.
'Word's just come.'

'Are they mad? Of course we're disembarking – we've just sailed a million leagues. Five million, even. We been through fires and storms and green lights in the sky and nights with the shakes and broken jaws and that damned rhizan piss they called wine. That's Malaz City there, right there, and that's where I'm going, Corporal Brethy Touchless, and I don't care how many arms you got, I'm going and that's that.' She swung about, walked forward, reached the rail, pitched over and was suddenly gone.

Brethless and Touchy stared at each other again, as a heavy splash sounded.

'Now what?' Touchy demanded.

'She's done drowned herself, hasn't she?'

'We'd better report it to somebody.'

'We do that and we're in real trouble. We was standing right here, after all. They'll say we pushed her.'

'But we didn't!'

'That don't matter. We're not even trying to save her, are we?'

'I can't swim!'

'Me neither.'

'Then we should shout an alarm or something.'

'You do it.'

'No, you.'

'Maybe we should just go below, tell people we went looking for her but we didn't never find her.'

At that they both paused and looked round. A few figures moving in the gloom, sailors doing sailor things.

'Nobody saw or heard nothing.'

'Looks like. Well, that's good.'

'Isn't it. So, we go below now, right? Throw up our hands and say nothing.'

'Not nothing. We say we couldn't find her nowhere.'

'Right, that's what I mean. Nothing is what I mean, I mean, about her going over the side, that sort of nothing.'

A new voice from behind them: 'You two, what are you doing on deck?'

Both corporals turned. 'Nothing,' they said in unison.

'Get below, and stay there.'

They hurried off.

'Three ashore,' the young, foppishly attired figure said, his eyes fixed on the knuckle dice where they came to a rest on the weathered stone.

His twin stood facing the distant, looming bulk of Mock's Hold, the night's wind caressing the gaudy silks about her slim form.

'You see how it plays out?' her brother asked, collecting the dice with a sweep of one hand. 'Tell me truly,
have you any idea – any idea at all – of how mightily I struggled to retain our card during that horrendous
game? I'm still weak, dizzy. He wanted to drag us out, again and again and again. It was horrifying.'

'Heroic indeed,' she murmured without turning.

'Three ashore,' he said again. 'How very ... unexpected. Do you think that dreadful descent above Otataral
Island was responsible? I mean, for the one that's even now on its way?' Straightening, he moved to join his
sister.

They were standing on a convenient tower rising from the city of Malaz, south of the river. To most citizens
of the city, the tower appeared to be in ruins, but that was an illusion, maintained by the sorcerer who occupied
its lower chambers, a sorcerer who seemed to be sleeping. The twin god and goddess known as Oponn had the
platform – and the view – entirely to themselves.

'Certainly possible,' she conceded, 'but is that not the charm of our games, beloved?' She gestured towards
the bay to their right. 'They have arrived, and even now there is a stirring among those abject mortals in those
ships, especially the Silanda. Whilst, in the fell Hold opposite, the nest slithers awake. There will be work for
us, this night.'

'Oh yes. Both you and me. Pull, push, pull, push.' He rubbed his hands together. 'I can hardly wait.'

She faced him suddenly. 'Can we be so sure, brother, that we comprehend all the players? All of them? What
if one hides from us? Just one ... wild, unexpected, so very terrible ... we could end up in trouble. We could end
up ... dead.'

'It was that damned soldier,' her brother snarled. 'Stealing our power! The arrogance, to usurp us in our very
own game! I want his blood!'

She smiled in the darkness. 'Ah, such fire in your voice. So be it. Cast the knuckles, then, on his fate. Go on.
Cast them!'

He stared across at her, then grinned. Whirled about, one hand flinging out and down – knuckles struck,
bounced, struck again, then spun and skidded, and finally fell still.

The twins, breathing hard in perfect unison, hurried over and crouched down to study the cast.

And then, had there been anyone present to see them, they would have witnessed on their perfect faces
bemused expressions. Frowns deepening, confusion reigning in immortal eyes, and, before this night was done,
pure terror.

The non-existent witness would then shake his or her head. 

Never, dear gods. Never mess with mortals.

'Grub and three friends, playing in a cave. A Soletaken with a stolen sword. Togg and Fanderay and damned
castaways ...'

Trapped since Fiddler's reading in a small closet-sized cabin on the Froth Wolf, Bottle worked the finishing
touches on the doll nestled in his lap. The Adjunct's commands made no sense – but no, he corrected with a
scowl, not the Adjunct's. This – all of this – belonged to that tawny-eyed beauty, T'amber. Who in Hood's name
is she? Oh, never mind. Only the thousandth time I've asked myself that question. But it's that look, you see, in
her eyes. That knowing look, like she's plunged through, right into my heart.

And she doesn't even like men, does she?

He studied the doll, and his scowl deepened. 'You,' he muttered, 'I've never seen you before, you know that?
But here you are, with a sliver of iron in your gut – gods but that must hurt, cutting away, always cutting away
inside. You, sir, are somewhere in Malaz City, and she wants me to find you, and that's that. A whole city,
mind you, and I've got till dawn to track you down.' Of course, this doll would help, somewhat, once the poor
man was close enough for Bottle to stare into his eyes and see the same pain that now marked these uneven
chips of oyster shell. That, and the seams of old scars on the forearms – but there were plenty of people with
those, weren't there?

'I need help,' he said under his breath.

From above, the voices of sailors as the ship angled in towards the jetty, and some deeper, more distant sound, from the dockfront itself. And that one felt ... unpleasant.

_We've been betrayed. All of us._

The door squealed open behind him.

Bottle closed his eyes.

The Adjunct spoke. 'We're close. The High Mage is ready to send you across – you will find him in my cabin. I trust you are ready, soldier.'

'Aye, Adjunct.' He turned, studied her face in the gloom of the corridor where she stood. The extremity of emotion within her was revealed only in a tightness around her eyes. _Desperate._

'You must not fail, Bottle.'

'Adjunct, the odds are against me—'

'T'amber says you must seek help. She says you know who.'

_T'amber, the woman with those damned eyes. Like a lioness. What is it, damn it, about those eyes? 'Who is she, Adjunct?'

A flicker of something like sympathy in the woman's gaze. 'Someone ... a lot more than she once was, soldier.'

'And you trust her?'

'Trust.' She smiled slightly. 'You must know, as young as you are, Bottle, that truth is found in the touch. Always.'

No, he did not know. He did not understand. Not any of it. Sighing, he rose, stuffing the limp doll beneath his jerkin, where it sat nestled alongside the sheathed knife under his left arm. No uniform, no markings whatsoever that would suggest he was a soldier of the Fourteenth – the absence of fetishes made him feel naked, vulnerable. 'All right,' he said.

She led him to her cabin, then halted at the doorway. 'Go on. I must be on deck, now.'

Bottle hesitated, then said, 'Be careful, Adjunct.'

A faint widening of the eyes, then she turned and walked away.

Kalam stood at the stern, squinting into the darkness beyond where transports were anchoring. He'd thought he'd heard the winching of a longboat, somewhere a few cables distant from shore. _Against every damned order the Adjunct's given this night._

Well, even he wasn't pleased with those orders. Quick Ben slicing open a sliver of a gate – even that sliver might get detected, and that would be bad news for poor Bottle. He'd step out into a nest of Claw. He wouldn't stand a chance. And who might come through the other way?

All too risky. All too ... extreme.

He rolled his shoulders, lifting then shrugging off the tension. But the tautness came back only moments later. The palms of the assassin's hands were itching beneath the worn leather of his gloves. _Decide, damn you. just decide._
Something skittered on the planks to his right and he turned to see a shin-high reptilian skeleton, its long-snouted head tilting as the empty eye sockets regarded him. The segmented tail flicked.

'Don't you smell nice?' the creature hissed, jaws clacking out of sequence. 'Doesn't he smell nice, Curdle?'

'Oh yes,' said another thin voice, this time to Kalam's left, and he glanced over to see a matching skeleton perched on the stern rail, almost within reach. 'Blood and strength and will and mindfulness, nearly a match to our sweetheart. Imagine the fight between them, Telorast. Wouldn't that be something to see?'

'And where is she?' Kalam asked in a rumble. 'Where's Apsalar hiding?'

'She's gone,' Curdle said, head bobbing.

'What?'

'Gone,' chimed in Telorast with another flick of the tail. 'It's only me and Curdle who are hiding right now. Not that we have to, of course.'

'Expedience,' explained Curdle. 'It's scary out there tonight. You have no idea. None.'

'We know who's here, you see. All of them.'

Now, from the dark waters, Kalam could hear the creak of oars. Someone had indeed dropped a longboat and was making for shore. Damned fools – that mob will tear them to pieces.

He turned about and set off for the mid deck.

The huge jetty appeared to starboard as the ship seemed to curl round, its flank sidling ever closer. The assassin saw the Adjunct arrive from below and he approached her.

'We've got trouble,' he said without preamble. 'Someone's going ashore, in a longboat.'

Tavore nodded. 'So I have been informed.'

'Oh. Who, then?'

From nearby T'amber said, 'There is a certain ... symmetry to this. A rather bitter one, alas. In the longboat, Kalam Mekhar, are Fist Tene Baralta and his Red Blades.'

The assassin frowned.

'Deeming it probable, perhaps,' T'amber continued, 'that our escort coming down from Mock's Hold will prove insufficient against the mob.' Yet there seemed to be little conviction in the woman's tone, as if she was aware of a deeper truth, and was inviting Kalam to seek it for himself.

'The Red Blades,' said the Adjunct, 'ever have great need to assert their loyalty.'

... their loyalty ...

'Kalam Mekhar,' Tavore continued, stepping closer, her eyes now fixed on his own, 'I expect I will be permitted but a minimal escort of my own choosing. T'amber, of course, and, if you would accede, you.'

'Not an order, Adjunct?'

'No,' she answered quietly, almost tremulously. And then she waited.

Kalam looked away. Dragon's got Hood by the nose hairs ... one of Fid's observations during one of his games. Years ago, now. Blackdog, was it? Probably. Why had he thought of that statement now? Because I know how Hood must have felt, that's why.

Wait, I can decide on this without deciding on anything else. Can't I? Of course I can. 'Very well, Adjunct. I will be part of your escort. We'll get you to Mock's Hold.'
"To the Hold, yes, that is what I have asked of you here."

As she turned away, Kalam frowned, then glanced over at T'amber, who was regarding him flatly, as if disappointed. 'Something wrong?' he asked the young woman.

'There are times,' she said, 'when the Adjunct's patience surpasses even mine. And, you may not know this, but that is saying something.'

_Froth Wolf_ edged closer to the jetty.

On the other side of the same stone pier, the longboat scraped up against the slimy foundation boulders. Lines were made fast to the rings set in the mortar, and Lostara Yil watched as one of the more nimble Red Blades hauled himself upward from ring to ring, trailing a knot-ladder. Moments later, he had reached the top of the jetty, where he attached the ladder's hooks to still more rings.

Tene Baralta was the first to ascend, slowly, awkward, using his one arm and grunting with each upward heave on the rungs.

Feeling sick to her stomach, Lostara followed, ready to catch the man should he falter or slip.

_This is a lie. All of it._

She reached the top, clambered upright and paused, adjusting her weapon belt and her cloak.

'Captain,' Tene Baralta said, 'form up to await the Adjunct.'

She glanced to the right and saw a contingent of Imperial Guard pushing through the milling crowd, an officer in their midst.

Tene Baralta noticed them as well. 'Not enough, as I suspected. If this mob smells blood ...'

Turning to the company of Red Blades, Lostara kept her face impassive, even as a sneering thought silently slithered through her mind: _Whatever you say, Fist. Just don't expect me to believe any of this._

At that moment a deeper roaring sound filled the air, and the sky above the bay suddenly blazed bright.

Banaschar squinted through the haze of smoke, scanning the crowd, then he grunted. 'He's not here,' he said. 'In fact, I haven't seen him in days ... I think. How about you, Master Sergeant?'

Braven Tooth simply shrugged, his only response to Mudslinger's question.

The soldier glanced at Gentur, his silent companion, then said, 'It's just this, Master Sergeant. First we lose them, then we hear something about him, and we put it together, you see?'

The hairy old man bared his teeth. 'Oh yeah, Mudslinger. Now go away before I tie a full cask to your back and send you round the harbourfront at double-time.'

'He can't do that, can he?' Gentur asked his fellow soldier.

But Mudslinger had paled. 'You never forget, do you, sir?'

'Explain it to your friend. But not here. Try the alley.'

The two soldiers backed off, exchanging whispers as they made their way back to their table.

'I always like to think,' Banaschar said, 'that a nasty reputation is usually mostly undeserved. Benefit of the doubt, and maybe I've got some glimmer of faith in humanity clawing its way free every now and again. But, with you, Braven Tooth, alas, such optimism is revealed for the delusion it truly is.'

'Got that right. What about it?'
'Nothing.'

They heard shouting in the street outside, a clamour of voices that then died away. This had been going on all evening. Roving bands of idiots looking for someone to terrorize. The mood in the city was dark and ugly and getting worse with every bell that chimed, and there seemed to be no reason for it, although, Banaschar reminded himself, that had now changed.

Well, maybe there was still no reason as such. Only, there had arrived ... a target.

'Someone's poking with a knife,' Braven Tooth said.

'It's the imperial fleet,' Banaschar said. 'Bad timing, given all the Wickans in those ships, and the other foreigners with them, too, I imagine.'

'You ain't drinking much, Banaschar. You sick or something?'

'Worse than that,' he replied. 'I have reached a decision. Autumn has arrived. You can feel it in the wind. The worms are swarming to shore. It's D'rek's season. Tonight, I talk with the Imperial High Mage.'

The Master Sergeant scowled across at him. 'Thought you said trying that would get you dead quick. Unless, of course, that's what you want.'

'I plan on losing my follower in the crowd,' Banaschar said in a low voice, leaning over the table. 'I'll take the waterfront way, at least to the bridge. I hear there's City Watch there, pushing the brainless dolts back from the jetties — gods, how stupid can people be? That's an army out on those ships!'

'Like I said, someone's poking. Be nice to meet that someone. So's I can put my fist into his face and watch it come out the back of his head. Messy way to go, but fast, which is more than the bastard deserves.'

'What are you going on about?' Banaschar asked.

'Never mind.'

'Well,' the ex-priest said with more bravado in his voice than he in truth felt, 'it's now or never. Come tomorrow night I'll buy you a pitcher of Malaz Dark—'

'That reminds me – you always seem to find enough coin – how is that?'

'Temple coffers, Braven Tooth.'

'You stole from the D'rek Temple here?'

'Here? That's good. Yes, here, and all the others I visited, too. Got it all squirrelled away, where no-one but me can get to it. Problem is, I feel guilty every time I pinch from it. I never take much — no point in inviting a mugging, after all. But that's just the excuse I use. Like I said, it's guilt.'

'So, if you get yourself killed tonight ...'

Banaschar grinned and flung up his hands. 'Phoof! All of it. Gone. For ever.'

'Nice trick, that.'

'You want I should leave it to you?'

'Hood no! What would I do with chests of coin?'

'Chests? Dear Master Sergeant, more like roomfuls. In any case, I'll see you tomorrow ... or not. And if not, then, well met, Braven Tooth.'

'Forget that. Tomorrow, like you said.'

Nodding, Banaschar backed away, then began threading his way towards the front door.
Alone at the table now, Braven Tooth slowly raised his tankard for a drink, his eyes almost closed – and to anyone more than a pace or two away they would have seemed closed indeed – and so the figure who hastily rose, slipping like an adder into Banaschar's wake, noticed nothing of the Master Sergeant's fixed attention, the small eyes tracking for a moment, before Braven Tooth finished the ale in three quick swallows. Then the huge, hairy man climbed gustily to his feet, weaving slightly, one hand reaching to the table for balance.

He staggered over to Mudslinger and Gentur, both of whom looked up in guilt and fear – as if they'd been discussing bad things. Braven Tooth leaned between them. 'Listen, you fools,' he said under his breath.

'We're just waiting for Foreigner,' Mudslinger said, eyes wide. 'That's all. We never——'

'Quiet. See that snake at the steps up front – quickly!'

'Just ... gone,' Gentur observed, squinting. 'Snake, you said. I'd say more like a——'

'And you'd be right. And the target is none other than Banaschar. Now, are you two up for surprising a Claw tonight? Do this and I'll think nice thoughts about the both of you.'

The two men were already on their feet.

Gentur spat onto his hands and rubbed them together. 'I used to dream of nights like this,' he said. 'Let's go, Mudder. Before we lose 'im.'

'Heading towards the waterfront,' Braven Tooth said. 'Northering t'the Stairs, right?'

He watched the two soldiers hurry to the back door. Out they went, looking far too eager.

Mudslinger, he knew, was a lot tougher than he looked. Besides, he didn't think that Claw would be thinking about anyone on his own trail. And with the crowds ... well, they shouldn't have too much trouble. Soldiers love killing assassins ...

Someone threw a handful of knuckle dice at the back of the low-ceiled room.

And Braven Tooth suddenly shivered.

'I must be getting soft.

There were plenty of well-armed figures among the crowd gathering along the harbourfront, although, for the moment, those weapons remained beneath heavy cloaks, as these selected agents moved into designated positions. Faint nods passing between them, a few whispered words here and there.

The City Watch stood in a ragged line, pikes shifting nervously as the bolder thugs edged forward with taunts and threats.

There were Wickans in those ships out there.

And we want them.

Traitors, one and all, and dealing with traitors was a punishment that belonged to the people. Wasn't the Empress herself up there at Mock's Hold? Here to witness imperial wrath – she's done it before, right, back when she commanded the Claw.

Never mind you're waiting for an officer, you fools, the signals are lit and we ain't stupid – they're telling those bastards to come in. Tie up. Disembark. Look at 'em, the cowards! They know the time's come to answer their betrayal!

Believe us, we're gonna fill this bay with Wickan heads – won't that be a pretty sight come morning?
Gods below! What's that?

A chorus of voices shouted that, or something similar, and hands lifted, fingers pointing, eyes tracking a blazing ball of fire that slanted down across half the sky to the west, trailing a blue-grey plume of smoke like the track of an eel on black sand. Growing in size with alarming swiftness.

Then ... gone ... and a moment later, a savage crack rolled in from beyond the bay, where rose a tumbling cloud of steam.

Close.' A third of a league, you think?

Less.

Not much impact, though.

Must've been small. Smaller than it looked.

Went right overhead—

It's an omen! An omen!

A Wickan head! Did you see it? It was a Wickan head! Sent down by the gods!

Momentarily distracted by the plunging fireball that seemed to land just beyond the bay, the Claw Saygen Maral pushed himself forward once more. The assassin was pleased with the heaving press he moved through, a press settling down once again, although at a higher pitch of anticipation than before.

Up ahead, the crowd had slowed the ex-priest's pace, which was good, since already nothing was going as planned. The target should have been settled in for the night at Coop's, and the Hand was likely closing in on the alley behind the inn, there to await his contacting them with the necessary details.

Pointing the Skull, they used to call it. Identifying the target right there, right then, in person. A proper reward for following the fool around for sometimes weeks on end – seeing the actual assassination. Be that as it may, as things were turning out he would be bloodying his own hands with this target tonight, now that the decision had been made to kill the drunkard.

A convenient conjoining of Saygen Maral's divided loyalties. Trained from childhood in the Imperial Claw – ever since he had been taken from his dead mother's side, aged fourteen, at the Cull of the Wax Witches in the Mouse Quarter all those years ago – his disaffection with the Empress had taken a long time to emerge, and even then, if not for the Jhistal Master it would never have found focus, or indeed purpose. Of course, discovering precisely how his mother had died had helped considerably.

The empire was rotten through and through, and he knew he wasn't the only Claw to realize this; just as he wasn't the only one who now followed the commands of the Jhistal Master – most of the Hand on its way down from Mock's Hold belonged to the phantom Black Glove that was the name of Mallick Rel's spectral organization. In truth, there was no way of telling just how many of the Imperial Claw had been turned – each agent was aware of but three others, forming a discrete cell – in itself a classic Claw structure.

In any case, Clawmaster Pearl had confirmed the order to kill Banaschar. Comforting, that.

He remained ten paces behind the ex-priest, acutely aware of the seething violence in this mob – encouraged by the idiotic cries of 'An omen!' and 'A Wickan head!' – but he carried on his person certain items, invested with sorcery, that encouraged a lack of attention from everyone he pushed past, that dampened their ire momentarily no matter how rude and painful his jabbing elbows.

They were close to the docks now, and agents of the Jhistal Master were in the milling crowd, working them ever nastier and more belligerent with well-timed shouts and exhortations. No more than fifty City Watch soldiers faced a mass now numbering in the high hundreds, an under-strength presence that had been carefully coordinated by selective incompetence among the officers at the nearby barracks.
He noted a retinue of more heavily armed and armoured soldiers escorting a ranking officer towards the centre dock, before which now loomed the Adjunct's flagship. The captain, Saygen Maral knew, was delivering a most auspicious set of imperial commands. And those, in turn, would lead inexorably to a night of slaughter such as this city had never before experienced. Not even the Cull in the Mouse would compare.

The assassin smiled.

*Welcome home, Adjunct.*

His breath caught suddenly as a prickling sensation awoke on his left shoulder beneath his clothes. A small sliver of metal threaded under his skin had awakened, informing him that he was being followed by someone with murderous intent. *Clumsy. A killer should ever mask such thoughts. After all, Mockra is the most common natural talent, needing no formal training – that whispering unease, the hair rising on the back of the neck – far too many people possess such things.*

Nonetheless, even a clumsy killer could know the Lady's Pull on occasion, just as Saygen Maral, for all his skills and preparation, could stumble – fatally – to the Lord's Push.

Ahead, now fifteen paces away, Banaschar was working free of the crowd, and Saygen sensed the man's warren – Mockra, yes, achieving what my own invested items have done. Uninterest, sudden fugue, confusion – the sharper the mind, after all, the more vulnerable it proves to such passive assaults. To be a killer, of course, one needed to fend off such sorcery. Simple awareness of the trap sufficed, and so Saygen Maral was not concerned. His intent was most singular.

Of course he would have to eliminate his own hunters first.

Banaschar was heading for the Stairs. There was little risk in Saygen effecting a slight delay. He saw an alley mouth off to the left, where the crowd was thin. The assassin angled himself towards it, and, as he stepped past the last figure, quickly turned left and slipped into the alley.

Gloom, rubbish under foot, a tortured, winding route before him. He continued on five more steps, found an alcove and edged into it.

'He's getting ready to take the drunk,' Gentur hissed. 'He'll circle round—'

'Then let's get after 'im,' Mudslinger whispered, pushing his friend on.

They entered the alley, padded forward.

The shadows swallowing the niche were too deep, too opaque to be natural, and both soldiers went right past without a second thought.

A faint sound, whistling past Mudslinger's left shoulder, and Gentur grunted, flinging up his hands as he staggered forward, then collapsed. Whirling, Mudslinger ducked low, but not low enough, as a second tiny quarrel struck him on his chest, directly over his heart, and, still spinning round with his own momentum, the soldier's feet skidded out beneath him. He fell hard, the back of his head crunching on the greasy cobbles.

Saygen Maral studied the two motionless bodies for a moment longer, then he reloaded the corkscrew crossbows strapped to his wrists. *First shot, base of the skull. Second shot, heart – that was a lucky one, since I was aiming for low in the gut. Guess he didn't want all that pain. Too bad. Anyway ... What were they thinking of doing? Mugging me? No matter, it's done.* Adjusting his sleeves, hiding the weapons once more, he set off after Banaschar.

A sixth of a bell later, the Claw realized that he had lost the man. In rising panic, he began backtracking, down alleys and streets, as a cool breeze lifted withered leaves that spun random paths across cobbles.

Making clicking sounds, like the skittering of dice.
The huge wheels of twisted rope suspended on the side of the stone jetty compressed as the Froth Wolf shouldered its bulk against them, then the craft slid away again, momentarily, until the lines, made fast to the dock's huge bollards, drew taut. The gangplank rattled and thumped into place even as the garrison captain and his guards approached along the jetty's length. Pointedly ignoring the troop of Red Blades standing at attention opposite the plank with their one-armed, one-eyed commander.

Something had just struck the sea beyond the anchored fleet, and the thunderous sound of its impact still echoed, even as darkness swept back into the wake of the bright, blazing fireball. The smell of steam was heavy in the air.

It had seemed to Keneb that there was a peculiar lack of reaction to this event, from the Adjunct and T'amber, at any rate. There had been plenty of shouts, warding gestures then animated talk among the sailors, but that was to be expected.

*Let's face it,* Keneb admitted, *the timing was less than auspicious.* It was no wonder that thousand-strong mob awaiting them were shouting about omens.

The Fist's attention was drawn once more to the approaching contingent.

'They mean to come aboard, Adjunct,' Keneb said as she prepared to disembark.

Tavore frowned, then nodded and stepped back. T'amber positioned herself to the Adjunct's left.

Boots thumped on the plank, and the captain halted one step from the ship's deck. He looked round, as if deciding what to do next.

Moving forward, Keneb said, 'Good evening, Captain, I am Fist Keneb, Eighth Legion, Fourteenth Army.'

A moment's hesitation, then a salute. 'Fist Keneb. I have orders for the Adjunct Tavore Paran. May I come on deck?'

'Of course,' Keneb said.

Mostly unintelligible shouts and curses reached them from the crowds massing behind a line of soldiers on the waterfront, many of them taunts directed at the Red Blades. At these sounds, the captain winced slightly, then he moved forward until he faced the Adjunct. 'The Empress awaits you,' he said, 'in Mock's Hold. In your absence, command of the Fourteenth Army temporarily falls to me, with respect to disembarking and standing down.'

'I see,' Tavore said.

The captain shifted uneasily, as if he had been expecting some kind of protest, as if her lack of reaction to his words was the very last thing he anticipated. 'It appears that the transports are anchoring in the bay, Adjunct.'

'Yes, it does appear so, Captain.'

'That will need to be countermanded immediately.'

'Captain, what is your name?'

'Adjunct? My apologies. It is Rynag. Captain Rynag of the Untan Imperial Guard.'

'Ah, then you have accompanied the Empress to the island. Your normal posting is as an officer in the Palace Guard.'

Rynag cleared his throat. 'Correct, Adjunct, although as a matter of course my responsibilities have expand —'

'T'amber,' the Adjunct cut in. 'Please collect Kalam Mekhar. He is, I believe, once more at the stern.' She studied the captain for a moment longer, then asked him, 'The Empress commands that I meet her alone?'
'Uh, she was not specific—'

'Very well—'

'Excuse me, Adjunct. Not specific, as I said, with one exception.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. The High Mage Adaephon Delat is to remain on board until such time as directed otherwise.'

Tavore frowned for a moment, then said, 'Very well.'

'I believe I was speaking about countermanding the order to drop anchor—'

'I leave that to you, Captain Rynag,' the Adjunct said as T'amber reappeared, Kalam trailing a step behind. 'We will make use of your escort, as well as that of Fist Baralta's Red Blades, to ensure our passage through that mob.' With that, and a gesture to T'amber and the assassin to follow, she disembarked.

Bemused, the captain watched them cross over to the jetty. A few curt commands to the Imperial Guards assembled there and a careless gesture to Tene Baralta and his soldiers to fall in, and the two groups moved out in uneasy company to flank Tavore and her two companions. Then the party set off.

Rynag swung back to Keneb. 'Fist?'

'Yes?'

'Well ...'

'Things aren't going as planned, Captain?' Keneb stepped close and slapped a hand on the man's shoulder.

'Consider this, it could be worse. Correct that. It is much worse.'

'No longer,' the man snapped, finally angry. 'I am now in command of the Fourteenth Army, Fist Keneb, and these are my orders. Signal flag to Admiral Nok. The escorts are to withdraw and set sail without delay for Unta. Signal flag to the foreign fleet, they are to anchor outside the bay, this side of the shoals on the headland north of Mock's Hold. A pilot ship will guide them. Finally, signal flag to the transports – we will establish a number system; and thereafter in sets of fifteen they will weigh anchor and draw in to the designated moorings. The disembarking will begin as soon as possible, Fist. Furthermore, the soldiers are to be unarmed, their kits secured for transportation.'

Keneb scratched his stubbly jaw.

'Why are you just standing there, Fist Keneb?'

'I am trying to decide, Captain, where to begin.'

'What do you mean?'

'All right, never mind. First of all, whether you are in command of the Fourteenth Army or not, you do not outrank Admiral Nok. Signal him all you want. He will do precisely as he pleases.'

'I am instructed by the Empress—'

'He will need to see those orders, Captain. In person. The Admiral is very precise with such protocol. I assume you have said orders ?'

'Of course I have! Very well, signal him aboard!'

'Alas, he will not comply.'

'What?'
'Now, as for the Perish – the foreign fleet, Captain Rynag – the only command they acknowledge, under the circumstances, is their own. By all means, make your request, but be certain that it is a request. Lest they take offence, and Captain, you truly do not want them to take offence.'

'You are leaving me no choice but to relieve you of command, Fist.'

'Excuse me?'

'I have given you my orders, yet still you stand here—'

'Well that is precisely the problem, Captain. Not one of your orders can be carried out, for the imperative overriding them cannot be challenged, not by you, not even by the Empress herself.'

'What are you talking about?'

Keneb said, 'Follow me, please, Captain.'

They walked to the stem. In the bay beyond, the huge transports loomed a short distance away like gigantic, slumbering beasts.

'Granted,' Keneb said, 'darkness obscures, and for this reason it is understandable that you do not as yet comprehend. But, allow me to direct your gaze, Captain, to the topmost signal flag on those near ships, a flag identical to those on Nok's dromons. In a moment, when that cloud passes by the moon, with Opomn's blessing there will be enough light with which to see. There is an edict, Captain, pertaining to survival itself. You seem to forget, both the Fourteenth Army and the imperial fleet have come from Seven Cities.'

The cloud slid away from the blurred, hazy moon, and enough light licked waves, ships, and flags for Rynag to see. The captain's breath caught in a half-choke. 'Gods below!' he whispered.

'And Seven Cities,' Keneb continued in a calm voice, 'was struck by a most virulent plague. Which, as you can now see, we inadvertently brought with us. So, Captain, do you now understand why we cannot comply with your commands?'

The man spun to face him, his eyes filled with terror and panic. 'And this damned ship?' he demanded in a hoarse voice. 'And the other one that just docked? Fist Keneb—'

'Plague-free, both of them, Captain, as was the ship from whence came the Red Blades. We would not have moored alongside were it otherwise. Anyway, beyond signal flags, there is no contact between ships. For obvious reasons. I suppose, if you believe the Empress would nonetheless insist we one and all disembark regardless of the slaughter our presence would deliver to Malaz Island – and, inevitably, to the entire mainland – you can insist on countermanding our collective gesture of compassion and mercy. Unquestionably, the name of Captain Rynag will acquire legendary status, at least among devotees to Poliel – nothing wrong with seeing the positives, don't you think?'

The group marched ever closer to the wall of belligerence blocking the streets. Kalam loosened the long-knives in their scabbards. Glancing over, he found himself walking alongside Captain Lostara Yil, who looked profoundly unhappy.

'Suggest you all draw your weapons any time now,' the assassin said to her. 'That should be enough to make them back off.'

She grunted. 'Until they start throwing bricks.'

'I doubt it. We're for the Empress, not them. The ones these people are hungry to sink their teeth into are out there in the transports. The Wickans. The Khundryl Burned Tears.'

'Clever ruse,' Lostara said under her breath, 'those flags.'

'Fist Keneb.'
'Indeed?'

'Aye.' Then Kalam smiled. ' Spinner of Death. A prettier lie you won't find. Fid must be grinning ear to ear, if he ain't drowning.'

'Drowning?'

'He was over the side before the Silanda shipped oars, is my guess – probably Gesler and Stormy went with him, too.'

Just then they reached the line of City Watch, who parted to let them pass.

Weapons hissed from scabbards and shields were brought round by the Red Blades.

And, as Kalam had predicted, the crowds fell silent, watchful, and backed away to each side to let the party make its way through.

'So,' the assassin said under his breath, 'we've got ourselves a long, dull walk. Sound idea, by the way, Captain, your Fist deciding to act on his own.'

The look she shot him started sweat beneath Kalam's clothing, as she asked, 'Was it, Kalam Mekhar?'

'Well—'

She faced straight ahead again. 'The Fist,' she said in a whisper, 'hasn't even begun.'

Well ... oh, that's not good at all.

Behind the troop, the mob closed in once again, and there arose new shouts, this time of horror.

'Plague flags! On the transports in the bay! Plague flags!'

In moments belligerence drained away like piss down a leg, and terror grabbed hold between those legs – squeezing hard – and people began swarming in every direction, but a heartbeat away from pure, frenzied panic. Kalam kept his smile to himself.

Ever so faint, the clatter of knuckles bouncing and skidding had alerted Banaschar. This night the Worm was awake, and with it the return of the ex-priest's old sensitivities to the whisper of magic. In rapid succession thereafter, as he shifted from his path and found a dead-end alley in which to crouch, heart pounding, he felt multiple pulses of sorcery – a gate, slicing open the thinnest rent, the sudden, violent unravelling of some unseen tapestry, and then, finally, a trembling underfoot, as if something terrible and vast had just stepped onto the dry land of this island.

Dizzy from the successive waves of virulent power, Banaschar straightened once more, one hand against a grimy wall for support, then he headed off – back, back towards the harbourfront.

No choice, no choice. I need to see ... to understand ...

As he drew nearer, he could smell panic in the air, acrid and bitter, and all at once there were mute figures hurrying past him – the beginnings of an exodus. Faces twisted in fear blurred by, and others dark with rage – as if their plans had been suddenly knocked awry, and there was not yet time to find a means to regroup, nor yet the opportunity to think things through.

Something's happened.

Maybe to do with that falling rock or whatever it was.

In the old days, such an occurrence, on the eve of autumn, the eve of D'rek's arrival upon the mortal earth ... well, we'd have flooded the streets. Out from the temples, raising our voices to the heavens. And the coffers would overflow, because there could be no mistaking ...
The thoughts trailed away, vanished, leaving naught but a taste of ashes in his mouth. We were such fools. The sky casts down, the world heaves up, the waters wash it all away. None of this – none of it! – has anything to do with our precious gods!

He reached the broad avenue fronting the docks. People moving about here and there. If anger remained it was roiling about, all direction lost. Some vast desire had been... blunted.

Passing an old woman Banaschar reached out to her. 'Here,' he said. 'What has happened?'

She glared up at him, pulling free as if his touch was a contaminant. 'Plague ships!' she hissed. 'Get away from me!'

He let her go, halted, stared out at the ships filling the bay.

Ah, the flags...

Banaschar sniffed the air.

Poliel? I can't sense you at all... out there. Or anywhere else, come to think of it. His eyes narrowed. Then, slowly, he smiled.

At that moment, a heavy hand thumped down on his left shoulder, spun him round—

And someone screamed.

Lifting clear of the swirling black, filthy waters. Straightening, slime and grit streaming off, blood-sucking eels flapping down to writhe on the muddy rocks, the broken pottery and the brick fragments beneath the wooden dock. One step forward, then another, heavy, scraping.

A rough wall directly ahead, revealing layers of street levels, bulwarks, old drainage holes dating back to the city's youth – before iron was first forged by humans – when the sewer system was a superb, efficient subterranean web beneath level streets. In all, plenty of hand- and foot-holds, given sufficient determination, strength and will.

Of all three, the one standing facing that wall had been given plenty.

More steps.

Then, climbing. A stranger had come to Malaz City.

Gasping, she leaned against a wall. What a mistake, trying to swim in all that armour. And then, all those damned eels! She'd emerged from the water covered in the damned things. Hands, arms, legs, neck, head, face, dangling and squirming and probably getting drunk every one of them and it wasn't no fun anyway, pulling them off. Squeeze too hard and they sprayed blood, black stuff, smelly stuff. But you had to squeeze, to get a good grip, because those mouths, they held fast, leaving huge circular weals on her flesh, puckered and oozing.

Stumbling ashore like some kind of worm witch, or demon – ha, that mongrel dog that sniffled up to her sure did run, didn't it? Stupid dog.

Sewer ramp, pretty steep, but there were rungs on the sides and she was able to work her way along it, then the climb which had damn near killed her but no chance of that. Thirst was a demanding master. The most demanding master. But she'd dumped her armour, down there kneedeep in the muck of the bottom with the keel of the damned ship nearly taking her head off – took the helmet, didn't it? And if that strap hadn't broke so conveniently... anyway, she'd even dropped her weapon belt. Nothing to pawn, and that was bad. Except for this knife, but it was the only knife she got, the only one left.

Still, she was thirsty. She needed to get the taste of the harbour soup out of her mouth, especially that first gasp after struggling back up to the surface, sucking in head-first the bloated corpse of a disgusting rat – that
had come as close to killing her as anything so far – what if it'd been alive, and eager to climb down her throat? She'd had nightmares like that, once. During a dry spell, it was, but that's what dry spells did – they reminded you that the world was awful and ugly and miserable and there were things out there that wanted to get you. Spiders, rats, eels, caterpillars.

Had there been a crowd up here? Not many left now, and those that came close to her kept crying out and running away in some weird blind panic. She wiped at the stinging weals on her face, blinked more muck from her eyes, lifted her head and looked around.

*And now, who is that?*

Sudden sobriety, sudden intent, a blast of white incandescence purging her brain and who knew what else.

*And now now now, just who oh who is that? Right there – no, don’t turn your back, too late. Hee hee, too too too late late late!*

Hellian crept forward, as quiet as could be, came up right behind him. Drew her knife with her right hand, reached out with her left. Five more paces to go ...

Saygen Maral stepped out from the alley. The target had doubled back, the bastard. But there he was, not ten paces away, and few people around him. Convenient. He would cease being subtle. Sometimes, it paid to remind citizens that the Claw was ever present, ever ready to do what was necessary.

The assassin drew out from beneath his cloak a paralt-smeared dagger, gingerly adjusting his grip on the weapon as he moved forward.

Some woman was staring at Banaschar – a hoary, sodden thing, with an eel dangling from under her left ear and round sores all over her exposed flesh – people, upon seeing her, were running away. Aye, she looks like she’s got the plague, but she doesn’t. Must’ve fallen in or something. No matter.

He returned his attention to his target's back, moved lithely forward, his footsteps making no sound. He'd spin the fool around, to catch the death in the man's eyes. Always more pleasurable that way, the rush of power that raced through the killer when the eyes locked, and recognition blossomed, along with pain and the sudden knowledge of impending death.

He was addicted to it, he knew. But he was hardly alone in that, now, was he?

With a half-smile, Saygen Maral drew up behind the drunkard, reached out and gripped the man's shoulder, then spun him round, even as the knife in his other hand rustled free of the cloak, darted forward—

A scream sounded from down the avenue.

As Banaschar was pulled around, he saw – on the face of the man opposite him – a look of shock, then consternation—

A woman had grasped the man's forearm – an arm at the end of which was a gleaming, stained knife – and, as Banaschar stared, still not quite comprehending, he saw her drive the heel of a palm into the elbow joint of that arm, snapping it clean. The knife, sprung loose, spun away to clatter on the cobbles, even as the woman, snarling something under her breath, tugged the broken arm down and drove her knee into the man's face.

A savage cracking sound, blood spraying as the head rocked back, eyes wide, and the woman twisted the arm round, forcing the man face-first onto the cobbles. She descended onto him, grasped him by the hair with both hands and began systematically pounding his skull into the street.

And, between each cracking impact, words grated from her:

'No—'
crunch

'you—'

'you—'

'don’t!'

CRUNCH!

'This one's—'

'mine!'

Appalled, Banaschar reached down, grasped the terrible apparition by her sodden jerkin, and dragged her back. 'For Hood's sake, woman! You've shattered his skull! It's all pulp! Stop! Stop!'

She twisted free, turned on him and, with smooth precision, set the tip of a knife just beneath his right eye. Her pocked, blood-smeared, filthy face shifted into a sneer, as she snarled, 'You! Finally! You're under arrest!'

And someone screamed from down the avenue. Again.

Thirty paces away, Fiddler, Gesler and Stormy all stared at the commotion not far from an alley mouth. An attempted assassination, interrupted – with fatal ferocity – by some woman—

Gesler suddenly gripped Fiddler's arm. 'Hey, that's Hellian there!'

_Hellian? Sergeant Hellian?_

They then heard her pronounce an arrest.

Even as screams ripped the air from farther down, and figures began racing away from the waterfront. _Now, what's all that about? Never mind._ His eyes still fixed on Hellian, who was now struggling with the poor man who looked as drunk as she was – _her husband?_ – Fiddler hesitated, then he shook his head. 'Not a chance.'

'You got that right,' Gesler said. 'So, Fid, meet you in a bell, right?'

'Aye. Until then.'

The three soldiers set off, then almost immediately parted ways, Gesler and Stormy turning south on a route that would take them across the river on the first bridge, Fiddler continuing west, into the heart of the Centre District.

Leaving behind those frantic, terrified cries from the north end of the Centre Docks harbourfront, which seemed, despite Fiddler's pace, to be drawing ever nearer.

_Plague. Smart man, Keneb. Wonder how long the ruse will last?_ Then, as he reached very familiar streets on the bay side of Raven Hill Park, there came a surge of pleasure.

_Hey. I'm home. Imagine that. I'm home!_

And there, ten paces ahead, a small shop front, little more than a narrow door beneath a crumbling overhang from which dangled a polished tin disc, on its surface an acid-etched symbol. A burning mouse. Fiddler halted before it, then thumped on the door. It was a lot more solid than it looked. He pounded some more, until he heard a scratching of latches being drawn back on the other side. The door opened a crack. A small rheumy eye regarded him for a moment, then withdrew.

A push and the door swung back.
Fiddler stepped inside. A landing, with stairs leading upward. The owner was already halfway up them, dragging one stiff leg beneath misaligned hips, his midnight-blue night-robe trailing like some imperial train. In one hand was a lantern, swinging back and forth and casting wild shadows. The sergeant followed.

The shop on the next floor was cluttered, a looter's haul from a hundred battles, a hundred overrun cities. Weapons, armour, jewellery, tapestries, bolts of precious silk, the standards of fallen armies, statues of unknown heroes, kings and queens, of gods, goddesses and demonic spirits. Looking round as the old man lit two more lanterns, Fiddler said, 'You've done well, Tak.'

'You lost it, didn't you?'

The sergeant winced. 'Sorry.'

Tak moved behind a broad, lacquered table and sat down, gingerly, in a plush chair that might have been the throne of some minor Quon king. 'You careless runt, Fiddler. You know I only make one at a time. No market, you see – aye, I keep my promises there. Labours of love, every time, but that kind of love don't fill the belly, don't feed the wives and all those urchins not one of 'em looking like me.' The small eyes were like barrow coins. 'Where is it, then?'

Fiddler scowled. 'Under Y'Ghatan.'

'Y'Ghatan. Better it than you.'

'I certainly thought so.'

'Changed your mind since?'

'Look, Tak, I'm no wide-eyed recruit any more. You can stop treating me like I was a damned apprentice and you my master.'

Gnarled brows rose. 'Why, Fiddler, I wasn't doing nothing of the sort. You feel that way, it's because of what's been stirred awake inside that knobby skull of yours. Old habits and all that. I meant what I said. Better it than you. Even so, how many is it now?'

'Never mind,' the sergeant growled, finding a chair and dragging it over. He slumped down into it. 'Like I said, you've done well, Tak. So how come you never got that hip fixed?'

'I gauge it this way,' the old man said, 'the limp earns sympathy, near five per cent. Better still, since I don't say nothing about nothing they all think I'm some kind of veteran. For my soldiering customers, that's another five per cent. Then there's the domestic. Wives are happier since they all know I can't catch them—'

'Wives. Why did you agree to that in the first place?'

'Well, four women get together and decide they want to marry you, it's kinda hard to say no, right? Sure, wasn't my manly looks, wasn't even that crooked baby-maker between my legs. It was this new shop, and all that mysterious coin that helped me set up again. It was the house here in the Centre District. You think I was the only one who ended up losing everything in the Mouse?'

'All right, if it makes you happy. So, you kept the limp. And you kept the promise. Well?'

Tak smiled, then reached under the table, released two latches and Fiddler heard the clunk of a hidden drawer dropping down onto its rails. Pushing the throne back, the old man slid open the large drawer, then carefully removed a cloth-wrapped object. He set it down on the table and pulled the cloth away. 'A few improvements,' he purred. 'Better range for one.'

His eyes on the extraordinary crossbow between them, Fiddler asked, 'How much better?'

'Add fifty paces, I figure. Never tested that, though. But look at the ribs. That's ten strips of iron folded together. Inside band has the most spring, grading less and less as you go out. The cable's four hundred strands into twenty, then wound in bhederin-gut and soaked in dhenrabi oil. Your old one was two hundred strands into
ten. Now, look at the cradle – I only had clay mock-ups of cussers and sharpers and burners, weighted as close as I could figure—'

'Sharpers and burners?'

An eager nod. 'Why just cussers, I asked? Well, because that's what was wanted and that's how we did the cradle, right? But the mock-ups gave me an idea.' He reached back into the drawer and lifted free a clay cusser-sized grenade. 'So, I made cradles inside this, to fit five sharpers or three burners – the weight's close on all three configurations, by the way – the Moranth were always precise on these sort of things, you know.' As he was speaking, he took the clay object, one hand on top, the other beneath, and pushed in opposite directions until there was a grating click, then he was holding two halves of the hollow mock-up. 'Like I said, improvements. You can load up how you like, without ever having to change the bow's cradle. I got ten of these made. Empty, they're nice and light and you won't fly through Hood's Gate if one of 'em breaks by accident in your satchel.'

'You are a genius, Tak.'

'Tell me something I don't know.'

'How much do you want for all of this?'

A frown. 'Don't be an idiot, Fiddler. You saved my life, you and Dujek got me out of the Mouse with only a crushed hip. You gave me money—'

'Tak, we wanted you to make crossbows, like that old jeweller did before you. But he was dead and you weren't.'

'That don't matter. Call it a replacement guarantee, for life.'

Fiddler shook his head, then he reached into his pack and withdrew a real cusser. 'Let's see how it fits, shall we?'

Tak's eyes glittered. 'Oh yes, do that! Then heft the weapon, check the balance – see that over-shoulder clamp there? It's a brace for steadying aim and evening out the weight. Your arms won't get tired holding and aiming.' He rose. 'I will be right back.'

Distracted, Fiddler nodded. He set the cusser down into the weapon's cradle and clamped in place the open-ended, padded basket. That motion in turn raised from the forward base of the cradle a denticulate bar to prevent the cusser slipping out when the weapon was held point-down. That bar was in turn linked to the release trigger, dropping it flush with the cradle in time for the projectile to fly clear.

'Oh,' the sapper murmured, 'very clever, Tak.' With this weapon, there was no need for a shaft. The cradle was the launcher.

The old man was rummaging in a chest at the back of the shop.

'So tell me,' Fiddler said, 'how many more of these have you made?'

'That's it. The only one.'

'Right. So where are the others?'

'In a crate above your head.'

Fiddler glanced up to see a long box balanced across two blackened beams. 'How many in there?'

'Four.'

'Identical to this one?'

'More or less.'
'Any more?'

'Lots. For when you lose these ones.'

'I want those four above me, Tak, and I'll pay for them—'

'Take 'em, I don't want your coin. Take 'em and go blow up people you don't like.' The old man straightened and made his way back to the table.

In his hands was something that made Fiddler's eyes widen. 'Gods below, Tak ...'

'Found it a year ago. Thought to myself, oh yes, there's always the chance. Cost me four copper crescents.'

Tak reached out to set the fiddle in the sergeant's hands.

'You were robbed,' Fiddler said. 'This is the ugliest piece of junk I've ever seen.'

'What's the difference? You never play the damned things anyway!'

'Good point. I'll take it.'

'Two thousand gold.'

'Got twelve diamonds with me.'

'Worth?'

'Maybe four thousand.'

'All right, six then for the fiddle. You want to buy the bow as well?'

'Why not?'

'That's another two thousand. See the horsehair? It's white. I knew this horse. Used to pull carts of rubbish from Hood's own temple in Old Upper. Then one day the hauler had his heart burst and he stumbled down under the animal's hoofs. It panicked and bolted, right through the webbed window wall this side of the fourth bridge—'

'Wait! That huge lead window? Fourth Bridge?'

'Fronting the recruiting kit store, aye—'

'That's it! That old temple—'

'And you won't believe who was standing there with a half-dozen knock-kneed recruits when that insane horse exploded into the room—'

'Braven Tooth!'

Tak nodded. 'And he turned right round, took one look, then hammered his fist right between the beast's eyes. It dropped dead right there. Only, the animal lands half on one lad's leg, snapping it clean, and he starts screaming. Then, ignoring all that, Master Sergeant he just turns round again and says to the wide-eyed supply clerk — I swear, I heard all this from one of those recruits – he said: "These pathetic meer-rats are heading back up to Ashok to rejoin their regiment. You make sure they got waterskins that don't leak." And he looks down at that screaming broke-leg recruit, and he says, "Your name's now Limp. Aye, not very imaginative, but it's like this. If you can't hear Hood laughing, well, I can." And so, that's where this horsehair come from.'

'Two thousand gold for the bow?'

'With a story like that, aye, and it's a bargain.'

'Done. Now, let's get that crate down – I don't want the box. I'll just sling 'em all on my back.'
'They ain't strung, and neither is this one.'

'So we'll string 'em. You got extra cables?'

'Three for each. You want those mock-ups, too?'

'Absolutely, and I've got sharpeners and burners in this pack, so let's load 'em up and check the weight and all that. But let's be quick.'

'Fiddler, it's not nice out there any more, you know? Especially tonight. Smells like the old Mouse.'

'I know, and that's why I don't want to head back out without this cuss up nestled in.'

'Just be glad you're not Wickan.'

'First Wickan-hater I come across gets this egg up his dark dining hall. Tell me, Braven Tooth still live in the same house down in Lower? Near Obo's Tower?'

'That he does.'

Hellian dragged Banaschar down the winding alley – at least, it seemed to be winding, the way they kept careening off grimy walls. And she talked. 'Sure, you thought you got away clean. Not a chance. No, this is Sergeant Hellian you're dealing with here. Think I wouldn't chase you across half the damned world? Damned fool—'

'You idiot. Half the damned world? I went straight back down to the docks and sailed back to Malaz City.'

'And you thought that'd fool me? Forget it. Sure, the trail was cold, but not cold enough. And now I got you, a suspect wanted for questioning.'

The alley opened out onto a wider street. Off to their left was a bridge. Scowling, Hellian yanked her prisoner towards it.

'I told you the first time, Sergeant! Banaschar snapped. 'I had nothing to do with that slaughter – the same thing had happened in every damned temple of D'rek, at precisely the same time. You don't understand – I have to get to Mock's Hold. I have to see the Imperial High Mage—'

'That snake! I knew it, a conspiracy! Well, I'll deal with him later. One mass-murderer at a time, I always say.'

'This is madness, Sergeant! Let go of me – I can explain—'

'Save your explanations. I got some questions for you first and you'd better answer them!'

'With what?' he sneered. 'Explanations?'

'No. Answers. There's a difference—'

'Really? How? What difference?'

'Explanations are what people use when they need to lie. Y'can always tell those, 'cause those explanations don't explain nothing and then they look at you like they just cleared things up when really they did the opposite and they know it and you know it and they know you know and you know they know that you know and they know you and you know them and maybe you go out for a pitcher later but who picks up the tab? That's what I want to know.'

'Right, and answers?'

'Answers is what I get when I ask questions. Answers is when you got no choice. I ask, you tell. I ask again, you tell some more. Then I break your fingers, 'cause I don't like what you're telling me, because those answers
'Ah! So you really want explanations!'

'Not till you give me the answers!'

'So what are your questions?'

'Who said I got questions? I already know what your answers are, anyway. No point in questions, really.'

'And there's no need to break my fingers, Sergeant, I give up already.'

'Nice try. I don't believe you.'

'Gods below—'

Hellian dragged him back. Halting, looking about. The sergeant scowled. 'Where are we?'

'That depends. Where were you taking me?'

'Back to the ships.'

'You idiot – we went the wrong way – all you had to do was turn around back there, when you first caught me—'

'Well I didn't, did I? What's that?' She pointed.

Banaschar frowned at the brooding, unlit structure just beyond the low wall they had been walking along. Then he cursed under his breath and said, 'That's the Deadhouse.'

'What, some kind of bar?'

'No, and don't even think of dragging me in there.'

'I'm thirsty.'

'I have an idea, then, Sergeant. We can go to Coop's—'

'How far is that?'

'Straight ahead—'

'Forget it. It's a trap.' She tugged him right and they made their way along the front of the Deadhouse, then through a short alley with uneven walls, where Hellian guided her prisoner left once more. Then she halted and pointed across the way. 'What place is that one?'

'That's Smiley's. You don't want to go in there, it's where rats go to die—'

'Perfect. You're buying me a drink. Then we're heading back to the ships.'

Banaschar ran a hand across his scalp. 'As you like. They say the ale brewed in there uses water run off from the Deadhouse – and then there's the proprietor—'

'What about him?'

'Related, it's rumoured, to the old dead Emperor himself – that place used to be Kellanved's, you know.'

'The Emperor owned a tavern?'

'He did, partnered with Dancer. And there was a serving wench, named Surly—'

She shook him. 'Just because I asked questions don't mean I wanted answers, especially not those kinda answers, so be quiet!'
'Sorry.'

'One drink, then we go back to the ships and take a swim—'

'A what?'

'Easy. Ain't no drowned spiders in this bay.'

'No, just blood-sucking eels! Like the one dangling from behind your ear. It's already sucked all the blood from half of your face. Tell me, is your scalp getting numb on one side?'

She glared at him. 'I never gave you no permission to ask questions. That's my task. Remember that.' Then she shook her head. Something long and bloated bumped against her neck. Hellian reached up and grasped the eel. She yanked it off. 'Ow!' Glared at the writhing creature in her hand, then dropped it and crushed it under a heel. Black goo spattered out to the sides. 'See that, Banaschar? Give me trouble and you get the same treatment.'

'If I hang from your ear? Really, Sergeant, this is ridiculous—'

They turned at murmuring sounds from the street behind them. Thirty or forty locals came into view, heading for Front Street. Some of them were now carrying bows, and canisters of burning pitch swinging from straps. 'What are they about?' Hellian asked.

'They think the fleet's rotten with plague,' the ex-priest said. 'I expect they mean to set a few transports on fire.'

'Plague? There ain't no plague—'

'I know that and you know that. Now, there's another problem,' he added as the mob saw them and a half-dozen thugs split away, then slowly, ominously approached. 'Those weals all over you, Sergeant – easily mistaken for signs of plague.'

'What? Gods below, let's get into that tavern.'

They hurried forward, pushed through the doors.

Inside, inky gloom broken only by a few tallow candles on blackened tabletops. There was but one other customer, seated near the back wall. The ceiling was low, the floor underfoot littered with rubbish. The thick air reminded Hellian of a cheese-sock.

From the right appeared the proprietor, a pike-thin Dal Honese of indeterminate age, each eye looking in a different direction – neither one fixing on Hellian or Banaschar as he smiled unctuously, hands wringing. 'Ah, most sweet tryst, yes? Come! I have a table, yes! Reserved for such as you!'

'Close that ugly mouth or I'll sew it up myself,' Hellian said. 'Jus' show us the damned table then get us a pitcher of anything you got that won't come back up through our noses.'

Head bobbing, the man hobbled over to a table and, reaching out multiple times he finally grasped hold of the chairs and made a show of dragging them back through the filth.

Banaschar made to sit, then he recoiled. 'Gods below, that candle—'

'Oh yes!' said the Dal Honese gleefully, 'the few wax witches left are most generous with Smiley's. It's the history, yes?'

Sudden loud voices outside the entrance and the proprietor winced. 'Uninvited guests. A moment whilst I send them on their way.' He headed off.

Hellian finally released her grip on the ex-priest and slumped down in the chair opposite. 'Don't try nothing,' she said in a growl. 'I ain't in the mood.'
Behind her the door was pulled back by the owner. A few quiet words, then louder threats.

Hellian saw Banaschar's gaze flick past her – he had a good view of what was going on out front – and then he bolted back in his chair, eyes widening – as shrieks erupted from the mob, followed by the sounds of panicked flight.

Scowling, Hellian twisted round in her chair.

The proprietor was gone, and in the man's place stood a demon, its back to them, big enough to fill the entire doorway. A thrashing victim was in its huge hands and, as the sergeant watched, the demon tore off the screaming man's head, leaned through the doorway and threw it after the fleeing citizens. Then it flung the headless corpse in the same direction.

A strange blurring, and a sweet, spicy scent drifted back into the tavern, and then the demon was gone, in its place the old Dal Honese, brushing clean his hands, then the front of his grimy tunic. He turned about and walked back to the table.

Another smile beneath skewed eyes. 'Finest ale, then, a pitcher, coming right up!'

Hellian swung back round in her chair. Her gaze flicked over to the other customer at the back wall. A woman, a whore. The sergeant grunted, then called to her, 'You! Get much business?'

A snort in reply, then, 'Who cares?'

'Well, you got a point there, you do.'

'Both of you be quiet!' Banaschar shouted, his voice sounding half-strangled. 'That was a Kenryll'ah demon!'

'He's not so bad,' said the whore, 'once you get to know 'im.

From behind the bar came the sound of crashing crockery, then a curse.

In clumps, in bands, in ragged troops, the crowds began reappearing along the Centre Docks harbourfront. More weapons among them now, and here and there bows. Torches flared in the dark, and voices rose, delivering commands.

Leaning against the prow of the Silanda – moored just behind the longboat the Red Blades had used – Koryk watched the proceedings on the front street for a time, then he turned about and made his way back down to the mid deck.

'Sergeant Balm.'

'What?'

'We could be in for some trouble soon.'

'Typical,' Balm hissed, rising to begin pacing. 'Fid vanishes. Gesler vanishes. Leaving just me, and I ain't got no whistle, do I? Deadsmell, get up'n'over, talk to Fist Keneb. See what they want us to do about it.'

The corporal shrugged, then made his way to the boarding ladder.

Tarr was climbing into his armour. 'Sergeant,' he said, 'we got Fid's crate of munitions below—'

'Hood's balls, you're right! Cuttle, get down there. Sharpers and burners, all you can lay hands on. Throatslitter – what are you doing there?'

'Was thinking of sneaking into that crowd,' the man said from the rail, where he'd thrown one leg over and was about to climb down into the murky water. 'It doesn't sound right, does it? There's ringleaders up there – Claws, maybe, and you know how I like killing those. I could make things more confused, like they should be —'
'You'll get torn to pieces, you idiot. No, you stay here, we're undermanned enough as it is.'

Koryk crouched down near Tarr and Smiles. 'Fid keeps doing this, doesn't he?'

'Relax,' Tarr said. 'If need be, me and Gesler's heavies will hold the jetty.'

'You're looking forward to that!' Smiles accused.

'Why not? Since when did the Wickans deserve all this hate? That mob's hungry for the Fourteenth, fine, why disappoint them?'

"Cause we was ordered to stay aboard here,' Smiles said.

'Easier holding the jetty than letting the bastards jump down onto this deck.'

'They'd jump right back off,' Koryk predicted, 'once they see those heads.'

'I'm itching for a fight, Koryk.'

'Fine, Tarr, you go up and get yourself ready. Me, Smiles and Cuttle will be right behind you, with a few dozen sharpers.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas joined them. The man was strapping on a round-shield. 'I will flank you, Corporal Tarr,' he said. 'I have found a cutlass and I have some skill with that weapon.'

'Appreciate the company,' Tarr said, then looked over to where Shortnose, Flashwit, Uru Hela and Mayfly were donning armour. 'Six in all, front line. Let them try and get past us.'

Cuttle reappeared, dragging a crate.

'Pass 'em out, sapper,' Balm ordered. 'Then we all go up top and give that mob a wave over.'

Koryk loaded his crossbow, then pounded Tarr on the shoulder. 'Let's go take a look. I'm in the mood to kill someone, too.'

The corporal straightened, then spat over the side. 'Aren't we all?'
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Twins stood on their tower as the slaughter began below and the knuckles bouncing wild to their delight, now turned sudden sudden and sour and this game they played – the mortals bleeding and crying in the dark – they saw it turn and the game they played tossed to a new wind, a gale not their own – and so the Twins were played, oh how they were played.

Slayer’s Moon
Vatan Urot

Within sight of Rampart Way – the stairs leading up to Mock's Hold – Kalam Mekhar glanced behind them yet again. Furtive crowds were closing in, moving one and all, it seemed, back towards the harbour-front. Who was behind all of this? What possible reason could there be?

The Fourteenth would not be dragged down into slaughter. In fact, the only realistic outcome was the very opposite. Hundreds of citizens could well die tonight, before the rest broke and fled. True, there were but a handful of marines at the jetty, but, Kalam well knew, they had Moranth munitions. And then, of course, there was Quick Ben.

Just don't use yourself up, friend. I think ...

The assassin reached beneath the folds of his cloak, reassured himself once again that he still carried the acorn the High Mage had prepared for him. My shaved knuckle in the hole. If it came to it, he could summon Quick. And I'm dunking ...

The Adjunct did not hesitate, beginning her ascent of Rampart Way. The others followed.

A long climb ahead, a tiring one, rows upon rows of steps that had seen more than their share of spilled blood. Kalam had few pleasant memories of Rampart Way. She's up there, and so it flows down, ever down. They were above the level of the Upper Estates now, passing through a roiling updraught of mists bitter with woodsmoke. Condensation clung to the stone wall on their left, as if the promontory itself had begun to sweat.

There was torchlight weaving through the streets below. City Watch alarms sounded here and there, and suddenly an estate was in flames, black smoke rising, eerily lit from beneath. Faint screams reached them.

And they climbed without pause, not a single word shared among them. Naught but the muted clunk and rustle of armour, the scrape of boots, heavier breaths drawn with each step. The blurred moon emerged to throw a sickly light upon the city below and the bay, illuminating Old Lookout Island at the very outside edge of the harbour, the silvery reeds of Mud Island and, further south, opposite the mouth of Redcave River, Worm Island, where stood the ruins of a long abandoned temple of D'rek. The clear water this side of Mud Island was crowded with the transports, while Nok's escorts were positioned between those transports and the four Quon dromons of Empress Laseen's entourage, the latter still moored alongside the Imperial Docks directly beneath Mock's Hold.

The world suddenly seemed etched small to Kalam's eyes, an elaborate arrangement of some child's toys. If not for the masses of torchlight closing in on the Centre Docks, the faintly seen running figures in various streets and avenues, and the distant cries of a city convulsing upon itself, the panorama would look almost picturesque.

Was he seeing the Malazan Empire's death-throes? On the island where it began, so too, perhaps, would its fall be announced, here, this night, in a chaotic, senseless maelstrom of violence. The Adjunct crushed the rebellion in Seven Cities. This should be a triumphal return. Laseen, what have you done? Is this mad beast now broken free of your control?

Civilization's veil was so very thin, he well knew. Casting it aside required little effort, and even less instigation.
There were enough thugs in the world – and those thugs could well be wearing the raiment of a noble, or a Fist, or indeed a priest's robes or a scholar's vestments – enough of them, without question, who lusted for chaos and the opportunities it provided. For senseless cruelty, for the unleashing of hatred, for killing and rape. Any excuse would suffice, or even none at all.

Ahead of him, the Adjunct ascended without hesitation, as though she was climbing a scaffold, at peace with what the fates had decreed. Was he reading her true? Kalam did not know.

But the time was coming, very soon now, when he would need to decide.

And he hoped. He prayed. That the moment, when it arrived, would make his choice obvious, indeed, inevitable. Yet, a suspicion lurked that the choice would prove far harsher than he now dared admit.

_Do I choose to live, or do I choose to die?_

He looked down to his right, at those four ships directly below.

_She brought a lot of people with her, didn't she?_

Halfway to Raven Hill Park, Bottle drew up against a door, his heart pounding, sweat dripping from his face. Sorcery was roiling through every street. Mockra. Twisting the thoughts of the unsuspecting and the gullible, filling skulls with the hunger for violence. And lone figures making their way against the tide were victims in the waiting – he had been forced to take a roundabout route to this door, along narrow choking alleys, down beneath North Riverwalk, buried up to his ankles in the filthy mud of Malaz River, where insects rose in voracious swarms. But at last, he had arrived.

He drew a knife and, fearful of making a louder noise, scratched against the door. At the moment the street behind him was empty, but he could hear riots beginning, the splintering of wood, the shrill cry of a dying horse, and everywhere throughout the city, dogs were now barking, as if some ancient wolf memory had been awakened. He scratched again.

The door suddenly swung open. A tall, grey-haired woman stared down at him, expressionless.

'Agayla,' Bottle said. 'My uncle married your aunt's husband's sister. We're family!'

She stepped back. 'Get in here, unless you're of a mind to get torn to pieces!'

'I'm Bottle,' he said, following her into an apothecary thick with the scents of herbs, 'that's not my real name, but—'

'Oh, never mind all that. Your boots are filthy. Where have you come from and why did you choose this night of all nights to visit Malaz City? Tea?'

Blinking, Bottle nodded. 'I'm from the Fourteenth Army, Agayla—'

'Well, that was silly of you, wasn't it?'

'Excuse me?'

'You should be hiding in the boats with all the rest, dear boy.,'

'I can't. I mean, the Adjunct sent me—'

She turned. 'To see me? Whatever for?'

'No, it's not that. It was my idea to find you. I'm looking for someone. It's important – I need your help. '

Her back to him once more, she poured the herbal brew into two cups. 'Come get your tea, Bottle. '

As he stepped forward, Agayla quickly faced him again, reached into the folds of his cloak and snatched free
the doll. She studied it for a moment, then, with a scowl, shook the doll in front of Bottle's face. 'And what is this? Have you any idea what you are dabbling in, child?'

'Child? Hold on—'

'Is this the man you need to find?'

'Well, yes—'

'Then you leave me no choice, do you?'

'Sorry?'

She stuffed the doll back into the folds of his cloak and turned away once more. 'Drink your tea. Then we'll talk.'

'You can help me?'

'Save the world? Well, yes, of course.'

Save the world? Now, Adjunct, you never mentioned that part.

Koryk rolled his shoulders to adjust the weight of the heavy chain armour. Longsword and shield were positioned on the damp stones behind him. In his gauntleted hands he held his crossbow. Three paces to his left stood Smiles, a sharper in her right hand, her bared teeth gleaming in the dull moonlight. To his right was Cuttle, crouched down over a collection of munitions laid out on a rain-cape. Among them was a cusser.

'Hold on, Cuttle,' Koryk said upon seeing that oversized grenado. 'Pass that cusser right back down, will you? Unless you're planning on blowing up everyone here, not to mention the Silanda and the Froth Wolf.'

The sapper squinted up at him. 'If it takes a hundred of 'em with us, I'm happy, Koryk. Don't mind that one – it's for the last thing left – you'll probably be all down by then, anyway.'

'But maybe still alive—'

'Try and avoid that, soldier. Unless you're happy with the mob having fun with what's left of you.'

Scowling, Koryk returned his attention to the massing crowd opposite. Twenty paces away, milling, shouting threats and ugly promises. Plenty of serious weapons among them. The City Guard had vanished, and all that seemed to be holding the fools back for the moment was the solid line of shield-locked soldiers facing them. Tarr, Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas, Uru Hela, Mayfly, Shortnose and Flashwit. A few rocks and brick fragments had been thrown across the killing ground, and those that came close were met by shields lifting almost languidly to fend them off.

Burning arrows were being readied along the flanks of the mob.

They'll try to fire the ships here first, and that is not good. He didn't think the Silanda would burn, not after what Gesler had told them. But the Froth Wolf was another matter. He glanced over to see Corporal Deadsmell cross the gangplank back to the jetty, and behind him was Fist Keneb, who then spoke.

'Sergeant Balm.'

'Aye, Fist?'

Keneb looked around. 'Where're Gesler and Fiddler?'

'Scouting, sir.'

'Scouting. I see. So, you're it, are you?'

'Those arrows, sir—'
'Destriant Run'Thurvian assures me our moored craft will be safe. The transports, alas, are another matter. We have signalled the nearest ones, with the command that they withdraw until out of range. What this means, Sergeant, is that you and your soldiers are on your own. The bow ballista on *Froth Wolf* will provide support.'

'Appreciate that, sir,' Balm said, a strangely bewildered look in his eyes. 'Where's the siege?'

'Excuse me?'

Deadsmell cleared his throat and said to Keneb, 'Don't mind him, sir. Once the fighting starts he'll be fine. Fist, you're saying those arrows won't light up the ships – once they see that they'll turn 'em on us.'

Nodding, Keneb looked over at Cuttle. 'Sapper, I want you to hit those archers on the flanks. Don't wait for their first move. Sharpers, assuming they're within range.'

Straightening, Cuttle looked over. 'Easy, sir. Galt, Lobe, get over here and collect yourselves a couple sharpers – not the cusser, Galt, you idiot – those small round ones, right? Two, damn you, no more than that. Come back if you need more—'

'Maybe three—'

'No! Think on it, Lobe. How many hands you got? Where you gonna hold the third one – between your cheeks? Two, and don't drop 'em or this whole jetty will vanish and us with it.' He turned. 'Fist, you want us to hit 'em now?'

'Might as well,' Keneb replied. 'With luck, the rest will scatter.'

Flaming arrows hissed out, seeking the rigging of the *Froth Wolf*. The sizzling arcs suddenly disappeared.

Koryk grunted. 'Cute. Better get to it, Cuttle. The next salvo's coming our way, I'd wager.'

Cuttle on the right, Galt and Lobe on the left. Hefting sharpers, then at Cuttle's command they threw the clay grenados.

Detonations, snapping like cracks in brittle stone, and bodies were down, writhing, screaming—

'That's it,' from one of the heavies up front.

Smiles launched her sharper into that onrushing midst.

Another explosion, this one ten paces in front of the shield-wall, which instinctively flinched back, heads ducking beneath raised shields. Shrieks, tumbling figures, blood and bits of meat, bodies underfoot tripping the attackers – the front of that charge had become a chaotic mess, but those behind it pushed on.

Koryk moved along to the right – he could hear someone shouting orders, a heavy voice, authoritarian – the cadence of a Malazan officer – and Koryk wanted the bastard.

The ballista mounted on the prow of the *Froth Wolf* bucked, the oversized missile speeding out, ripping through the crowd in a streak of spraying blood. A quarrel designed to knock holes in hulls punched through flesh and bone effortlessly, one body after another.

A few arrows raced towards the soldiers on the jetty, and then the mob reached the front line.

Undisciplined, convinced that the weight of impetus alone would suffice in shattering the shield-wall, they were not prepared for the perfectly timed answering push from the heavies, the large shields hammering into them, blades lashing out.

The only soldier untrained in holding a wall was Corabb Bhilan Thenu' alas, and Koryk saw Smiles move up behind the man as he chopped away at a foe with his cutlass. The man before him was huge, wielding shortswords, one thrusting the other slashing, and Corabb dropped into a sustained defence with his round
shield and his weapon – even as Smiles, seeing an opening, threw a knife that took the attacker in the throat. As the man crumpled, Corabb swung and the cutlass crunched down into the unprotected head.

‘Back into the gap!’ Smiles screamed, pushing Corabb forward.

Koryk caught sight of a figure off to one side – not the commander – gods, that’s a mage, and he’s readying a warren – he raised his crossbow, depressed the trigger.

The quarrel sent the man spinning.

Three more sharpers detonated further back in the pressing mob. All at once the attack crumpled, and the shield-wall advanced a step, then another, weapons slashing down to finish off the wounded. Figures raced away, and Koryk heard someone in the distance shouting, calling out a rallying point – for the moment, he saw, few were listening.

One down.

On the broad loading platform and to either side, scores of bodies littered the cobbles, faint voices crying with sorrow and pain.

Gods below, we’re killing our own here.

On the foredeck of the Froth Wolf, Keneb turned to Captain Rynag. He struggled to contain his fury as he said, 'Captain, there were soldiers in that mob. Out of uniform.'

The man was pale. 'I know nothing of that, Fist.'

'What is the point of this? They won’t get their hands on the Fourteenth.'

'I – I don’t know. It’s the Wickans – they want them. A pogrom’s begun and there’s no way of stopping it. A crusade’s been launched, there’s an army marching onto the Wickan Plains—'

'An army? What kind of army?'

'Well, a rabble, but they say it’s ten thousand strong, and there’s veterans among them.'

'The Empress approves? Never mind.’ Keneb turned once more and regarded the city. The bastards were regrouping. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘if this goes on long enough I may defy the orders given me by the Adjunct. And land the whole damned army—'

‘Fist, you cannot do that—'

Keneb spun round. ‘Not long ago you were insisting on it!’

‘Plague, Fist! You would unleash devastation—’

‘So what? I’d rather give than receive, under the circumstances. Now, unless the Empress has a whole army hidden here in the city, the Fourteenth can put an end to this uprising – the gods know, we’ve got enough experience when it comes to those. And I admit, I am now of a mind to do just that.’

‘Fist—’

‘Get off this ship, Captain. Now.’

The man stared. ‘You are threatening me?’

‘Threatening? Coltaine was pinned spreadeagled to a cross outside Aren. While Pormqual’s army hid behind the city’s walls. I am sorely tempted, Captain, to nail you to something similar, right here and now. A gift for the unbelievers out there, just to remind them that some of us remember the truth. I am going to draw three breaths and if you’re still here when I’m done—’
The captain scrambled.

Koryk watched the officer rush down the gangplank, then edge round the heavies in their line. He seemed to be making for the nearest crowd that was rallying at the mouth of a broad street.

Had Koryk considered, he would have found that array of dark thoughts in his mind – each and every one ready to find voice – to give him the excuses he needed. But he did not consider, and as for excuses, there was, for him, no need, no need at all.

He raised his crossbow.

Loosed the quarrel.

Watched it strike the captain between the shoulderblades, watched the man sprawl forward, arms flung out to the sides.

Tarr and others in that front line turned to study him, silent, expressions blank beneath the rims of helms.

Smiles voiced a disbelieving laugh.

Heavy boots on the gangplank, then Keneb's harsh demand: 'Who was responsible for that?'

Koryk faced the Fist. 'I was, sir.'

'You just murdered a captain of the Untan Palace Guard, soldier.'

'Yes, sir.'

From Tarr: 'They're coming back for another try! Looks like you got 'em mad, Koryk.'

'Proof enough for me,' the half-blood Seti said in a growl, as he began reloading his crossbow. As he waited for Keneb to speak. Waited for the command to Balm to arrest him.

Instead, the Fist said nothing. He turned about and walked back to the Froth Wolf.

A hiss from Smiles. 'Look out, Koryk. Wait till Fid hears about this.'

'Fid?' snapped Sergeant Balm. 'What about the Adjunct? You're gonna get strung up, Koryk.'

'If I am then I am. But I'd do it all over again. Bastard wanted us to hand them the Wickans.'

Numbed, Keneb stepped back onto the mid deck. '... wanted us to hand them the Wickans...' Marines and sailors were all looking at him, and the Destriant Run'Thurvian had appeared from below and now approached.

'Fist Keneb, this night is not proceeding well, is it?'

Keneb blinked. 'Destriant?'

'A most grievous breach of discipline—'

'I am sorry,' Keneb cut in, 'it's clear you misunderstand. Some time ago, the Adjunct proclaimed the birth of the Bonehunters. What did she see then? I had but a sense of it – barely a sense. More like a suspicion. But now ...' he shook his head. 'Three squads on the jetty standing their ground, and why?'

'Fist, the threat is perceived, and must be answered.'

'We could cast lines and sail out. Instead, here we are. Here they are, ready to bloody the noses of anyone who dares come close. Ready to answer blood with blood. Betrayal, Destriant, stalks this night like a god, right here in Malaz City.' He strode past the others, back to the forecastle. 'That ballista loaded?' he demanded.
One of the crew nodded. 'Aye, Fist.'

'Good. They're closing fast.'

The Destriant moved up beside Keneb. 'Fist, I do not understand.'

Keneb pulled his attention from the hundreds edging ever closer. 'But I do. I've seen. We're holding the jetty, and not one damned soldier down there gives a damn about anything else! Why?' He thumped the rail. 'Because we're waiting. We're waiting for the Adjunct. Destriant, we're hers, now. It's done, and the damned empire can rot!'

The other man's eyes slowly widened at this outburst, and then, with a faint smile, he bowed. 'As you say, Fist. As you say.'

Last door down the tenement hall, uppermost floor. Typical. The knife-edge slipped easily between the door and the frame, lifted the latch. A slow, even push moved the door back with but the faintest moan from the leather hinges.

Fiddler slipped inside, looked round in the gloom.

Loud animal snoring and grunts from the cot, a smell of stale beer pervading the turgid air.

Moving in the tiniest increments, Fiddler lowered his collection of crossbows to the floor, a procedure taking nearly thirty heartbeats, yet not once did the stentorian notes of slumber pause from the figure on the cot.

Unburdened now, Fiddler crept closer, breathing nice and slow, until he hovered right above his unsuspecting victim's shaggy head.

Then he began whispering in a singsong voice, 'Your ghosts – we're back – never to leave you alone, never to give you a moment's rest – oh yes, dear Braven Tooth, it's me, Fiddler, dead but not gone – a ghost, returning to haunt you until your last—'

The fist came out of nowhere, connecting solidly with Fiddler's midriff. All air driven from him, the sergeant collapsed backward, onto the floor, where he curled up round the agony—

As Braven Tooth climbed upright. 'That wasn't funny, Fiddler,' he said, looking down. 'But you, squirming round down there on the floor, now that's funny.'

'Shut that mouth,' gasped Fiddler, 'and find me a chair.'

The Master Sergeant helped him to his feet. Leaning heavily, Fiddler carefully straightened, the effort punctuated with winces and the hiss of breath between his teeth.

'You'll live?'

A nod, and Fiddler managed to step back. 'All right, I deserved that—'

'Goes without saying,' Braven Tooth replied.

They faced each other in the darkness for a moment. And then they embraced. And said nothing.

A moment later the door swung open behind them. They parted to see Gesler and Stormy, the former carrying two bottles of wine and the latter three loaves of bread.

'Hood's breath!' Braven Tooth laughed. 'The old bastards one and all come home!'

As Gesler and Stormy set their victuals down on a small table, Fiddler examined the fiddle that had been strapped to his back. No damage beyond the old damage, he was pleased to see. He drew out the bow, looked round as Braven Tooth ignited a lantern, then walked over to a chair and sat down.
A moment, then all three men were staring across at him.

'I know,' Fiddler said. 'Braven Tooth, you remember the last time I played—'

'That was the last time?'

'It was, and there's been a lot who've fallen since then. Friends. People we grew to love, and now miss, like holes in the heart.' He drew a deep breath, then continued, 'It's been waiting, inside, for a long time. So, my old, old friends, let's hear some names.'

Braven Tooth sat down on the cot, scratching at his beard. 'Got a new one for you. A soldier I sent off this very night who got himself killed. Name of Gentur. His friend Mudslinger nearly died himself but it looks like the Lady pulled. And we found him in time to help things along.'

Fiddler nodded. 'Gentur. All right. Gesler?'

'Kulp. Baudin. And, I think, Felisin Paran – she had no luck at all, and when good things showed up, rare as that was, well, she didn't know what to do or say.' He shrugged. 'A person hurts enough inside, all they can do is hurt back. So, her as well.' He paused, then added, 'Pella, Truth.'

'And Coltaine,' Stormy said. 'And Duiker, and the Seventh.'

Fiddler began tuning the instrument. 'Good names, one and all. I'll add a few more. Whiskeyjack. Hedge. Trotts. And one more – no name yet, and it's not so bad as that. One more ...' He grimaced. 'Could sound a little rough, no matter how much rosin I use. No matter. Got a sad dirge in my head that needs to come out—'

'AIl sad, Fid?'

'No, not all. I leave the good memories to you – but I'll give you a whisper every now and then, to tell you I know what you're feeling. Now, settle down – pour them cups full, Gesler – this'll take a while, I expect.'

And he began to play.

The heavy door at the top of Rampart Way opened with a squeal, revealing a massive, humped form silhouetted on the threshold. As the Adjunct reached the level, the figure stepped back. She strode into the gatehouse, followed by T'amber, then Fist Tene Baralta. Kalam entered the musty room. The air was sweet with the cloying fumes of rum.

The assassin paused opposite the keeper. 'Lubben.'

A heavy, rumbling reply, 'Kalam Mekhar.'

'Busy night?'

'Not everybody uses the door,' Lubben replied.

Kalam nodded, and said nothing more. He continued on, emerging out into the keep's courtyard, tilted flagstones underfoot, the old tower off to the left, the hold itself slightly to his right. The Adjunct had already traversed half the length of the concourse. Behind Kalam the escort of Untan Guard now separated themselves from the group, making for the barracks near the north wall.

Kalam squinted up at the murky moon. A faint wind brushed across his face, warm, sultry and dry, plucking at the sweat on his brow. Somewhere overhead, a weather vane squealed momentarily. The assassin set off after the others.

Two Claws flanked the keep entrance – not the usual guard. Kalam wondered where the resident Fist and his garrison were this night. *Probably in the storehouse cellars, blind drunk. Hood knows, it's where I would be in their boots.* Not old Lubben, of course. That hoary hunchback was as old as the Rampart Gate itself – he'd always been there, as far back as the Emperor's time and even, if rumours were true, back to Mock's rule of the island.
As Kalam passed between the two assassins, both tilted their hooded heads in his direction. A mocking
acknowledgement, he concluded, or something worse. He made no response, continuing on into the broad
hallway.

Another Claw had been awaiting them, and this cowled figure now led them towards the staircase.

Ascending two levels, then down a corridor, into an antechamber, where Tene Baralta ordered his Red
Blades to remain, barring his captain, Lostara Yil. The Fist then sent off two of his soldiers after a brief
whispered set of instructions. The Adjunct watched all of this without expression, although Kalam was tempted
to call Baralta out on what was obviously an act of pointed independence – as if Tene Baralta was divesting
himself and his Red Blades of any association with the Adjunct and the Fourteenth Army.

After a moment, the Claw led them onward, through another portal, into another corridor, then down its
length to a set of double doors. Not the usual room for official meetings, Kalam knew. This one was smaller –
if the approach was any indication – and situated in a quarter of the keep rarely frequented. Two more Claws
stood guard at the entrance, and both turned to open the doors.

Kalam watched the Adjunct stride in, then halt. As did T’amber and Tene Baralta. Beside the assassin,
Lostara Yil's breath caught.

A tribunal awaited them, and seated opposite them were Empress Laseen, Korbolo Dom – attired as a High
Fist – and another person Kalam did not recognize. Roundfaced and full-featured, corpulent, wearing blue silks.
His hair was colourless, cut short and oiled. Sleepy eyes regarded the Adjunct with an executioner's avarice.

The tables were arranged in an inverted T, and three chairs waited, their high backs to the newcomers.

After a long moment, the Adjunct stepped forward, drew out the centre chair, and sat, her back straight.
T’amber took the chair to Tavore’s left. Tene Baralta gestured Lostara Yil to accompany him and moved off to
the far right side, where he stood at attention, facing the Empress.

Kalam slowly sighed, then walked to the remaining chair. Sitting down, he settled both gloved hands on the
scarred tabletop before him.

The oily fat man fixed his gaze on the assassin and leaned forward slightly. 'Kalam Mekhar, yes? Great
pleasure,' he murmured, 'in meeting you at last.'

'Is it? I'm happy for you ... whoever you are.'

'Mallick Rel.'

'Here in what capacity?' Kalam asked. 'Chief snake?'

'That will be enough from you,' the Empress said. 'Sit if you must, Kalam, but be silent. And understand, I
did not request your presence here this night.'

Kalam sensed a hidden question in that statement, to which he but shrugged.

Laseen, I'm not ready to give you anything.

Laseen shifted her attention to the commander of the Red Blades. 'Tene Baralta, I understand you assisted in
escorting the Adjunct and her retinue through the city. Noble of you. I assume the Adjunct did not invite you,
nor compel you in any manner. Accordingly, it seems clear that you wish to speak to me on behalf of the Red
Blades.'

The man with the ravaged face bowed, then said, 'Yes, Empress.'

'Go on.'

'The Red Blades were conscripted by the Adjunct in Aren, Empress, whereupon I was made a Fist in the
Fourteenth Army. I respectfully request that you countermand that order. The Red Blades have ever served the
Malazan Empire in an independent capacity, as befitting our unique status the first and foremost Imperial
Guardians in Seven Cities.'

The Empress nodded. 'I see no reason not to grant your request, Commander. Does the Adjunct wish to make comment?'

'No.'

'Very well. Commander Tene Baralta, the Red Blades can be quartered here in Mock's Hold for the time being. You may leave.'

The man bowed again, then, turning about, he marched from the chamber. His captain followed.

The doors closed once more behind them.

Laseen fixed her attention on the Adjunct. 'Welcome home, Tavore,' she said.

'Thank you, Empress.'

'The transports in the harbour display the flag of plague – you and I both know that no plague is present among the soldiers of your army.' She tilted her head. 'What am I to make of this attempt at deception?'

'Empress, Fist Keneb has evidently concluded that, regardless of Captain Rynag's views, Malaz City is in a state of civil unrest, sufficient to make Keneb fear for the wellbeing of the Fourteenth, should the army disembark. After all, I have with me Wickans – whose loyalty to the Empire, I might add, is beyond reproach. In addition, we have a substantial force of Khundryl Burned Tears, who have also served with distinction. To land such troops could invite a bloodbath.'

'A bloodbath, Adjunct?' Laseen's brows rose. 'Captain Rynag was given specific orders to ensure that the soldiers of the Fourteenth disarm prior to disembarking.'

'Thus leaving them at the mercy of an enflamed mob, Empress.'

Laseen waved dismissively.

'Empress,' the Adjunct continued, 'I believe there is now the misapprehension, here in the heart of the empire, that the events commonly known as the Chain of Dogs – and those that followed at Aren – are somehow suspect.' She paused, then resumed, 'I see that Korbolo Dom, who commanded the renegade Dogslayers, and who was captured and arrested in Raraku, is once more a free man, and, indeed, a High Fist. Furthermore, the Jhistal priest and likely instigator in the slaughter of the Aren Army, Mallick Rel, now sits as your adviser in these proceedings. Needless to say, I am confused by this. Unless, of course, the Seven Cities Rebellion has succeeded beyond its wildest dreams, regardless of my own successes in Seven Cities.'

'My dear Tavore,' Laseen said, 'I admit to some embarrassment on your behalf. You appear to hold to the childish notion that some truths are intransigent and undeniable. Alas, the adult world is never so simple. All truths are malleable. Subject, by necessity, to revision. Have you not yet observed, Tavore, that in the minds of the people in this empire, truth is without relevance? It has lost its power. It no longer effects change and indeed, the very will of the people – born of fear and ignorance, granted – the very will, as I said, can in turn revise those truths, can transform, if you like, the lies of convenience into faith, and that faith in turn is not open to challenge.'

'In challenging,' the Adjunct said after a moment, 'one commits treason.'

The Empress smiled. 'I see you grow older with every heartbeat, Tavore. Perhaps we might mourn the loss of innocence, but not for long, I'm afraid. The Malazan Empire is at its most precarious moment, and all is uncertain, hovering on the cusp. We have lost Dujek Onearm to plague – and his army appears to have vanished entirely, likely also victims of that plague. Events have taken a turn for the worse in Korel. The decimation of Seven Cities has struck us a near-mortal blow with respect to our economy and, specifically, the harvests. We may find ourselves facing starvation before the subcontinent can recover. It becomes imperative, Tavore, to force a new shape upon our empire.'
'And what, Empress, does this new shape entail?'

Mallick Rel spoke: 'Victims, alas. Spilled blood, to slacken the thirst, the need. Unfortunate, but no other path presents. All are saddened here.'

Tavore slowly blinked. 'You wish me to hand over the Wickans.'

'And,' Mallick Rel said, 'the Khundryl.'

Korbolo Dom suddenly leaned forward. 'One other matter, Tavore Paran. Who in Hood's name are on those catamarans?'

'Soldiers of a people known as the Perish.'

'Why are they here?' the Napan demanded, baring his teeth.

'They have pledged allegiance, High Fist.'

'To the Malazan Empire?'

The Adjunct hesitated, then fixed her gaze once more upon Laseen. 'Empress, I must speak with you. In private.

There are matters that belong exclusively to the Empress and her Adjunct.'

Mallick Rel hissed, then said, 'Matters unleashed by an otataral sword, you mean! It is as I feared, Empress! She serves another, now, and would draw cold iron across the throat of the Malazan Empire!'

Tavore's expression twisted, unveiling disgust as she looked upon the Jhistal priest. 'The empire has ever refused an immortal patron, Mallick Rel. For this reason more than any other, we have survived and, indeed, grown ever stronger. What are you doing here, priest?'

'Who do you now serve, woman?' Mallick Rel demanded.

'I am the Adjunct to the Empress.'

'Then you must do as she commands! Give us the Wickans!'

'Us? Ah, now I see. You were cheated of some of your glory outside Aren. Tell me, how long before an arrest writ is issued for Fist Blistig, the once-commander of the Aren Guard who defied the order to leave the city? Because of him and him alone, Aren did not fall.'

Laseen asked, 'Were not the Red Blades in Aren arrested by Blistig, Tavore?'

'At Pormqual's command. Please, Empress, we must speak, you and I, alone.'

And Kalam saw then, in Laseen's eyes, something he thought he would never see. A flicker of fear.

But it was Korbolo Dom who spoke. 'Adjunct Tavore, I am now High Fist. And, with Dujek's death, I am ranking High Fist. Furthermore, I have assumed the title and responsibilities of First Sword of the Empire, a post sadly vacant since Dassem Ultor's untimely death. Accordingly, I now assume command of the Fourteenth Army.'

'Tavore,' Laseen said quietly, 'it was never the function of an Adjunct to command armies. Necessity forced my hand with the rebellion in Seven Cities, but that is now over. You have completed all that I asked of you, and I am not blind to your loyalty. It grieves me that this meeting has become so overtly hostile – you are the extension of my will, Tavore, and I do not regret my choice. No, not even now. It seems I must make the details of my will clear to you. I want you at my side once more, in Unta. Mallick Rel may well possess talents in many areas of administration, but he lacks in others – I need you for those, Tavore, I need you at my side to complement the Jhistal priest. You see before you the restructuring of the imperial high command. A new First Sword now assumes overall command of the Malazan Armies. The time has come, Tavore, to set aside your
own sword.'

Silence. From Tavore, no movement, not a single twitch of emotion. ‘As you command, Empress.’

Beneath his clothes, Kalam felt his skin grow hot, as if close to blistering flames. Sweat ran down his body; he could feel it beading on his face and neck. He stared down at his leather-clad hands, motionless on the worn wood of the tabletop.

‘I am pleased,’ Laseen said.

‘It will be necessary,’ Tavore said, ‘for me to return, briefly, to the docks. I believe Fist Keneb will doubt the veracity of the change of command if informed by anyone but me.’

‘A most loyal man,’ Mallick Rel murmured.

‘Yes, he is that.’

‘And these Perish?’ Korbolo Dom demanded. ‘Are they worth the trouble? Will they submit to my authority?’

‘I cannot speak for them in that matter,’ Tavore said tonelessly. ‘But they will not reject any overtures out of hand. As for their prowess, I believe it will suffice, at least in an auxiliary function to our regulars.’

‘There is nothing more to them?’

The Adjunct’s shrug was careless. ‘They are foreigners, First Sword. Barbarians.’

*Barbarians sailing the finest warships on the damned ocean, aye.*

But Korbolo Dom, in all his percipience and razor-honed judgement, simply nodded.

Another moment of silence, in which so many things could have been said, in which the course of the Malazan Empire could have found firmer footing. Silence, and yet to Kalam it seemed he could hear the slamming of doors, the clatter and crunch of portcullis dropping, and he saw hallways, avenues, where the flickering light dimmed, then vanished.

If the Empress were to speak then, with words for the Adjunct alone – anything, any overture that did not ring false—

Mallick Rel said, ‘Adjunct, there is the matter of two Wickans, a warlock and a witch.’

Tavore’s eyes remained on Laseen. ‘Of course. Fortunately, they are ineffectual, a consequence of the trauma they experienced with Coltaine’s death.’

‘Nonetheless, the Claw will effect their arrest.’

The Empress said, ‘It cannot be helped, Tavore. Even with a remnant of their old power, they could unleash slaughter upon the citizens of Malaz City, and that we cannot have.’

‘The blood this night belongs to the Wickans and the Khundryl.’ A statement from the Adjunct, devoid of all emotion.

‘It must be so,’ the Jhistal priest murmured, as if struck anew by grief.

‘Tavore,’ Laseen said, ‘will the Khundryl prove recalcitrant in yielding their arms and armour? Do they not number two thousand, or more?’

‘A word from me will suffice,’ the Adjunct said.

‘I am greatly relieved,’ the Empress said, with a faint smile, ‘that you now comprehend the necessity of what will occur this night. In the broader scheme of things, Tavore, the sacrifice is modest. It is also clear that the Wickans have outlived their usefulness – the old covenants with the tribes must be dispensed with, now that Seven Cities and its harvest have become so thoroughly disrupted. In other words, we need the Wickan Plains.'
The herds must be slaughtered and the earth broken, crops planted. Seven Cities has provided us a harsh lesson when it comes to relying upon distant lands for the resources the empire consumes.’

‘In this way,’ Mallick Rel said, spreading his hands, ‘necessity is an economic matter, yes? That an ignorant and backward people must be eradicated is sad, indeed, but alas, inevitable.’

‘You would well know of that,’ Tavore said to him. ‘The Gedorion Falari cult of the Jhistal was eradicated in a similar manner by Emperor Kellanved, after all. Presumably you are among the very few survivors from that time.’

Mallick Rel's round, oiled face slowly drained of what little colour it had possessed.

The Adjunct continued, 'A very minor note in the imperial histories, difficult to find. I believe, however, should you peruse the works of Duiker, you will find suitable references. Of course, "minor" is a relative term, just as, I suppose, this Wickan Pogrom will be seen in later histories. For the Wickans themselves, of course, it will be anything but minor.’

'Your point, woman?’ Mallick Rel asked.

'IT is useful, on occasion, to halt upon a path, and to turn and walk back some distance.'

'Achieving what?’

'An understanding of motivations, Jhistal. It seems that this is a night of unravelling, after all. Covenants, treaties, and memories—’

'This debate,’ the Empress cut in, 'can be conducted another time. The mob in the city below will soon turn upon itself if the proper victims are not delivered. Are you ready, Adjunct?’

Kalam found he was holding his breath. He could not see Tavore's eyes, but something in Laseen's told him that the Adjunct had locked gazes with the Empress, and in that moment something passed between them, and slowly, in increments, the eyes of Laseen went flat, strangely colourless.

The Adjunct rose. 'I am, Empress.’

'T'amber also stood, and, before anyone could shift their attention to Kalam, the assassin climbed to his feet.

'Adjunct,’ he said in a weary rumble, 'I will see you out.’

'When you are done that courtesy,’ the Empress said, 'please return here. I have never accepted your resignation from the Claw, Kalam Mekhar, and indeed, it is in my mind that worthy promotions are long overdue. The apparent loss of Topper in the Imperial Warren has left vacant the command of the Claw. I can think of no-one more deserving of that position.’

Kalam's brows lifted. 'And do you imagine, Empress, that I would assume that mantle and just settle back in Unta's West Tower, surrounding myself with whores and sycophants? Do you expect another Topper?’

Now it was Laseen's turn to speak without inflection. 'Most certainly not, Kalam Mekhar.'

_The entire Claw, under my control. Gods, who would fall first? Mallick Rel. Korbolo Dom …_

_And she knows that. She offers that. I can cut the cancers out of the flesh ... but first, some Wickans need to die. And ... not just Wickans._

Not trusting himself to speak, and not knowing what he might say if he did, Kalam simply bowed to the Empress, then followed Tavore and T’amber as they strode from the chamber.

Into the corridor.

Twenty-three paces to the antechamber – no Red Blades remained – where Tavore paused, gesturing to T’amber who moved past and positioned herself at the far door. The Adjunct then shut the one behind them.
And faced Kalam.

But it was T'amber who spoke. 'Kalam Mekhar. How many Hands await us?'

He looked away. 'Each Hand is trained to work as a unit. Both a strength and a flaw.'

'How many?'

'Four ships moored below. Could be as many as eighty.'

'Eighty?'

The assassin nodded. *You are dead, Adjunct. So are you, T'amber.* 'She will not let you get back to the ships,' he said, still not meeting their gazes. 'To do so invites a civil war—'

'No,' Tavore said.

Kalam frowned, glanced at her.

'We are leaving the Malazan Empire. And in all likelihood, we will never return.'

He walked to a wall, leaned his back against it, and closed his eyes. Sweat streamed down his face. 'Don't you understand what she just offered me? I can walk right back into that room and do precisely what she wants me to do – what she needs me to do. She and I will then walk out of there, leaving two corpses, their heads sawed off and planted on that damned table. Damn this, Tavore. Eighty Hands!'

'I understand,' the Adjunct said. 'Go then. I will not think less of you, Kalam Mekhar. You are of the Malazan Empire. Now serve it.'

Still he did not move, not open his eyes. 'So it means nothing to you, now, Tavore?'

'I have other concerns.'

'Explain them.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

T'amber said, 'There is a convergence this night, Kalam, here in Malaz City. The game is in a frenzy of move and countermove, and yes, Mallick Rel is a participant, although the hand that guides him remains remote, unseen. Removing him, as you intend to do, will prove a deadly blow and may well shift the entire balance. It may well save not just the Malazan Empire, but the world itself. How can we object to your desire?'

'And yet ...'

'Yes,' T'amber said. 'We are asking you. Kalam, without you we stand no chance at all—'

'Six hundred assassins, damn you!' He set his head against the wall, unwilling, unable to look upon these two women, to see the need in their eyes. 'I'm not enough. You have to see that. We all go down, and Mallick Rel lives.'

'As you say,' Tavore replied.

He waited for her to add something more, a final plea. He waited for a new tack from T'amber. But there was only silence.

'Is it worth it, Adjunct?'

'Win this battle, Kalam, or win the war.'

'I'm just one man.'
'Yes.'

*With a shaved knuckle in the hole.*

His palms itched against the damp leather of his gloves. 'That Jhistal priest holds a grudge.'

'A prolonged one, yes,' said T'amber. 'That, and a lust for power.'

'Laseen is desperate.'

'Yes, Kalam, she is.'

'Why not stay right here, the both of you? Wait for me to kill them. Wait, and I will convince the Empress that this pogrom needs to be stopped. Right now. No more blood spilled. There's six hundred assassins in the city below – we can crush this madness, scour away this fever—'

'No more blood, Kalam Mekhar?'

T'amber's question stung him, then he shook his head. 'Ringleaders, nothing more will be required.'

'It is clear that something has not occurred to you,' T'amber said.

'What hasn't?'

'The Claw. They are infiltrated. Extensively. The Jhistal priest has not been idle.'

'How do you know this?'

Silence once more.

Kalam rubbed at his face with both hands. 'Gods below ...'

'May I ask you a question?'

He snorted. 'Go ahead, T'amber.'

'You once railed at the purging of the Old Guard. In fact, you came to this very city not so long ago, intending to assassinate the Empress.'

*How does she know this? How could she know any of this? Who is she? Go on.*

'You were driven by outrage, by indignation. Your own memories had been proclaimed nothing but lies, and you wanted to defy those revisionists who so sullied all that you valued. You wanted to look into the eyes of the one who decided the Bridgeburners had to die – you needed to see the truth there, and, if you found it, you would act. But she talked you out of it—'

'She wasn't even here.'

'Ah, you knew that, then. Well, no matter. Would that alone have stopped you from crossing to UnTa? From chasing her down?'

He shook his head.

'In any case, where now is your indignation, Kalam Mekhar? Coltaine of the Crow Clan. The Imperial Historian Duiker. The Seventh Army. And now, the Wickans of the Fourteenth. Fist Temul. Nil, Nether. Gall of the Khundryl Burned Tears, who threw back Korbolo Dom at Sanimon – cheating Korbolo's victory long before Aren. The betrayers are in the throne room—'

'I can make that stay shortlived.'

'You can. And if you so choose, the Adjunct and I will die possessing at least that measure of satisfaction. But in dying, so too will many, many others. More than any of us can comprehend.'
'You ask where is my indignation, but you have the answer before you. It lives. Within me. And it is ready to kill. Right now.'

'Killing Mallick Rel and Korbolo Dom this night,' T'amber said, 'will not save the Wickans, nor the Khundryl. Will not prevent war with the Perish. Or the destruction of the Wickan Plains. The Empress is indeed desperate, so desperate that she will sacrifice her Adjunct in exchange for the slaying of the two betrayers in her midst. But tell me, do you not think Mallick Rel understood the essence of Laseen's offer to you?'

'Is that your question?'

'Yes.'

'Korbolo Dom is a fool. Likely he comprehends nothing. The Jhistal priest is, unfortunately, not a fool. So, he is prepared.' Kalam fell silent, although his thoughts continued, following countless tracks. Potentials, possibilities. 'He may not know I possess an otataral weapon—'

'The power he can draw upon is Elder,' T'amber said.

'So, after all we've said here, I may fail.'

'You may.'

'And if I do, then we all lose.'

'Yes.'

Kalam opened his eyes, and found that the Adjunct had turned away. T'amber alone faced him, her gold-hued eyes unwavering in their uncanny regard.

_Six hundred._ 'Tell me this, T'amber: between you and the Adjunct, whose life matters more?'

The reply was immediate. 'The Adjunct's.'

It seemed that Tavore flinched then, but would not face them.

'And,' Kalam asked, 'between you and me?'

'Yours.'

Ah. 'Adjunct. Choose, if you will, between yourself and the Fourteenth.'

'What is the purpose of all this?' Tavore demanded, her voice ragged.

'Choose.'

'Fist Keneb has his orders,' she said.

Kalam slowly closed his eyes once more. Somewhere, at the back of his mind, a faint, ever faint sound. Music. Filled with sorrow. 'Warrens in the city,' he said in a soft voice. 'Many, seething with power – Quick Ben will be hardpressed even if I can get through to him, and there's no chance of using gates. Adjunct, you will need your sword. Otataral out front ... and to the rear.'

Strange music, the tune unfamiliar and yet ... he knew it.

Kalam opened his eyes, even as the Adjunct slowly turned.

The pain in her gaze was like a blow against his heart.

'Thank you,' she said.

The assassin drew a deep breath, then rolled his shoulders. 'All right, no point in keeping them waiting.'
Pearl stepped into the chamber. Mallick Rel was pacing, and Korbolo Dom had uncorked a bottle of wine and was pouring himself a goblet. The Empress remained in her chair.

She wasted no time on small talk. "The three are nearing the Gate."

'I see. So, Kalam Mekhar made his choice, then.'

A flicker of something like disappointment. 'Yes, he is out of your way now, Pearl.'

You bitch. Offered him the Claw, did you? And where would that have left me?

'He and I have unfinished business, Empress.'

'Do not let that interfere with what must be done. Kalam is the least relevant target, do you understand me? Get him out of the way, of course, but then complete what is commanded of you.'

'Of course, Empress.'

'When you return,' Laseen said, with a small smile on her plain features, 'I have a surprise for you. A pleasant one.'

'I doubt I shall be gone long—'

'It is that overconfidence that I find most irritating in you, Pearl.'

'Empress, he is one man!'

'Do you imagine the Adjunct helpless? She wields an otataral sword, Pearl — the sorcery by which the Claw conduct their ambushes will not work. This will be brutal. Furthermore, there is T'amber, and she remains — to all of us — a mystery. I do not want you to return to me at dawn to inform me that success has left two hundred dead Claws in the streets and alleys below.'

Pearl bowed.

'Go, then.'

Mallick Rel turned at that moment, 'Clawmaster,' he said, 'when the task is done, be sure to dispatch two Hands to the ship, Froth Wolf, with instructions to kill Nil and Nether. If opportunity arrives thereafter, they are to kill Fist Keneb as well.'

Pearl frowned. 'Quick Ben is on that ship.'

'Leave him be,' the Empress said.

'He will not act to defend the targets?'

'His power is an illusion,' Mallick Rel said dismissively. 'His title as High Mage is unearned, yet I suspect he enjoys the status, and so will do nothing to reveal the paucity of his talents.'

Pearl slowly cocked his head. Really, Mallick Rel?

'Send out the commands,' Laseen said.

The Clawmaster bowed again, then left the chamber.

Kalam Mekhar. Finally, we can end this. For that, Empress, thank you.

They entered the gatehouse at the top of Rampart Way. Lubben was a shadow hunched over a small table off to one side. The keeper glanced up, then down again. A large bronze tankard was nestled in his huge, battered hands.

Kalam paused. 'Tilt that back once for us, will you?'
A nod. 'Count on it.'

They moved to the opposite gate.

Behind them, Lubben said, 'Mind that last step down there.'

'We will.'

_And thanks for that, Lubben._

They stepped out onto the landing.

Below, buildings were burning here and there across the city. Torches scurried back and forth like glowworms in rotted flesh. Faint shouts, screams. Centre Docks was a mass of humanity.

'Marines on the jetty,' the Adjunct said.

'They're holding,' T'amber noted, as if to reassure Tavore.

_Gods below, there must be a thousand or more in that mob._ 'There's barely three squads there, Adjunct.'

She said nothing, and began the descent. T'amber followed, and finally, with a last glance at the seething battle at Centre Docks, Kalam set off in their wake.

Tene Baralta strode into the well-furnished room, paused to look around for a moment, then made his way to a plush high-backed chair. 'By the Seven,' he said with a loud sigh, 'at last we are done with the cold-eyed bitch.' He sat down, stretched out his legs. 'Pour us some wine, Captain.'

Lostara Yil approached her commander. 'That can wait.

Allow me to help you out of your armour, sir.'

'Good idea. The ghost of my arm pains me so – my neck muscles are like twisted bars of iron.'

She drew the lone gauntlet off his remaining hand and set it on the table. Then moved to behind the chair, reached over and unclasped the man's cloak. He half-rose, allowing her to pull it away. She folded it carefully and set it on top of a wooden chest near the large, cushion-piled bed. Returning to Tene Baralta she said, 'Stand for a moment, sir, if you will. We will remove the chain.'

Nodding, he straightened. It was awkward, but they finally managed to draw the heavy armour away. She placed it in a heap at the foot of the bed. Baralta's under-quilting was damp with sweat, pungent and stained under the arms. She pulled it away, leaving the man bare above the hips. The scars of old burns were livid weals. His muscles had softened with disuse beneath a layer of fat.

'High Denul,' Lostara said, 'the Empress will not hesitate in seeing you properly mended.'

'That she will,' he said, settling back into the chair. 'And then, Lostara Yil, you will not flinch when looking upon me. I have had many thoughts, of you and me.'

'Indeed.' She moved up behind him yet again, and began kneading the rock-hard tension gripping the muscles to either side of his neck.

'Yes. It is, I believe now, meant to be.'

'Do you recall, sir,' she said, 'a visit I made, long ago now, when on Kalam Mekhar's trail. A visit to a garrison keep. I sat at the very same table as the assassin. A Deck was unveiled, rather unexpectedly. Death and Shadow predominated the field, if my memory serves – and that, I admit, I cannot guarantee. In any case, following your instructions precisely, I later conducted a thorough slaughter of everyone present – after Kalam's departure, of course.'
'You have always followed orders with impressive precision, Lostara Yil.'

She brought her left hand up along his jaw-line, stroking softly. 'That morning of murder, Commander, remains my greatest regret. They were innocents, one and all.'

'Do not let such errors weigh on you, my love.'

'Let is a difficult task, sir. Achieving the necessary coldness.'

'You have singular talents in such matters.'

'I suppose I have,' she said, as her palm brushed his mangled lips, then settled there, against his mouth. And the knife in her other hand slid into the side of his neck, behind the windpipe, then slashed out and down.

Blood flooded against the palm of her hand, along with gurgling sounds and bubbles of escaping air. The body in the chair twitched a few times, then slumped down.

Lostara Yil stepped away. She wiped the knife and her hands on the silk bedding. Sheathing the weapon once more, she collected her gloves, and walked to the door.

She opened it only wide enough to permit her passage through, and to the two Red Blades standing guard outside, she said, 'The commander sleeps now. Do not disturb him.'

The soldiers saluted.

Lostara closed the door, then strode down the corridor.

Very well, Cotillion, you were right about him after all.
And once again, the necessary coldness was achieved.

Uru Hela was down, screaming and curling up round the spear transfixing her torso. Swearing, Koryk pushed hard with his shield, driving the attackers back until he could step over her. Smiles edged in behind him, grasped the downed soldier by the belt and pulled Uru Hela back.

Another sharper exploded, bodies whirling away in sheets of blood, the spray striking Koryk's face beneath the helm. He blinked stinging heat from his eyes, took a mace blow against his shield, then thrust upward from beneath it, the sword-point ripping into a groin. The shriek that exploded from the crippled attacker nearly deafened him. He tugged the sword loose.

There were shouts behind him, but he could make little sense of them. With Uru Hela out of the fight, and Shortnose getting crippled by a sword through a thigh in the last rush, the front line was desperately thin. Both Galt and Lobe had joined it now. Deadsmell worked on Shortnose's bleeder, and Widdershins was frantically trying to deflect assaults of Mockra – the sorcerous attacks seeking to incite confusion and panic – and the squad mage was fast weakening.

What in Hood's name was Quick Ben up to? Where was he? Why hadn't he emerged onto the deck of the Froth Wolf.

Koryk found himself swearing in every language he knew. They couldn't hold.

And who was playing that damned music, anyway?

He fought on.

And saw nothing of what was happening behind him, the sliding out of darkness of the enormous wolf-headed catamaran, closing on the end of the jetty. The broad platforms scraping outward, thumping down on the solid stone. Units of heavily armoured soldiers marching across those platforms, archers among them, long arrows nocked to bowstrings.
Koryk slashed with his sword, saw some poor Malazan citizen's face split in half, the jaw torn away, a torrent of blood – the white gleam of exposed bone beneath each ear – then, reeling away, eyes filled with disbelief, horror—

*Killing our own – gods below – our own—*

A sudden ringing command from Sergeant Balm behind him. 'Disengage! Marines disengage!'

And discipline took hold – that command, echoing a hairy Master Sergeant's bawled orders on a drill field years ago – Koryk, snarling, lurched back, bringing up his shield to fend off an out-thrust spear—

All at once, soldiers were moving past him on either side, a new shield-wall clashing closed in front of him.

A chorus of screams as arrows whispered into the heaving mob, thudding into flesh.

Wheeling away, sword's point dragging then skipping across the uneven cobbles, Koryk staggered back.

*The Perish.*

*They're here.*

*And that's that.*

Galt was laughing. 'Our first real scrap, Sergeant. And it's against Malazans!'

'Well,' Balm said, 'laughing's better'n crying. But shut that mouth anyway.'

As the fighting intensified at the foot of the jetty, the marines sagged down onto the cobbles or staggered off in search of water. Wiping spattered blood from his eyes, Koryk looked round, bewildered, numbed. He saw two cloaked figures standing near the plank to the *Froth Wolf*. The Wickan witch and her warlock brother.

'Koryk of the Seti,' Nether said. 'Where is Bottle?'

'No idea,' he replied, squinting at the young woman. 'Somewhere' – he nodded towards the city behind him – 'in there.'

Nil said, 'He cannot get back. Not through that horde.'

Koryk spat onto the cobbles. 'He'll find a way,' he said.

'No worries about that,' Smiles added, walking up to the half-blood with a waterskin in her hands.

Nether spoke: 'You are all very confident.'

As Smiles handed Koryk the waterskin she said, 'Your heart's desire will be fine, is what I'm saying, Nether. He took his rat with him, didn't he?'

'His what?'

'Keeps it tucked in most of the time, it's true, but I seen it out more than once—'

'Enough,' Koryk growled under his breath.

Smile made a face at him. 'Spoilsport.'

'You two should get back onto the ship,' Koryk said to Nil and Nether. 'It's safer there – any stray arrow—'

'Soldier,' Nil cut in. 'You fight for the Wickans and for the Khundryl Burned Tears this night. We choose to witness.'

'Fine, just do it from the deck. What's the point of all this if you drop with an arrow through the throat?'

After a moment, the brother and sister both bowed – to Koryk and the other marines – then they turned about
and made their way back up the plank.

*Gods below, I've never seen them bow before. To anyone.*

'Mind that last step ...'

Kalam moved up directly behind the Adjunct. Twenty steps remained. 'With six left,' the assassin murmured, 'slow down and move to your left.'

She nodded.

The four moored dromons were off to one side, no guards present on the jetties. Directly ahead, at the foot of Rampart Way, stretched out a concourse. Opposite the clearing stood three imperial buildings, one a blockhouse and gaol, another a customs and tithes building and the third a solid, heavily fortified armoury for the City Watch. None of the usual guards were present, and the blockhouse was unlit.

Seven steps from the bottom. Kalam unsheathed his long-knives beneath his rain-cape.

The Adjunct edged to her left and hesitated.

In a blur Kalam swept past her, leading with his otataral weapon, and launched himself into the air, down, sailing over the last six steps.

Five figures seemed to materialize from nothing at the base of Rampart Way. One was crouched in Kalam's path, but twisted away to avoid a crushing collision. The otataral long-knife slashed out, the edge biting deep into the Claw's neck, dragging free to loose a jet of arterial blood.

Landing in a crouch, Kalam parried an attack from his left twice, as the Claw closed with a dagger in each hand. Blackened iron flickered between them, the snick of blade catching blade as, pivoting on his inside leg, Kalam dropped lower, lashing out with his other leg to sweep the Claw from his feet. The killer landed hard on his left hip. Kalam locked both dagger blades hard against the hilts of his long-knives, pushed them to either side, then drove his knee down into the centre of the Claw's chest. The sternum was punched inward with a sickening crunch, ribs to either side bowing outward. Even as he landed, Kalam threw his weight forward, over the downed man, the tip of one of his long-knives sinking deep into the Claw's right eye socket as he passed.

He felt a dagger-blade cut through the rain-cape on his back, then skitter along the chain beneath, and then he was out of range, shoulder dipping, rolling back into a crouch and spinning round.

The attacker had followed, almost as quick, and Kalam grunted as the Claw slammed into him. A dagger-point plunged through chain links above his left hip and, twisting hard, he felt a shallow opening of his flesh, then the point struck more chain, and was suddenly snagged. In the midst of this movement, and as the attacker seemed to bounce back from the impact – Kalam far outweighing him, or her – another dagger descended from overhead. An upward stop-thrust impaled that arm. The dagger spilled from a spasming hand. Leaving his long-knife there, Kalam slashed down against the other arm, severing tendons below the elbow. He then dropped that weapon as well, left hand inverting as it snapped up to grasp the front of the Claw's jerkin; his other hand closing on a handful down at the killer's crotch – male – and Kalam heaved the figure upward, over his left shoulder, then, spinning round, he hammered the Claw headfirst onto the pavestones.

Skull and entire head seemed to vanish within folds of hood and cloak. White matter spattered out.

Releasing the flopping body, Kalam collected both longknives, then turned to face the last two of the Hand.

Both were already down. The Adjunct stood above one, her sword out and slick with blood. T'amber appeared to have closed to hand-to-hand with the other Claw, somehow breaking the man's neck even as he plunged both daggers into her. Kalam stared as she tugged the weapons free – lower right shoulder, just beneath a clavicle, and her right waist – and flung them aside as if they were mere slivers.

He met the young woman's eyes, and it seemed the gold flared for a moment, before she casually turned away. 'Stuff those holes,' Kalam said, 'or you'll bleed out.'
'Never mind me,' she replied. 'Where to, now?'

There was anguish on the Adjunct's face as she looked upon her lover, and it seemed she was struggling not to reach out.

Kalam collected his other long-knife. 'Where to now, T'amber? Ambushes set for every direct approach to Centre Docks. Let's force them to pull up and move to intercept us. West, Adjunct, deeper into the city. We then swing south and keep going, right through Centre District, then take one of the inland bridges across to the Mouse – I know that area well – and, if we get that far, we head to the shoreline and back up north again. If necessary we can steal a fisher boat and scull our way over to the Froth Wolf.'

'Presumably we are being observed right now,' the Adjunct said.

Kalam nodded.

'And they understand that their sorcery will fail them.'

'Aye.'

'Forcing them to be more ... direct.'

'Before too long,' Kalam said, 'more than one Hand will have to come at us at once. That's when we're in real trouble.'

A faint smile.

Kalam faced T'amber again. 'We have to move fast—'

'I can keep up.'

'Why didn't you use your sword on that fool?'

'He was too close to the Adjunct. I got him from behind but he was skilled enough to strike anyway.'

Damn, talk about a bad start. 'Well, neither wound looks like much of a bleeder. We should get going.'

As they set out, westward, the cliff-face of the promontory to their right, the Adjunct said, 'Do most grown men bounce off when they run into you, Kalam Mekhar?'

'Quick always said I was the densest man he ever knew.'

'A Hand has broken cover,' T'amber said. 'They're moving parallel to us.'

Kalam glanced to his left. Seeing nothing, no-one. How does she know that? Do I doubt her? Not for a moment. 'Are they converging on our path?'

'Not yet.'

More official buildings, and then the first of the major estates of the Lightings District. No marauding riots up here. Naturally. 'At least we've got the streets to ourselves,' he muttered. More or less.

'There are but three gates leading down to Old Upper Estates,' the Adjunct said after a moment, 'and we are fast coming opposite the last of them.'

'Aye, any further west and it's all wall, an ever higher drop the farther we go. But there's an old estate, abandoned for years and hopefully still empty. There's a way down, and if we're lucky the Claw don't know about it.'

'Another Hand's just come up through the last gate,' T'amber said. 'They're linking up with the other one.'

'Just the two here in Lightings?'
'So far.'

'Are you sure?'

She glanced across at him. 'I have a keen sense of smell, Kalam Mekhar.'

Smell? 'I didn't know Claw assassins have stopped bathing.'

'Not that kind of smell. Aggression, and fear.'

'Fear? There's only the three of us, for Hood's sake!'

'And one of them is you, Kalam. Even so, they all want to be the Hand that takes you down. They will compete for that honour.'

'Idiots.' He gestured ahead. 'That one, with the high walls. I see no lights—'

'The gate is ajar,' the Adjunct said as they drew closer.

'Never mind that,' T'amber said. 'Here they come.'

All three spun round.

The deadening effect of the Adjunct's unsheathed sword was far more efficacious than that of Kalam's long-knife, and its range was revealed as, thirty paces up the street, ten cloaked figures shimmered into existence. 'Take cover!' Kalam hissed, ducking down.

Silvery quarrels flashed, barbed heads flickering in the faint moonlight as they corkscrewed in flight. Multiple impacts on the moss-stained wall behind them. Straightening, Kalam cursed to see T'amber rushing the killers.

'There's ten of them, you fool!

He raced forward.

Five paces from the fast-closing Claws, T'amber drew her sword.

There was an old saying, that for all the terror waiting in the gloved hands of an assassin, it was as nothing against a professional soldier. T'amber did not even slow down, her blade weaving to either side in a blur. Bodies sprawled in her wake, blood splashing out, knives clattering on the cobbles. A dagger hissed through the air, caught the woman on the right side of her chest, sinking deep. She ignored it – Kalam's eyes widened as he saw a severed head tumble away from what seemed the lightest slash of T'amber's longsword, and then he joined the fight.

Two Claws had darted past, out of T'amber's reach, and set off towards the Adjunct. Kalam shifted to come at them from their left. The nearer one leapt into his path, seeking to hold Kalam long enough for the other killer to close on Tavore.

A dancing flurry of parries from the Claw had begun even before Kalam engaged with his own weapons – and he recognized that form – the Web – 'Gods below, you fool,' he said in a snarl as he reached both long-knives into the skein of parries, feinted with minute jabs then, breaking his timing, evaded the knife-blades as they snapped across, and neatly impaled both hands.

The man screamed as Kalam closed in, pushing both stuck hands out to the sides, and head-butted him. Hooded head snapped back – and met the point of Kalam's righthand long-knife as it completed its disengage to come up behind the Claw. A grating crunch as the point drove up into the base of his brain. Even as he crumpled Kalam was stepping over him, into the wake of the last killer.

The Adjunct watched calmly as the Claw launched himself at her. Her stop-thrust took him in the cup of his throat, between the breastbones, the heavy blade punching through windpipe, then spine, and out the back, stretching but not cutting the cloak.
The Claw had thrown both daggers a heartbeat before spitting himself on the sword, and the Adjunct had lithely evaded both as she turned her body sideways in extending the stop-thrust.

Kalam slowed down, turned round, to see T’amber walking back towards them.

*Eight dead Claws. Damned impressive. Even if it took a knife in the lung to do it.*

There was frothy blood trickling onto T’amber’s chin. She had pulled out the knife and more blood soaked her tunic. Yet her strides were steady.

‘Through the gate, then,’ Kalam said.

They entered the courtyard. Overgrown, filled with rubbish. A fountain commanded the centre, the pool entirely sheathed in gleaming algae. Insects rose from it in a cloud that spun and whirled towards them. Kalam pointed with one weapon to the far wall. ‘That old well. There was once a natural cistern in the limestone under all of this. Some enterprising thief broke into it from below. Stole an entire fortune from the family living here. Left them destitute. This was long ago – that hoard of wealth bankrolled Kellanved’s early ventures in piracy on the lanes between here and the Napan Isles.’

The Adjunct glanced over. ‘Kellanved was the enterprising thief?’

‘More likely Dancer. The estate was Mock’s family, and, accordingly, the hoard was takings from twenty years of piracy. Not long after, Kellanved usurped Mock and annexed the whole island. Birth of the Malazan Empire. Among the few who know about it, this is called the Well of Plenty.’

A cough from T’amber, and she spat out a gout of blood.

Kalam eyed her in the gloom. That perfect face had grown very pale. He faced the well once more. ‘I’ll go first. The drop is about two and a half man-heights – if you can, use the side walls to work your way down as far as possible. Adjunct, do you hear music?’

‘Yes. Faint.’

Nodding, Kalam vaulted onto the lip of the well, then worked his way down. *Not just me, then. Fiddler, you’re breaking my heart.*

Four Hands, weapons out, hooded eyes scanning in every direction. Pearl stood above a body. The poor man’s head had been driven into the street, hard enough to turn it into pulp, to push the jaw and the base of the skull into the column of the neck between the shoulders, turning the spine into a coiled, splintered mess.

That was the one thing about Kalam Mekhar that one tended to forget, or even more erroneously, disregard. The bastard’s animal strength.

‘Westward,’ one of his lieutenants said in a whisper. ‘Along Lightings, likely to the last gate. They will seek to circle round, pulling loose our established ambushes—’

‘Not all of them,’ Pearl murmured. ‘I did not for a moment believe he would attempt the direct route. In fact, he’s about to run into the bulk of my small army.’

The lieutenant actually chuckled – Pearl faced him, stared for a long moment, then said, ‘Take two Hands and trail him. Don’t close, just get in sight every now and then.

Push them onward.’

‘They’ll turn and ambush us, Clawmaster—’

‘Probably. Enjoy your evening. Now go.’

An evil snicker would have been worse, but the chuckle was bad enough.
Pearl drew back the left sleeve of his loose silk shirt. The head of the quarrel set in the wrist-strapped crossbow was sheathed in thick wax. Easily pulled off when the time was propitious. In the meantime, he would not risk any possible contact with the paralt smeared on the head's edges. *No, this taste is for you, Kalam.*

*You’ve eliminated sorcery, after all. So, you leave me little choice, and no, I do not care about the Code.*

He rolled the sleeve back down, looked over at his two chosen Hands, his favoured, elite assassins. Not one of them a mage. Theirs was the most direct kind of talent. Tall, well-muscled, a match for Kalam's brawn. *We position ourselves south of Admiral Bridge, at the edge of the Mouse.*

One spoke: 'You believe they will get that far, Clawmaster?'

Pearl simply turned away. 'Let's go.'

Kalam edged down the low, narrow tunnel. He could see the brush of the garden disguising the cave mouth ahead. There were broken branches among it, and the air stank of bile and blood. *What's this, then?* Weapons out, he drew closer, came to the threshold.

There had been a Hand, positioned around the tunnel entrance. Five corpses, limbs sprawled. Kalam pushed through the brush.

They had been cut to pieces. Arms broken. Legs snapped. Blood everywhere, still dripping from some low branches on the tree commanding the abandoned orchard. Two had been cleanly eviscerated, their intestines tumbled out, trailing across the leaf-littered ground like bloated worms.

Movement behind him and he turned. The Adjunct and T’amber pushed their way into the clearing.

'That was fast,' Tavore said in a whisper.

'Not me, Adjunct.'

'I'm sorry. I realized that. We have friends, it seems.'

'Don't count on it,' Kalam said. 'This has the look of vendetta – someone or ones took out a whole lot of anger on these poor bastards. I don't think it has anything to do with us. As you said, the Claw is a compromised organization.'

'Have they turned on themselves?'

'Certainly looks that way.'

'Still in our favour, Kalam.'

'Well,' he muttered after a moment, 'that's not as important as the revelation that taking the long way round was anticipated. We've real trouble ahead, Adjunct.'

'There are sounds,' T’amber said, 'from the top of the well, I think. Hands. Two.'

'Fast,' said Kalam, baring his teeth. 'They want to flush us forward. To Hood with that. Stay here, you two.' He set off back into the tunnel. *Top of the well. Meaning you’ve got to come down ... one at a time. You were impatient, fools. And now it's going to cost you.*

Reaching the cistern, he saw the first set of moccasined feet appear, dangling from the hole in the ceiling. Kalam moved closer.

The Claw dropped, landed lightly, and died with a knifeblade through an eye socket. Kalam tugged his weapon free and pulled the slumping corpse to one side. Looking up, he waited for the next one.

Then he heard, echoing down, a voice.
Gathered round the well, the two Hands hesitated, looking down into the darkness. 'Lieutenant said he'd call up,' one of them hissed. 'I don't hear a thing down there.'

There then came a faint call, three fast clicks. A recognized signal. The assassins relaxed. 'Was checking out the entrance, I guess – Kalam must have got past the ambush in the orchard.'

'They say he's the meanest Claw there ever was. Not even Dancer wanted to mess with him.'

'Enough of that. Go on, Sturtho, get down there and give the lieutenant company and be sure to wipe up the puddle around his feet while you're at it – wouldn't want any of us to slip.'

The one named Sturtho clambered onto the well.

A short time later, Kalam emerged from the tunnel mouth. T'amber, sitting with her back to a tree, looked up, then nodded and began to rise. Blood had pooled in her lap and now streaked down onto her thighs.

'Which way ahead?' the Adjunct asked Kalam.

'We follow the old orchard wall, west, until we hit Raven Hill Road, then straight south to the hill itself – it's a wide track, with plenty of barred or barricaded alleys. We'll skirt the hill on the east side, along the Old City Wall, and then across Admiral Bridge.' Kalam hesitated, then said, 'We've got to move fast, at a run, never straight but never stopping either. Now, there's mobs out there, thugs looking for trouble – we need to avoid getting snagged up by those. So when I say we move fast and keep moving that's exactly what I mean. T'amber __'

'I can keep up.'

'Listen—'

'I said I can keep up.'

'You shouldn't even be conscious, damn you!'

She hefted her sword. 'Let's go find the next ambush, shall we?'

Tears glistened beneath Stormy's eyes as the sorrow-filled music born of strings filled the small room, and names and faces slowly resolved, one after another, in the minds of the four soldiers as the candles guttered down. Muted, from the streets of the city outside, there rose and fell the sounds of fighting, of dying, a chorus like the accumulated voices of history, of human failure and its echoes reaching them from every place in this world. Fiddler's struggle to evade the grim monotony of a dirge forced hesitation into the music, a seeking of hope and faith and the solid meaning of friendship – not just with those who had fallen, but with the three other men in the room – but it was a struggle he knew he was losing.

It seemed so easy for so many people to divide war from peace, to confine their definitions to the unambiguous, Marching soldiers, pitched battles and slaughter. Locked armouries, treaties, fêtes and city gates opened wide. But Fiddler knew that suffering thrived in both realms of existence – he'd witnessed too many faces of the poor, ancient crones and babes in a mother's arms, figures lying motionless in the road or in the gutters of streets – where the sewage flowed unceasing like rivers gathering their spent souls. And he had come to a conviction, lodged like an iron nail in his heart, and with its burning, searing realization, he could no longer look upon things the way he used to, he could no longer walk and see what he saw with a neatly partitioned mind, replete with its host of judgements – that critical act of moral relativity – this is less, that is more. The truth in his heart was this: he no longer believed in peace.

It did not exist except as an ideal to which endless lofty words paid service, a litany offering up the delusion that the absence of overt violence was sufficient in itself, was proof that one was better than the other. There was no dichotomy between war and peace – no true opposition except in their particular expressions of a
ubiquitous inequity. Suffering was all-pervasive. Children starved at the feet of wealthy lords no matter how secure and unchallenged their rule.

There was too much compassion within him – he knew that, for he could feel the pain, the helplessness, the invitation to despair, and from that despair came the desire – the need – to disengage, to throw up his hands and simply walk away, turn his back on all that he saw, all that he knew. If he could do nothing, then, dammit, he would see nothing. What other choice was there?

And so we weep for the fallen. We weep for those yet to fall, and in war the screams are loud and harsh and in peace the wail is so drawn-out we tell ourselves we hear nothing.

And so this music is a lament, and I am doomed to hear its bittersweet notes for a lifetime.

Show me a god that does not demand mortal suffering.

Show me a god that celebrates diversity, a celebration that embraces even non-believers and is not threatened by them.

Show me a god who understands the meaning of peace. In life, not in death.

Show—

'Stop,' Gesler said in a grating voice.

Blinking, Fiddler lowered the instrument. 'What?'

'You cannot end with such anger, Fid. Please.'

'Anger? I am sorry. He would have spoken that aloud, but suddenly he could not. His gaze lowered, and he found himself studying the littered floor at his feet. Someone, in passing – perhaps Fiddler himself – had inadvertently stepped on a cockroach. Half-crushed, smeared into the warped wood, its legs kicked feebly. He stared at it in fascination.

Dear creature, do you now curse an indifferent god?

'You're right,' he said. 'I can't end it there.' He raised the fiddle again. 'Here's a different song for you, one of the few I've actually learned. From Kartool. It's called "The Paralt's Dance".' He rested the bow on the strings, then began.

Wild, frantic, amusing. Its final notes recounted the triumphant female eating her lover. And even without words, the details of that closing flourish could not be mistaken.

The four men laughed.

Then fell silent once more.

It could have been worse, Bottle reflected as he hurried along the dark alley. Agayla could have reached in to the left instead of to the right, there under his shirt, pulling out not a doll but a live rat – who would probably have bitten her, since that was what it seemed Y'Ghatan liked to do most. Would their subsequent conversation have taken another track? he wondered. Probably.

The alleys of the Mouse twisted and turned, narrow and choking and unlit, and stumbling over a body in the gloom was not nearly as uncommon as one would like ... but not five bodies. Heart pounding, Bottle halted in his tracks. The stench of death engulfed him. Bile and blood.

Five corpses, all clothed in black, hooded, they appeared to have been cut to pieces. Perhaps only moments earlier.

He heard screams erupt from a street nearby, cries filled with terror. Gods, what's out there? He contemplated releasing Y'Ghatan, then decided against it – he would need the rat's eyes later, he was certain of
it, and risking the creature now invited potential disaster. Besides, I'm not far from my destination. I think. I hope.

He picked his way gingerly past the bodies, approached the alley mouth beyond.

Whatever had elicited the shrieks had gone another way, although Bottle saw a few running figures flash past, heading towards the docks. Reaching the street he turned right and set off in the same direction.

Until he came opposite the entrance to a tavern. Saddlebacked stairs, leading down. The prickle of sweat stole over his body. In here. Thank you, Agayla.

Bottle made his way down the steps, pushed through the doorway, and entered Coop's Hanged Man Inn.

The cramped, low-ceilinged den was crowded, yet strangely quiet. Pale faces turned in his direction, hard eyes fixing on him as he paused just inside the threshold, looking round.

_Damned veterans. Well, at least you're not all out there, trying to kill marines._

Bottle made his way to the bar. Beneath the folds of his cloak he felt the doll move slightly, a limb twitching – the right arm – and then he saw a figure before him, facing in the other direction. Broad back and shoulders, lifting a tankard with his right hand as he leaned on the counter. The ragged sleeve on that arm slipped down, revealing a skein of scars.

Bottle reached the man. Tapped him on the shoulder.

A slow turn, eyes dark as cold forges.

'You're the one called Foreigner?'

The man frowned. 'Not many call me that, and you're not one of them.'

'I have a message to deliver,' Bottle said.

'From who?'

'I can't say. Not here, anyway.'

'What's the message?'

'Your long wait is at an end.'

The faintest gleam in those eyes, as of embers fanned to life once more. 'Is that it?'

Bottle nodded. 'If there's things you need to gather up, I can wait here for you. But not for long. We need to move, fast.'

Foreigner turned his head, called out to a huge figure behind the bar who had just driven a spigot into a cask. 'Temper!' The older man looked over. 'Keep an eye on this one,' Foreigner said, 'until I'm back.'

'You want me to tie him up? Knock him senseless?'

'No, just make sure he stays breathing.'

'He's safe enough in here,' Temper replied, stepping closer, his eyes on Bottle. 'We know the Fourteenth did well, soldier. That's why we're all in here and not out there.'

Foreigner's regard seemed to undergo some subtle alteration as he looked upon Bottle once more. 'Ah,' he
said under his breath, 'now it's making more sense. Wait, I won't be long.'

Bottle watched the man push his way through the crowd, then he glanced back at Temper. 'He got a real name?'

'I'm sure of it,' Temper replied, turning away.

Three shadows huddled round a table in the far corner. They hadn't been there a moment earlier, Sergeant Hellian was sure of that. Maybe. They didn't look to be drinking anything, which was suspicious enough, and those black murky heads drawn together whispered of conspiracy, nefarious plans, malicious intentions, but if they were speaking she could hear nothing of it and the gloom was such that she could not see their mouths move. Assuming they had mouths.

The whore at the other table was playing a game of Troughs. With no-one.

Hellian leaned closer to her prisoner. 'This place is strange, if you ask me.'

Brows lifted marginally. 'Really? Wraiths and ghosts, one haggardly whore and a demon behind the bar—'

'Watch who you're callin' haggardly,' the woman growled as black round stones bounced in the trough of their own accord. She scowled at the result and muttered, 'You're cheatin', aren't ya? I swear it and I meant what I said – if I catch you at it, Hormul, I'm buying a candle wi' your name on it.'

Hellian looked over at the bar. The demonic owner, back into his scrawny, puny shape, was moving back and forth behind the counter, only his head visible. He seemed to be eating wedges of some kind of yellow fruit, his face twisting as he sucked all the juice from each wedge, then flung the rind over a shoulder. Back and forth, wedge after wedge. 'So who let him loose?' she demanded. 'Ain't there supposed to be some master nearby? Don't they get summoned and then bound? You're a priest, you're supposed to know about this stuff.'

'It so happens that I do,' Banaschar replied. 'And yes, normally it's how you d'scribed.' He rubbed at his face, then continued, 'Here's my guess, Sergeant. Was Kellanved 'imself conjured this demon, probbly as a bodyguard, or e'en a bouncer. Then he left, and the demon took over the business.'

'Ridiculous. What do demons know 'bout running a business? You're lying. Now drink up, suspect, an' then we'll have one more an' then we leave this madhouse.'

'How can I c'nvince you, Sergeant? I need to get to Mock's Hold. The fate of the world depends on it—'

'Ha, that's a good one. Let me tell you 'bout the fate o' the world. Hey, barkeep! You, head, more ale, damn you! Look at them shadows, suspect, they're what it's all about. Hidin' behind every scene, behind every throne, behind every bath-tub. Making plans and nothing but plans and plans while the rest of us, we go down the drain, chokin' along leaking lead pipes and out into the swill, where we drown. Countin' coin, that's what they do. Coin we can't e'en see, but it's how they measure us, the scales, I mean, a sliver in the dish a soul in the other one, evened out, you see. What's the fate o' the world, suspect?' She made a gesture with her hand, index finger corkscrewing, spiralling round and round, then downward. 'Wi' them in charge, it's all goin' down. An' the joke on 'em is this – they're goin' with it.'

'Listen, woman. Those are wraiths. Creatures of shadow. They're not making plans. They're not counting coins. They're just hanging around—'

As if on cue, the three shadows rose, chairs audibly scraping back, drew cloaks tight, hooded faces hidden in darkness, then filed out the door.

Hellian snorted.

The barkeep arrived with another pitcher.

'All right,' sighed Banaschar, closing his eyes. 'Arrest me. Throw me in some dungeon. Let me rot with the worms and rats. You're absolutely right, Sergeant. Headfirst down the drain – here, lemme top you up.'
'Now you're talkin', suspect.'

Kalam's forearm hammered into the Claw's veiled face, shattering the nose and driving the head against the wall. Bone collapsed with a crunch and the attacker slumped. Spinning round, Kalam made his way quickly along the wall of the building, tracked by a half-dozen crossbow quarrels that struck the bricks with snaps and sounds of splintering. He could hear weapons clashing in the alley ahead and to his right – where the Adjunct and T'amber had retreated under a fusillade of missiles from across the street – they had been shepherded into an ambush.

Three Hands were rushing to close the trap. Swearing, Kalam reached the mouth of the alley. A quick glance revealed the two women locked in a vicious close-in battle with four assassins – and in that momentary glance one of those four fell to T'amber's sword. Kalam turned his back on that fight, preparing to meet the Hands approaching from the street.

Daggers flickered through the air towards him. He threw himself down and to the right, regaining his feet in time to meet the first four Claws. A flurry of parries as Kalam worked his way further right, pulling himself beyond the range of two of the attackers. Long-knife lashed out, opening one man's face, and as the man reeled back, Kalam stepped close, impaling the man's left thigh whilst blocking a frenzied attack from the other Claw. Pivoting on the first Claw's pinned thigh, he twisted behind the man and thrust with his free weapon over his victim's right shoulder, the point tearing into the second attacker's neck.

Tugging free the blade impaling the thigh, Kalam brought that arm up to lock beneath the first Claw's chin, where he flexed hard and, with a single, savage wrenching motion, snapped the man's neck.

The one stabbed in the throat had stumbled, his jugular severed and blood spraying through the fingers grasping futilely at the wound. The last two of the four assassins were coming up fast. Beyond them, Kalam saw, the other Hands were racing for the Adjunct and T'amber.

Snarling his rage, Kalam launched himself past the two Claws, taking their attacks on his long-knives, slamming his foot into the nearer one's right leg, midway between knee and ankle, breaking bones. As the assassin shrieked her pain, the second attacker, seeking to move past her, collided with the falling woman, then lost balance entirely as both feet slid out on spilled blood.

Kalam's wild sprint struck the first group of Claws charging the Adjunct and Tavore. Coming from their left and slightly behind them, his sudden arrival forced a half-dozen attackers to swing round to meet him. Taking counter-attacks with parries, he threw his shoulder into the chest of the nearest Claw. The crack of ribs, a whoosh of breath driven from the lungs, and the attacker left his feet, flung backward to foul two Claws directly behind him. One of these stumbled too close to Kalam as he surged past, within reach of his left long-knife, and the cut he delivered into the victim's neck nearly severed the head.

Only two of the remaining four were close enough to spring at him. One came low from the left, the other high from the right. Kalam slashed across the path of the first attacker, felt his blade scrape along both knives in the Claw's hands. He followed that with a knee between the figure's eyes. The second attacker he forced back with a fully extended arm and long-knife, and the Claw, leaning back in desperation, left both feet planted – Kalam dropped the high feint and cut vertically down through the attacker's stomach to the crotch.

The Claw squealed as intestines tumbled out between his knees. Tearing his long-knife loose, Kalam continued his charge – and heard someone closing on him from behind. Dropping into a crouch, Kalam skidded to a halt, then threw himself backward. A dagger sank into his left waist, just beneath the ribcage, the point angled upward – seeking his heart – and then the two assassins collided, Kalam flinging his head back, connecting with the Claw's forehead. A second dagger skidded along mail beneath his right arm. Twisting away from the knife impaling him, he spun round and punched his elbow into the side of the Claw's head, crushing the cheekbone. The attacker sprawled, losing his grip on the knife in Kalam's side.

Gasping, Kalam forced himself forward once more. Every motion sent the fierce fire of agony through his chest, but he had no time to pull out the knife, as the last two Claws who had turned to meet him now rushed him.
But too close together, almost side by side – Kalam leapt to his right to take himself beyond the range of one of them. He ducked a horizontal slash seeking his throat, caught the second knife with an edge-on-bone parry of the Claw’s forearm, then back-hand thrust into the attacker’s throat. Even as that victim began pitching forward, Kalam settled his left shoulder against the chest – and pushed hard, following the body as it slammed into the other assassin. All three went down, with Kalam on top. The corpse between him and the live Claw snagged one of his long-knives – pulling that hand free, Kalam stabbed thumb and index finger into the assassin’s eyes, hooking with the thumb and pushing ever deeper with the finger, until the body ceased spasming.

Hearing more fighting from the alley, Kalam pushed himself to his feet, paused to ease free the knife in his side, cursing at the blood that gushed in the wake of the blade. He collected the snagged long-knife, then staggered into the alley.

Only three Claws remained, and T’amber had engaged two of them, driving both back, step by step, into Kalam’s path.

He moved up, thrust once, then twice, and two bodies writhed at his feet. T’amber had already turned and rushed to take the last assassin from behind, crushing the skull with the edge of her sword.

One of the Claws below heaved to one side, lifting a weapon – Kalam stamped his heel into the assassin’s neck.

Sudden silence beyond the gasping of breaths.

He stared at the two women. T’amber was a mass of wounds – frothy blood was streaming from her nose and mouth and he saw the shuddering, frantic rise and fall of her chest. Grimacing against his own pain, Kalam turned to study the street he had just left.

Bodies moving here and there, but none seemed inclined to renew the fight.

The Adjunct moved up beside him. Blood had splashed her face, mingling with grimy sweat. ‘Kalam Mekhar. I watch you. It seems ...’ She shook her head. ‘It seems you move faster than them. And for all their training, their skills, they cannot keep up with you.’

He wiped stinging sweat from his eyes. His hands, clenching the grips of the long-knives, ached, but he could not relax them. ‘It all slows down, Adjunct,’ he said in a rumble. ‘In my mind, they just slow down.’ He shook himself, forcing loose the muscles of his back and shoulders. He had managed to stem the bleeding, although he could feel the heat of blood down the outside of his leg, beneath the heavy cloth, forming a glue between the fabric and his skin. He was exhausted, a sour taste on his tongue. ‘We can’t stop,’ he said. ‘There’s plenty more. We’re close to Admiral Bridge, almost there.’

‘There?’

‘The Mouse.’

‘I hear riots – there’s fires there, and smoke, Kalam.’

He nodded. ‘Aye. Confusion. That’s good.’ He glanced back at T’amber. She was leaning with her back against a wall, sheathed in blood, her eyes closed. Kalam lowered his voice. ‘Adjunct, she needs healing, before it’s too late.’

But T’amber heard. Eyes opening, a gleam like tiger-eyes, and she straightened. ‘I’m ready.’

The Adjunct took a half-step towards her lover, then was forced to turn as T’amber moved past her to the alley mouth.

Kalam saw the anguish in Tavore’s gaze, and he looked away.

And saw thirty or more Claws shimmer into view not forty paces up the street. ‘Shit! Run!’
They emerged from the alley and set off. Kalam slowed his pace to allow the Adjunct past him. Somehow, T'amber stayed ahead of them, taking point. *There'll be another ambush. Waiting for us. She'll stumble right into it—*

Behind them, the assassins were in full pursuit, the faster sprinters among them closing the distance. Beyond the sound of soft footfalls, the thump of boots, and a chorus of fierce gasps, it seemed the cobbles beneath them, the buildings to either side, and even the lowering sky overhead, all conspired to close in upon them – upon this desperate scene – deadening the air, making it thicker, muffled. If eyes witnessed, the faces quickly turned away. If there were figures in the alleys they passed, they melted back into the darkness.

The street angled westward, now opposite Raven Hill Park. Up ahead it would link up with another street that bordered the park on the west side, before striking southward to the bridge. As they neared that intersection, Kalam saw T'amber suddenly shift direction, leading them into an alley on the left, and then he saw the reason for the unexpected detour – more Hands, massing in the intersection, and now surging forward.

*They're herding us. To the bridge. What's waiting for us on the other side?*

The alley widened into something like a street just past the first flanking buildings, and directly before them was the low wall encircling the park.

T'amber slowed, as if unsure whether to skirt that wall to the left or the right, then she staggered, lifting her sword as attackers closed in on her from both sides.

The Adjunct cried out.

Blades clashed, a body tumbled to one side, the others swarming round T'amber – Kalam saw two knives sink into the woman's torso, yet still she remained on her feet, slashing out with her sword. As Tavore reached them – thrusting her otataral blade into the side of an assassin's head, a savage lateral tug freeing it, the rust-hued weapon hissing into the path of an arm, slicing through flesh and bone, the arm flying away—

Kalam saw, in the heartbeat before he joined the fight, T'amber reaching out with her free hand to take a Claw by the throat, then pull the attacker into the air, pivoting to throw the Claw against the stone wall. Even as the figure repeatedly stabbed the woman in the chest, shoulders and upper arms.

*Gods below!*

Kalam arrived like a charging bhederin, long-knives licking out even as he hammered his weight into one Claw, then another, sending both sprawling.

There in the gloom before the wall of Raven Hill Park, a savage frenzy of close-in fighting, a second Hand joining what was left of the first. A dozen rapid heartbeats, and it was over.

And there was no time to pause, no time for a breath to recover, as quarrels began pounding into the wall.

Kalam waved mutely to run along the wall, westward, and somehow – impossibly – T'amber once more took the lead.

Screams erupted behind them, but there was no time to look. The wall curved southward, forming one side of the street leading to Admiral Bridge, and there stood the stone span, unlit, so buried in shadows that it might have been at the base of a pit. As they drew closer, that sorcery wavered, then died. Revealing ... nothing. No-one in sight.

'T'amber!' Kalam hissed. 'Hold up!'

Whatever had struck in their wake had snared the attention of the pursuing Claws – at least for the moment.

'Adjunct, listen to me. You and T'amber, get down into the river. Follow it straight to the harbour.'

'What about you?' Tavore demanded.

'We haven't yet encountered a third of the Hands in the city, Adjunct.' He nodded towards the Mouse.
'They're in there. I plan on leading them a merry chase.' He paused, then spat out a mouthful of phlegm and blood. 'I can lose them eventually – I know the Mouse, Tavore. I'll take to the rooftops.'

'There's no point in splitting up—'

'Yes, Adjunct. There is.' Kalam studied T'amber for a moment. Yes, despite everything, not much longer for you. T'amber agrees with me. She'll get you to the harbour.

From the streets and alleys behind them, ominous silence, now. Closing in. 'Go.'

The Adjunct met his eyes. 'Kalam—'

'Just go, Tavore.'

He watched as they moved to the edge of the river, the old sagging stone retaining wall at their feet. T'amber climbed down first. The river was befouled, sluggish and shallow. It would be slow going, but the darkness would hide them. And when they get to the harbour ... well, it'll be time to improvise.

Kalam adjusted his grips on the long-knives. A last glance behind him. Still nothing there. Odd. He fixed his gaze on the bridge. All right. Let's get this over with.

Lostara Yil made her way across the concourse, leaving Rampart Way and the bodies at its foot behind her. The sounds of rioting were still distant – coming from the harbour and beyond – while the nearby buildings and estates were silent and unlit, as if she had found herself in a necropolis, a fitting monument to imperial glory.

The small figure that stepped out before her was thus all the more startling, and her disquiet only increased upon recognizing him. 'Grub,' she said, approaching, 'what are you doing here?'

'Waiting for you,' the boy replied, wiping at a runny nose.

'What do you mean?'

'I'll take you where you need to go. It's a sad night, but it will be all right, you'll see that one day' With that he turned around and headed off along the avenue, southward. 'We don't need to stay on the path, not yet. We can take the first bridge. Lostara Yil—' a glance back, 'you're very pretty.'

Suddenly chilled despite the sultry air, she set off after him. 'What path?'

'Doesn't matter.'

Skittering sounds in the shadows off to her left. She closed a hand on her sword. 'Something's there—'

'That's okay,' Grub said. 'They're my friends. There won't be any trouble. But we should hurry.'

Before long they reached the bridge leading into Centre District, whereupon Grub angled them westward for a short time, before turning south once more.

They soon came upon the first of the bodies. Claws, sprawled in small groups at first – where rats and wild dogs had already come out to feed – and then, as they neared Raven Hill Park, the street was literally filled with corpses. Lostara slowed her pace as she approached the elongated scene of slaughter – heading southward, as if a bladed whirlwind had raced through a hundred or more imperial assassins – and, slowly, Lostara Yil realized something, as she looked upon one cut-up figure after another ... a pattern to the wounds, to their placements, to the smooth precision of every mortal blow.

Her chill deepened, stole into her bones.

Three paces ahead, Grub was humming a Wickan drover's song.

Halfway across Admiral Bridge, Kalam lodged one weapon under an arm and reached for the acorn tucked into
the folds of his sash. Smooth, warm even through the leather of his tattered glove, as if welcoming. And ... impatient.

Ducking into a crouch along one of the low retaining walls on the bridge, Kalam flung the acorn to the pavestones. It cracked, spun in place for a moment, then stilled.

'All right, Quick,' Kalam muttered, 'any time now.'

In a cabin on the Froth Wolf, Adaephon Delat, seated crosslegged on the floor, his eyes closed, flinched at that distant summons. Closer to hand, he could hear more fighting along the harbour-front, and he knew the Perish were being pushed back, step by step, battered by sorcery and an evergrowing mass of frenzied attackers. Whilst above decks Destriant Run'Thurvian was maintaining a barrier against every magical assault on the ship itself. Quick Ben sensed that the man was not exactly hard-pressed, but clearly distracted by something, and so there was a hesitation in him, as if he but awaited a far more taxing calling – a moment that was fast approaching.

Well, we got trouble everywhere, don't we just?

It would not be easy slipping through the maze of warrens unleashed in the streets of the city this night. Pockets of virulent sorcery wandered here and there, mobile traps eager to deliver agonizing death, and Quick Ben recognized those. Ruse, the path of the sea. Those traps are water, stolen from deep oceans and retaining that savage pressure – they crush everything they envelop. This is High Ruse, and it's damned ugly.

Someone out there was waiting for him. To make his move. And whoever it was, they wanted Quick Ben to remain precisely where he was, in a cabin on the Froth Wolf. Remain, doing nothing, staying out of the fight.

Well. He had unveiled four warrens, woven an even dozen sorcerous spells, all eager to be sprung loose – his hands itched, then burned, as if he was repeatedly dipping them in acid.

Kalam's out there, and he needs my help.

The High Mage allowed himself the briefest of nods, and the rent of a warren opened before him. He slowly rose to his feet, joints protesting the motion – gods, I think I'm getting old. Who'd have thought?

He drew a deep breath, then, blinking to clear his vision, he lunged forward – into the rent—

—and, even as he vanished he heard a soft giggle, then a sibilant voice: 'You said you owed me, remember? Well, my dear Snake, it's time.'


That's the problem with the shaved knuckle in the hole. Sometimes it doesn't work. So, I'm on my own. Well, so be it, I've been getting sick of this life anyway. Murder was overrated, he decided. It achieved nothing, nothing of real value. There wasn't an assassin out there who didn't deserve to have his or her head cut off and stuck on a spike. Skill, talent, opportunity – none of them justified the taking of a life.

How many of us – yes you – how many of you hate what you are? It's not worth it, you know. Hood take all those blistering egos, let's flash our pathetic light one last time, then surrender to the darkness. I'm done with this. I'm done.

He reached the end of the bridge and paused once more. Another backward glance. Well, it ain't burning, except here in my mind. Closing the circle, right? Hedge, Trotts, Whiskeyjack ...

The dark, pitted and broken face of the Mouse beckoned. A decayed grin, destitution and degradation, the misery that haunted so much life. It was, Kalam Mekhar decided, the right place. The assassin burst into motion, a diagonal sprint, hard and as low to the ground as he could manage, up to the leaning façade of a remnant of some estate wall, surging upward, one foot jamming in a cluttered murder hole – dislodging a bird's nest – up, forearm wrapping round the top edge, broken shards of cemented crockery cutting through the
sleeve, puncturing skin – then over, one foot gaining purchase on the ragged row, launching himself forward, through the air, onto an angled roof that exploded with guano dust as he struck it, scrambling along the incline, two long strides taking him to the peak, then down the other side—

And onto the wild maze, the crackled, disjointed back of the vast Mouse—

Claws, crouched and waiting, lunged in from all sides. Big, the biggest assassins Kalam had seen yet, each wielding long-knives in both hands. Fast, like vipers, lashing out.

Kalam did not slow down – he needed to push right through them, he needed to keep going – he caught weapons against his own, felt blade edges gouge tracks along his armour, links parting, and one point, thrust hard, sank deep into his left thigh, twisting, cutting in an upward motion – snarling, he writhed in the midst of the flashing weapons, wrapped an arm about the man's face and head, then, as he pushed through with all his strength, he pulled that head in a twisting wrench, hearing the vertebrae pop. Kalam half-dragged the flopping corpse by its wobbly head, into his wake, where he dropped it.

A long-knife from the right slashed into the side of his head, slicing down to sever his ear. He counter-thrust and felt his weapon skid along chain.

Hood take them! Someone used me to make more of me—

Continuing down, to the edge, Kalam then launched himself through the air, over the gap of an alley. He landed, pitching and rolling, on the flat roof of a sagging tenement, centuries old, the surface beneath him layered with the gravel of broken pottery. Multiple impacts followed, trembling along the rooftop, as his hunters came after him. Two, five, seven—

Kalam regained his feet and turned, at bay, as nine assassins, spread into a half-circle, rushed him.

Nine Kalams against one.

Hardly.

He surged forward, straight ahead, to the centre of that half-circle. The man before him raised his weapons in alarm, caught by surprise. He managed to parry twice with one long-knife, once with the other as he desperately backpedalled, before Kalam's succession of attacks broke through. A blade sinking into the man's chest, impaling his heart, the second one stabbing beneath the jaw-line, then twisting upward and pushing hard into the brain.

Using both jammed weapons, Kalam yanked the man around, into the path of two more Claws, then he tore free his long-knives and charged into one flank of attackers with blinding speed. A blade-edge sliced into his left calf from one of the pursuers – not deep enough to slow him down – as he feinted low at the Claw closest to him, then thrust high with his other weapon – into the eye socket of the man a step beyond the first assassin. The long-knife jammed. Releasing his grip, Kalam dipped a shoulder and flung himself into the midsection of the next attacker. The impact jolted through his bones – this Hood-cursed bastard's huge – yet he sank even lower, his freed arm sliding up between the man's legs, up behind. Blades tore down along his back, links popping like ticks on hot stones, and he felt the Claw seeking to shift the angle of those weapons, to push them inward – as, legs bunching beneath him, Kalam then heaved the hunter upward, off his feet – up, Kalam loosing a roar that tore the lining of his throat, using his weapon-hand to grasp the front of the man's shirt – up – and over.

Legs kicking, the Claw's head pitched forward, colliding with the chest of a pursuing assassin. Both went down. Kalam leapt after them, pounding an elbow into the forehead of the second Claw – collapsing it like a melon husk – while he sank his remaining long-knife into the back of the first man's neck.

A blade jammed into his right thigh, the point bursting through the other side. Kalam twisted fast to pull the weapon from the attacker's hand, drew both legs up as he rolled onto his back, then kicked hard into the Claw's belly, sending the figure flying. Another long-knife thrust at his face – he flung up a forearm and blocked the weapon, brought his hand round and grasped the Claw's wrist, pulled him closer and gutted him with his own long-knife, the intestines spilling out to land in Kalam's lap.
Scrambling upright, he pulled out the weapon impaling his thigh – in time to parry a slash with it, then, backing away – his slashed and punctured legs almost failing beneath him – he fell into a sustained defence. Three hunters faced him, with the one he had kicked now regaining his feet, slowly, struggling to draw breath.

Too much blood-loss; Kalam felt himself weakening. If any more Hands arrived ...

He leapt back, almost to the edge of the roof, and threw both long-knives, a move unexpected, particularly given the top-heavy imbalance of the weapons – but Kalam had practised short-range throwing with them, year after year. One buried itself deep in the chest of the Claw to his right; the other struck the breastbone of the Claw on the left with a solid thud and remained in place, quivering. Even as he threw the weapons, Kalam launched himself, barehanded, at the man in the middle.

Caught one forearm in both hands, pushed it back then across – the hunter attempted an upthrust from low with his other long-knife, but Kalam kneed it aside. A savage wrench dislocated the arm in his hands, then he pushed it back up, grinding the dislodged bones into the ruptured socket – the man shrieked. Releasing the arm, he brought both hands up behind the Claw's head, then, leaving his own feet, he drove that head downward, using all of his weight, downward, face-first into the roof.

A crunch, a loud crack, and the entire rooftop sagged – explosions of old rotted timber beams, crumbling mortar and plaster.

Swearing, Kalam rolled over the man – whose face was buried in the roof, amidst bubbling blood – and saw, through an ever widening fissure, a darkened room below. He slid himself forward—

Time to leave.

Ten paces away, Pearl stood and watched. Shaken, disbelieving. On the slanting rooftop all round him lay bodies. The finest assassins of the Malazan Empire. He cut through them all. Just ... cut through them. And, in his heart, there was terror – a sensation new to him, filling him with trembling weakness.

He watched as Kalam Mekhar, streaming blood, weaponless, dragged himself towards that hole in the roof. And Pearl drew back the sleeve of his left arm, extended it, aimed and released the quarrel.

A grunt with the impact, the quarrel sinking deep just under Kalam's outstretched left arm, even as the man slid forward, down, and vanished from sight.

I am sorry, Kalam Mekhar. But you ... I cannot accept ... your existence. I cannot ...

He then made his way forward, joined now by the lone survivor of the two Hands, and collected Kalam's weapons.

My ... trophies.

He turned to the Claw. 'Find the others—'

'But what of Kalam—'

'He's finished. Gather the Hands here in the Mouse – we're paying a visit to the Centre Docks, now. If the Adjunct makes it that far, well, we have to take her down there.'

'Understood, Clawmaster.'


Where would he begin?

Mallick Rel.

Korbolo Dom.
Neither of you will see the dawn. I swear it.

The other Claw spoke from the edge of the hole in the roof: 'I don't see him, Clawmaster.'

'He's crawling off to die,' Pearl said. 'Kartoolian paralt.'

The man's head snapped round. 'Not the snake? The spider's ... ? Gods below!'

*Aye, a most painful, protracted death. And there's not a priest left on the island who can neutralize that poison.*

Two weapons clunked on the roof. Pearl looked over. 'What are you doing?' he demanded.

The man was staring at him. 'Enough. How much dishonour will you set at the feet of the Claw? I am done with you.' And he turned away. 'Find the Adjunct yourself, Pearl, give her one of your damned spider bites—'

Pearl raised his right arm, sent a second quarrel flying across the rooftop. Striking the man between the shoulderblades. Arms flung out to the sides, the Claw toppled.

'That, regrettably, was white paralt. Much quicker.'

Now, as he had intended all along, there were no witnesses left. And it was time to gather the remaining Hands.

He wished it could have been different. All of it. But this was a new Malazan Empire, with new rules. *Rules I can manage well enough. After all, I have nothing left. No-one left.*

Closing his eyes, Fiddler set down his fiddle. He said nothing, for there was nothing to say. The reprise that had taken him was done. The music had left his hands, had left his mind, his heart. He felt empty inside, his soul riven, lifeless. He had known this was coming, a truth that neither diminished the pain of loss nor intensified it – a burden, that was all. Just one more burden.

Screams from the street below, then the sound of a door smashing into kindling.

Braven Tooth glanced up, wiped at his eyes.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs.

Gesler collected the wine jug from the table and slowly refilled the cups. No-one had touched the bread.

Thumping steps coming up the corridor. Scraping, dragging.

Halting before the Master Sergeant's door.

Then a heavy, splintering knock, like claws gouging the wood.

Gesler rose and walked over.

Fiddler watched as the sergeant opened the door, stood motionless for a long moment, staring at whoever was in the corridor, then Gesler said, 'Stormy, it's for you.'

The huge man slowly rose as Gesler turned about and walked back to his chair.

A shape filled the entrance. Broad-shouldered, wearing tattered, dripping furs. A flat face, the skin betel brown and stretched taut over robust bones. Pits for eyes. Long arms hanging to the sides. Fiddler's brows rose. A T'lan Imass.

Stormy cleared his throat. 'Legana Breed,' he said, his voice oddly high.

The reply that rasped from the apparition was like the grating of barrow stones. 'I have come for my sword, mortal.'
Gesler collapsed into his chair and collected his cup. 'A long, wet walk, was it, Breed?'

The head swivelled with a creak, but the T'lan Imass said nothing.

Stormy collected the flint sword and walked over to Legana Breed. 'You been scaring a lot of people below,' he said.

'Sensitive souls, you mortals.'

The marine held the sword out, horizontally. ' Took your time getting out of that portal.'

Legana Breed grasped it. 'Nothing is ever as easy as it seems, Shield Anvil. Carry the pain in your heart and know this: you are far from finished with this world.'

Fiddler glanced across at Braven Tooth. Shield Anvil? The Master Sergeant simply shook his head.

Legana Breed was studying the weapon in his skeletal hands. 'It's scratched.'

'What? Oh, but I – oh, well—'

'Humour is extinct,' the T'lan Imass said, turning back to the doorway.

Gesler suddenly straightened. 'A moment, Legana Breed!'

The creature paused.

'Stormy did all that you asked of him. Now, we need repayment.'

Sweat sprang out on Fiddler's skin. Gesler!

The T'lan Imass faced them again. 'Repayment. Shield Anvil, did not my weapon serve you well?'

'Aye, well enough.'

'Then there is no debt—'

'Not true!' Gesler said in a growl. 'We saw you take that Tiste Andii head with you! But we told your fellow T'lan Imass nothing – we kept your secret, Legana Breed! When we could have bargained with it, gotten ourselves right out of that damned mess we were in! There is a debt!'

Silence from the ancient undead warrior, then, 'What do you demand of me?'

'We – me, Stormy and Fiddler here – we need an escort. Back to our ship. It could mean a fight.'

'There are four thousand mortals between us and the docks,' Legana Breed said. 'One and all driven into madness by chaotic sorcery.'

'And?' Gesler sneered. 'Are you afraid, T'lan Imass?'

'Afraid.' A declarative statement. Then the head cocked. 'Humour?'

'So what's the problem?'

'The docks.' Hesitation, then, 'I just came from there.'

Fiddler began collecting his gear. 'With answers like that one, Legana Breed,' he said, 'you belong in the marines.' He glanced over at Braven Tooth. 'Well met, old friend.'

The Master Sergeant nodded. 'And with you. The three of you. Sorry about punching you in the gut, Fid.'

'Like Hood you are.'

'I didn't know it was you—'
'To Hood you didn't."

'All right, I heard you come in. Heard cloth against fiddle strings. Smelled Moranth munitions. Not hard with all that."

'So you punched me anyway?"

Braven Tooth smiled. The particular smile that gave the bastard his name.

Legana Breed spoke: 'You are all marines?'

'Aye,' Fiddler said.

'Tonight, then, I too am a marine. Let us go kill people."

Throatslitter clambered up the gangplank, stumbled down onto the deck. 'Fist,' he gasped, 'we need to call more in – we none of us can hold much longer—'

'No, soldier,' Keneb replied, his gaze fixed on the vicious fighting on the concourse before them, the ever-contracting Perish lines, the ever-growing mass of frenzied attackers pouring in from every street and alley mouth between warehouse buildings. Don't you see? We commit more and we get pulled deeper into this mess, deeper and deeper – until we cannot extricate ourselves. There's too much sorcery out there – gods below, my head feels ready to explode. He so wanted to explain all of this to the desperate marine, but that was not what a commander did.

Just like the Adjunct. You want to, gods how you want to, if only to see the understanding in their eyes. But you cannot. All right, so I'm starting to comprehend ...

'Attend, Fist Keneb!' The warning came from the Destriant. 'Assassins, seeking to penetrate our defences—'

A hiss from Throatslitter, and he turned, called down to the marines on the jetty. 'Sergeant! Get the squads up here! We got Claws on the way!'

Keneb faced Run'Thurvian. 'Can you block them?'

A slow nod of the suddenly pallid face. 'This time, yes – at the last moment – but they are persistent, and clever. When they breach, they will appear, suddenly, all about us."

'Who is their target? Do you know?'

'All of us, I believe. Perhaps, most of all,' the Destriant glanced over at Nil and Nether, who stood on the foredeck, silent witnesses to the defence, 'those two. Their power sleeps. For now, it cannot be awakened – it is not for us, you see. Not for us."

Hood's breath. He turned to see the first marines arrive. Koryk, Tarr, Smiles – damn you, Fiddler, where are you? – then Cuttle and Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. A moment later Sergeant Balm appeared, followed by Galt and Lobe. 'Sergeant, where is your healer – and your mage?'

'Used up,' the Dal Honese replied. 'They're recovering on the Silanda, sir."

'Very well. I want you to form a cordon around Nil and Nether – the Claw will go for them first and foremost.' As the soldiers scrambled he turned to Run'Thurvian, and said in a low voice, 'I assume you can protect yourself, Destriant."

'Yes, I have held myself in abeyance, anticipating such a moment. But what of you, Fist Keneb?'

'I doubt I'm important enough.' Then something occurred to him and he called over to the marines. 'Smiles! Head down to the First Mate's cabin – warn Quick Ben and if you can, convince him to get up here.' He made his way to the starboard rail, leaned out to study the fighting at the base of the jetty.
There were uniformed Malazan soldiers amidst the mob, now, all pretence gone. Armoured, many with shields, others holding back with crossbows, sending one quarrel after another into the line of Perish. The foreign allies had been pushed back almost to the jetty itself.

Cuttle was on the foredeck, yelling at the ballista crew – the sapper held a handful of fishing net in one hand and a large round object in the other. A cusser. After a moment the crew stepped back and Cuttle set to affixing the munition just behind the head of the oversized dart.

_Nice thinking. A messy way to clear a space, but there's little choice._

Smiles returned, hurried up to Keneb. 'Fist, he's not there.'

'What?'

'He's gone!'

'Very well. Never mind. Go join your squad, soldier.'

From somewhere in Malaz City, a bell sounded, the sonorous tones ringing four times. _Gods below, is that all?_

Lieutenant Pores stood beside his captain, staring across the dark water to the mayhem at Centre Docks. 'We're losing, sir,' he said.

'That's precisely why I made you an officer,' Kindly replied. 'Your extraordinary perceptiveness. And no, Lieutenant, we will not disobey our orders. We remain here.'

'It's not proper, sir,' Pores persisted. 'Our allies are dying there – it's not even their fight.'

'What they choose to do is their business.'

'Still not proper, sir.'

'Lieutenant, are you truly that eager to kill fellow Malazans? If so, get out of that armour and you can swim ashore. With Oponn's luck the sharks won't find you, despite my fervent prayers to the contrary. And you'll arrive just in time to get your head lopped off, forcing me to find myself a new lieutenant, which, I grant you, will not be hard, all things considered. Maybe Hanfeno, now there's officer material – to the level of lieutenant and no higher, of course. Almost as thick and pig-headed as you. Now go on, climb out of that armour, so Senny can start laying bets.'

'Thank you, sir, but I'd rather not.'

'Very well. But one more complaint from you, Lieutenant, and I'll throw you over the side myself.'

'Yes, sir.'

'In your armour.'

'Yes, sir.'

'After docking your pay for the loss of equipment.'

'Of course, Captain.'

'And if you keep trying to get the last word here I think I will kill you outright.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Lieutenant.'

Pores clamped his jaws shut, and held off. For the moment.
With barely a whisper, the figure landed on the sundered, pitched rooftop. Paused to look round at the sprawl of corpses. Then approached the gaping hole near one end.

As it neared, another figure seemed to materialize as if from nowhere, crouched down on one knee above a body lying face-down near the breach. A quarrel was buried deep in that body's back, the fletching fashioned of fish bone – the cheek sections of some large sea-dwelling species, pale and semi-translucent. The newcomer swung a ghostly face up to regard the one who approached.

'The Clawmaster killed me,' the apparition said in a rasp, gesturing to its own body beneath it. 'Even as I cursed his name with my last breath. I think ... yes, I think that is why I am still here, not yet ready to walk through Hood's Gate. It is a gift ... to you. He killed Kalam Mekhar. With Kartoolian paralt.' The ghost turned slightly and gestured to the edge of the hole. 'Kalam – he pulled the quarrel loose ... no point of course, it makes no difference since the paralt's in his blood. But I did not tell Pearl – it's right there, balanced on the very lip. Take it. There is plenty of poison left. Take it. For the Clawmaster.'

A moment later the ghost was gone.

The cloth-wrapped figure crouched down and collected the blood-smeared quarrel in one gloved hand. Tucked it into a fold of the sash belt, then straightened, and set off.

Through skeins of vicious sorcery, the lone figure moved with blinding speed down the street, deftly avoiding every snare – the coruscating pockets of High Ruse, the whispering invitations of Mockra – and then into the light-stealing paths of Rashan where assassins of the Claw had raced along only moments earlier – and onto their trail, fast closing, a dagger in each leather-clad hand.

Near the harbourfront the Claws began emerging from their warrens, massing by the score, moments from launching an all-out assault on the foreign soldiers, on everyone aboard the two moored ships.

Approaching fast from behind, the figure's movements acquired a fluidity, sinuous, weaving a flow of shadows, and the approach that had been quick transformed into something else – faster than a mortal eye could perceive in this night of gloom and smoke – and then the lone attacker struck the first of the Hands.

Blood sprayed, sheeted into the air, bodies spun to either side from its path, a whirlwind of death tearing into the ranks. Claws spun round, shouted, screamed, and died.

Clawmaster Pearl turned at the sounds. He was positioned over twenty Hands from the rearguard – a rearguard now down, writhing or motionless on the cobbles, as something – someone – tore through them. Gods below. A Shadow Dancer. Who – Cotillion? Cold terror seized his chest with piercing talons. The god. The Patron of Assassins – coming for me.

In Kalam Mekhar's name, coming for me!

He spun round, eyes searching frantically for a bolt-hole. To Hood with the Hands! Pearl pushed his way clear, then ran.

An alley, narrow between two warehouses, swallowed in darkness. Moments to go, then he would open his warren, force a rent, plunge through – through, and away.

Weapons in his hands now. If I go down, it will be fighting – god or no god—

Into the alley, embraced by darkness – behind him more screams, coming closer – Pearl reached in his mind like a drowning man for his warren. Mockra. Use it. Twist reality, cut into another warren – Rashan, and then the Imperial, and then—

Nothing answered his quest. A ragged gasp burst from Pearl's throat as he sprinted onward, up the alley—
Something behind him – right behind—

Strokes of agony, slicing through both Achilles tendons – Pearl shrieked as the severed ligaments rolled up beneath the skin, stumbled on feet that felt like clods of mud, shifting hopelessly beneath him. Sprawling, refusing to release his weapons, still grasping out for his warren—

Blade-edges licking like tongues of acid. Hamstrings, elbows – then he was lifted from the blackened cobbles by a single hand, and thrown into a wall. The impact shattered half his face, and as he fell backward, that hand returned, fingers digging in, forcing his head back. Cold iron slashed into his mouth, slicing, severing his tongue. Choking on blood, Pearl twisted his head around – he was grasped again, thrown into the opposite wall, breaking his left arm. Landing on his side – a foot hammered down on the point of his hip, the bone cradle collapsing into a splintered mess beneath it – gods, the pain, sweeping up through his mind, overwhelming him – his warren – where?

All motion ceased.

His attacker was standing over him. Crouching down.

Pearl could see nothing – blood filled his eyes – a savage ringing filled his head, nausea rising up his throat, spilling out in racking heaves, streaked with gore from the gouting stub of his tongue. Lostara, my love, come close to the gate – and you will see me. Walking.

A voice, soft and low, cut through it all, brutally clear, brutally close. 'My final target. You, Pearl. I had planned to make it quick.' A long pause, in which he heard slow, even breathing. 'But for Kalam Mekhar.'

Something stabbed into his stomach, was pushed deep.

'I give you back the quarrel that killed him, Pearl.' And the figure straightened once more, walked a few paces away, then returned, even as the first horrifying pulses of fire began to sear his veins, gathering behind his eyes – a poison that would keep him alive for as long as possible, feeding his heart with everything it needed, even as vessels throughout his body burst, again and again and again—

'Kalam's long-knives, Pearl. You weren't thinking. You cannot open a warren with otataral in your hand. And so, he and I together, we have killed you. Fitting.'

Fires! Gods! Fire!

As Apsalar walked away. Continuing up the alley, away from the harbour-front. Away, from everything.

A scrawny, shadowy apparition appeared before her near the far end, where the alley reached a side street just this side of a bridge leading across the river and into the Mouse. Apsalar halted before it.

'Tell Cotillion, I have done as he asked.'

Shadowthrone made a whispering sound, like sighing, and one almost formless hand emerged from the folds of his ghostly cloak, gripping the silver head of a cane, that tapped once on the cobbles. 'I watched, my dear. Your Shadow Dance. From the foot of Rampart Way and onward, I was witness.'

She said nothing.

Shadowthrone resumed. 'Not even Cotillion. Not even Cotillion.'

Still, Apsalar did not speak.

The god suddenly giggled. 'Too many bad judgements, the poor woman. As we feared.' A pause, then another giggle. 'Tonight, the Clawmaster, and three hundred and seven Claws – all by your hands, dear lass. I still ... disbelieve. No matter. She's on her own, now. Too bad for her.' The barely substantial hooded head cocked slightly. 'Ah. Yes, Apsalar. We keep our promises. You are free. Go.'

She held out the two long-knives, handles first.
A bow, and the god accepted Kalam Mekhar’s weapons.

Then Apsalar moved past Shadowthrone, and walked on.

He watched her cross the bridge.

Another sigh. A sudden lifting of the cowled head, sniffing the air. ‘Oh, happy news. But for me, not yet. First, a modest detour, yes. My, what a night!’

The god began to fade, then wavered, then re-formed. Shadowthrone looked down at the long-knives in his right hand. ‘Absurd! I must walk. And, perforce, quickly!’

He scurried off, cane rapping on the stones.

A short time later, Shadowthrone reached the base of a tower that was not nearly as ruined as it looked. Lifted the cane and tapped on the door. Waited for a dozen heartbeats, then repeated the effort.

The door was yanked open.

Dark eyes stared down at him, and in them was a growing fury.

‘Now now, Obo,’ Shadowthrone said. ‘This is a courtesy, I assure you. Two most meddling twins have commandeered the top of your tower. I humbly suggest you oust them, in your usual kindly manner.’ The god then sketched a salute with his cane, turned about and departed.

The door slammed shut after two strides.

And now, Shadowthrone began to quicken his pace once more. For one last rendezvous this night, a most precious one. The cane rapped swift as a soldier’s drum.

Halfway to his destination, the top of Obo’s tower erupted in a thunderous fireball that sent pieces of brick and tile flying. Amidst that eruption there came two outraged screams.

Recovering from his instinctive duck, Shadowthrone murmured. ‘Most kindly, Obo. Most kindly indeed.’

And the god walked the streets of Malaz City. Once more with uncharacteristic haste.

They moved quickly along the street, keeping to the shadows, ten paces behind Legana Breed, who walked down the centre, sword tip clattering along the cobbles. The few figures who had crossed their path had hurriedly fled upon sighting the tattered apparition of the T’lan Imass.

Fiddler had given Gesler and Stormy crossbows, both fitted with the sharper-packed grenados, whilst his own weapon held a cusser. They approached a wider street that ran parallel to the harbour-front, still south of the bridge leading over to Centre Docks. Familiar buildings for Fiddler, on all sides, yet a surreal quality had come to the air, as if the master hand of some mad artist had lifted every detail into something more profound than it should have been.

From the docks came the roar of battle, punctuated with the occasional crackle of Moranth munitions. Sharpers, mostly. **Cuttle. He’s using up my supply!**

They reached the intersection. Legana Breed paused in the middle, slowly faced the sagging façade of a tavern opposite. Where the door slammed open and two figures stumbled out. Reeling, negotiating the cobbles beneath them as if traversing stepping stones across a raging river, one grasping the other by an arm, tugging, pulling, then leaning against him, causing both to stagger.

Swearing under his breath, Fiddler headed towards them. ‘Sergeant Hellian, what in Hood’s name are you doing ashore?’

Both figures hitched up at the voice, turned.
And Hellian's eyes fixed on the T'lan Imass. 'Fiddler,' she said, 'you look awful.'

'Over here, you drunken idiot.' He waved Gesler and Stormy ahead as he came closer. 'Who's that with you?'

Hellian turned and regarded the man she held by an arm, for what seemed a long time.

'Your priz'ner,' the man said by way of encouragement.

'Thayz right.' Hellian straightened as she faced Fiddler again. 'He's wanted for questioning.'

'By whom?'

'Me, thazoo. So's anyway, where's the boat?'

Gesler and Stormy were making their way towards the bridge. 'Go with them,' Fiddler said to Legana Breed, and the T'lan Imass set off, feet scraping. The sapper turned back to Hellian. 'Stay close, we're heading back to the ships right now.'

'Good. Glad you could make it, Fid, in case thiz one tries an' 'scapes, right? Y'got my p'mission to shoot 'im down. But only in the foot. I wan' answers from 'im an' I'm gonna get 'em.'

'Hellian,' Fiddler said, 'could be we'll need to make a run for it.'

'We can do that. Right, Banash?'

'Fool,' Fiddler muttered. 'That's Smiley's there. The demon doesn't serve regular ale. Any other place ...' He then shook his head. 'Come on, you two.'

Up ahead, Gesler and Stormy had reached the bridge. Crouched low, they moved across its span. Fiddler heard Gesler shout, a cry of surprise and alarm – and all at once both he and Stormy were running – straight for a heaving crowd that loomed up before them.

'Shit!' Fiddler sprinted forward.

A winding trench swallowed in gloom, a vein that seemed to run beneath the level where the frenzy of slaughter commanded every street, every alley to either side. The woman behind her coughing gouts of blood as she sloshed along, the Adjunct, Tavore Paran, waded through a turgid stream of sewage.

Ever closer to the sounds of fighting at Centre Docks.

It had seemed impossible – the Claws had not found them, had not plunged down the rotted brick walls to deliver murder in the foul soup that was Malaz River. Oh, Tavore and T'amber had pushed past enough corpses on their journey, but the only sounds embracing them were the swirl of water, the skittering of rats along the ledges to either side, and the whine of biting insects.

That all changed when they reached the edge of the concourse. The concussion of a sharper, startlingly close, then the tumbling of a half-dozen bodies as a section of the retaining wall collapsed directly ahead. More figures sliding down, screaming, weapons waving in the air—

—and a soldier turned, saw them—

As he bellowed his discovery, T'amber pushed past the Adjunct. Longsword arced across, diagonally, and cut off the top third of the man's head, helm and bone, white matter spraying out.

Then T'amber reached back, closed a bloody hand on the Adjunct's cloak, dragged her forward, onto the sunken bank of dislodged brick, sand and gravel.

The strength in that grip stunned Tavore, as T'amber assailed the slope, dragging the Adjunct from her feet, up, up onto the level of the concourse. Stumbling onto her knees, even as that hand left her and the sounds of
fighting erupted around them—

City Guard, three squads at least – detonations had pushed them to this side of the concourse, and they turned upon the two women like rabid wolves—

Tavore pushed herself upright, caught a sword-thrust reaching for her midsection with a desperate parry, the weapons ringing. She instinctively counter-attacked, and felt the tip of her sword tear through chain and gouge the muscles of a shoulder. Her opponent grunted, flinched back. Tavore chopped down onto the knee of his lead leg, cutting in two the patella. He shrieked and fell.

To her left, T'amber cut, slashed, parried and lunged, and bodies were falling all around her. Even as swords sank into the woman – and she staggered.

Tavore cried out, twisting to move towards T'amber—

And saw, less than twenty paces away, a score or more Claws, rushing to join the fray.

A sword burst from T'amber's back, between the shoulder-blades, and the soldier gripping the weapon pushed close to the woman and heaved her from her feet, throwing her backward, where she slid off the length of iron, landing hard on the cobbles, her own sword leaving her hand, clattering away.

Six paces between the Adjunct and a dozen Guards – and behind them and closing fast, the Claws. Tavore backed away – faces turned to her, faces twisted in blind rage, eyes cold and hard, inhuman. The Adjunct raised her sword, both hands on the grip now, took a step back—

The Guards rushed forward—

Then, a blinding flash, immediately behind them, and that rush became a mass of torn bodies, severed limbs, sheets of blood – the roar of the detonation seemed to ignite in the centre of Tavore's skull. The world pitched, she saw night sky, wheeling, stars seeming to race outward in all directions – her head cracking on the cobbles, dislodging her helm, and she was on her back, staring up, confused by the tumbling smoke, the red mist, the thundering protest of every muscle and bone in her body.

A second explosion lifted her from the cobbles, pounded her back down on a surface suddenly heaved askew. More blood rained down— Someone skidded up against her, a hand reaching down to rest lightly on her sternum, a face, blurred, looming close. She watched the mouth move but heard nothing.

A flash, recognition. Sergeant Fiddler.

What? What are you doing?

And then she was being dragged along, boots pulling loose at the ends of senseless legs. The right one dislodging, left behind. She stared at her cloth-wrapped foot, soaked in river-slime and blood.

She could now see behind her as the sergeant continued pulling her towards the jetty. Two more marines, covering their retreat with strange, oversized crossbows in their hands. But no-one was coming after them – they were busy dying beneath a stone sword in the desiccated hands of a T'lan Imass – the creature punched at by virulent sorcery, yet pushing ever forward, killing, killing.

What was happening? Where had the marines come from? She saw another one, struggling with a prisoner – he wasn't trying to escape, however, just stay on his feet. They're drunk, the both of them – well, on this night, I think I'll let it pass.

Oh, T'amber ...

More figures surrounding them now. Bloodied soldiers. The Perish. People were shouting – she could see that – but the roaring in her head was unabated, drowning out all else. She half-lifted one arm, stared at her gauntleted hand – my sword. Where is my sword?

Never mind. Just sleep, now. Sleep.
Grub led her into the alley, to where a body was lying, curled up, racked with spasms and voicing a dreadful moaning. As she drew closer, Lostara recognized him. Anguish rose up within her and she lunged past Grub, fell to her knees.

Pearl was covered in wounds, as if he had been systematically tortured. And pain was consuming him. 'Oh, my love ...'

Grub spoke behind her. 'The poison has him, Lostara Yil. You must take his life.'

'What?'

'He thought you were dead,' the boy continued. 'He'd given up. On everything. Except revenge. Against the Adjunct.'

'Who did this?'

'I won't tell you,' Grub said. 'Pearl hungered for vengeance, and vengeance was repaid him. That's all.'

'That's all.'

'Kill him now, Lostara. He can't hear you, he can't see you. There's only the pain. It's the spiders, you see, they breathe the blood of their victims, they need it rich, bright red. And so the venom, it doesn't let go. And then, there's the acid in the stomach, leaking out, eating everything up.'

Numbed, she drew out her knife.

'Make the heart stop.'

'Yes, there, behind and beneath the shoulder-blade. Push deep, work the edges. Pull it loose, look, how the body stills, how the muscles cease their clenching. It's quiet, now. He's gone.'

'Come along, there's more. Quickly.'

He set off, and she rose and followed. You've left me. You were there, in Mock's Hold, but I didn't know. You didn't know.

Past a tumbled mass of corpses now. Claws. The alley was filled with them.

Ahead, Centre Docks, the clearing—

Sudden detonations, rocking the buildings. Screams.

At the alley mouth, between warehouses, Grub crouched and waved her down to his side.

People were fleeing – those still on their feet, and they were scant few. At least two cussers had exploded in the midst of the mobs. Cussers and sharpers, and there a Hooddamned T'lan Imass, cutting down the last ones within reach.

'Gods,' Lostara muttered, 'there must be a thousand dead out there.'

'Yes. But look, you must see this.' He pointed to their right, near the river.

'What?'

'Oh.' Grub reached out and settled a hand on her forearm.

And the scene seemed to somehow shift, a new illumination – it was gathered about a single body, too distant to make out details—

'T'amber,' Grub said. 'Only you and me can see. So watch, Lostara. Watch.'
The golden glow was coalescing, rising up from the corpse. A faint wind flowed past Lostara and Grub, familiar now, heady with the scent of savannah grasses, warm and dry.

‘She stayed with us a long time,’ Grub whispered. ‘She used T’amber. A lot. There wasn't any choice. The Fourteenth, it's going to war, and we're going with it. We have to.’

A figure now stood at a half-crouch over the body. Furred, tall, and female. No clothing, no ornamentation of any kind.

Lostara saw the T'lan Imass, thirty or more paces away, slowly turn to regard the apparition. And then, head bowing, the undead warrior slowly settled onto one knee. ‘I thought you said we were the only ones who could see, Grub.’

‘I was wrong. She has that effect.’

‘Who – what is she?’

‘The Eres'al. Lostara, you must never tell the Adjunct. Never.’

The Red Blade captain scowled. ‘Another damned secret to keep from her.’

‘Just the two,’ Grub said. ‘You can do that.’

Lostara glanced over at the boy. ‘Two, you said.’

Grub nodded. ‘Her sister, yes. That one, and this one. Two secrets. Never to tell.’

‘That won't be hard,’ she said, straightening. ‘I'm not going with them.’

‘Yes you are. Look! Look at the Eres'al!’

The strange female was lowering her head towards the body of T’amber. ‘What's she doing?’

‘Just a kiss. On the forehead. A thank-you.’

The apparition straightened once more, seemed to sniff the air, then, in a blur, vanished.

‘Oh!’ said Grub. Yet added nothing. Instead, taking her hand in his. ‘Lostara. The Adjunct, she's lost T’amber now.

You need to take that place—’

‘I'm done with lovers, male or female—’

‘No, not that. Just ... at her side. You have to. She cannot do this alone.’

‘Do what?’

‘We have to go – no, not that way. To the Mouse Docks—’

‘Grub – they're casting off!’

‘Never mind that! Come on!’

Deadsmell pushed Fiddler out of the way and knelt beside the body of the Adjunct. He set a hand on her begrimed forehead, then snatched it back. ‘Hood's breath! She doesn't need me.’ He backed away, shaking his head, ‘Damned otataral – I never could get that, what it does ...’

Tavore's eyes opened. After a moment, she struggled into a sitting position, then accepted Fiddler's hand in helping her to her feet.
The *Froth Wolf* was edging away from the jetty. The *Silanda* had pulled further out, the oars sweeping and sliding into the water.

Blinking, the Adjunct looked round, then she turned to Fiddler. 'Sergeant, where is Bottle?'

'I don't know. He never made it back. Seems we lost Quick Ben, too. And Kalam.'

At the last name, she flinched.

But Fiddler had already known. *The game* ...

'Adjunct—'

'I have never seen a man fight as he did,' she said. 'Him, and T'amber, the two of them – cutting through an entire city—'

'Adjunct. There's signals from the other ships. Where are we going?'

But she turned away. 'Bottle – we have failed, Sergeant. He was to retrieve someone.'

'Someone? Who?'

'It doesn't matter, now. We have failed.'

*All of this? All of the fallen this night – for one person?* 'Adjunct, we can wait here in the bay until light, send a detachment into the city looking—'

'No. Admiral Nok's escorts will be ordered to sink the transports – the Perish will intervene, and more will die. We must leave.'

'They can chase us down—'

'But they won't find us. The Admiral has assured me of his impending incompetence.'

'So, we signal the others to ship their anchors and make sail?'

'Yes.'

A shout from one of the crew. 'Ship closing to starboard!'

Fiddler followed the Adjunct to the rail. Where Fist Keneb already stood.

A small craft was approaching on an intercept course. A lantern appeared at its bow, flashing.

'They got passengers to drop off,' the lookout called down.

The ship came alongside with a crunch and grinding of hulls. Lines were thrown, rope ladders dropped down.

Fiddler nodded. 'Bottle.' Then he scowled. 'I thought you said one person – the fool's brought a damned score with him.'

The first to arrive over the rail, however, was Grub.

A bright grin. 'Hello, father,' he said as Keneb reached out and lifted the boy, setting him on the deck. 'I brought Captain Lostara Yil. And Bottle's brought lots of people—'

A stranger then clambered aboard, landing lightly on the deck and pausing, hands on hips, to look round. 'A damned mess,' he said.

As soon as he spoke, Fiddler stepped forward. 'Cartheron Crust. I thought you were—'

'Nobody here by that name,' the man said in a growl, one hand settling on the knife handle jutting from his belt.
Fiddler stepped back.

More figures were arriving, strangers one and all: the first a huge man, his expression flat, cautious, and on his forearms were scars and old weals that Fiddler recognized. He was about to speak when Crust – who was not Crust – spoke.

‘Adjunct Tavore, right? Well, I’m charging you sixteen gold imperials for delivering this mob of fools to your ship.’

‘Very well.’

‘So get it, because we’re not hanging round this damned harbour any longer than we have to.’

Tavore turned to Keneb. ‘Fist, go to the legion paychest and extract two hundred gold imperials.’

‘I said sixteen—’

‘Two hundred,’ the Adjunct repeated.

Keneb set off for below.

‘Captain,’ the Adjunct began, then fell silent.

The figures now climbing aboard were, one and all, tall, black-skinned. One, a woman, stood very near the scarred man, and this one now faced the Adjunct.

And in rough Malazan, she said, ‘My husband has been waiting for you a long time. But don’t think I am just letting you take him away. What is to come belongs to us – to the Tiste Andii – as much and perhaps more than it does to you.’

After a moment, the Adjunct nodded, then bowed. ‘Welcome aboard, then, Tiste Andii.’

Three small black shapes scrambled over the rail, made immediately for the rigging.

‘Gods below,’ Fiddler muttered. ‘Nachts. I hate those things—’

‘Mine,’ the scarred stranger said.

‘What is your name?’ Tavore asked him.

‘Withal. And this is my wife, Sandalath Drukorlat. Aye, a handful of a name and more than a handful of a—’

‘Quiet, husband.’

Fiddler saw Bottle trying to sneak off to one side and he set off after the soldier. ‘You.’

Bottle winced, then turned. ‘Sergeant.’

‘How in Hood’s name did you find Cartheron Crust?’

‘That Crust? Well, I just followed my rat. We couldn’t hope to get through the battle on the concourse, so we found us a ship—’

‘But Cartheron Crust?’

Bottle shrugged.

Keneb had reappeared, and Fiddler saw the Adjunct and Crust arguing, but he could not hear the exchange. After a moment, Crust nodded, collected the small chest of coins. And the Adjunct walked towards the bow.

Where stood Nil and Nether.

‘Sergeant?’
'Go get some rest, Bottle.'

'Aye, thank you, Sergeant.'

Fiddler walked up behind the Adjunct to listen in on the conversation.

Tavore was speaking, '... pogrom. The Wickans of your homeland need you both. And Temul. Alas, you won't be able to take your horses – the captain's ship is not large enough – but we can crowd every Wickan aboard. Please, make yourself ready, and, for all that you have done for me, thank you both.'

Nil was the first to descend to the mid deck. Nether followed a moment later, but made for Bottle, who was slumped into a sitting position, his back to the railing. She glared down at him until, some instinct warning him, he opened his eyes and looked up at her.

'When you are done,' Nether said, 'come back.'

Then she set off. Bottle stared after her, a dumbfounded expression on his face.

Fiddler turned away. Lucky bastard.

Or not.

He ascended to the forecastle. Stared across at Malaz City. Fires here and there, smoke and the reek of death.

Kalam Mekhar, my friend.

Farewell.

Blood loss, ironically, had kept him alive this far. Blood and poison, streaming out from his wounds as he staggered along, almost blind with the agony exploding in his muscles, the hammering of his heart deafening in his skull.

And he continued fighting his way. One step, then another, doubling over as the pain clenched suddenly, excruciating in its intensity before easing a fraction – enough to let him draw breath, and force one foot forward yet again. Then another.

He reached a corner, struggled to lift his head. But fire consumed his eyes, he could make out nothing of the world beyond. This far ... on instinct, following a map in his head, a map now torn into ribbons by the pain.

He was close. He could feel it.

Kalam Mekhar reached out to steady himself on a wall – but there was no wall, and he toppled, thudded hard onto the cobbles, where, unable to prevent it, his limbs drew inward and he curled up round the seething, lashing agony.

Lost. There should have been a wall, a corner, right there. His map had failed him. And now it was too late. He could feel his legs dying. His arms, his spine a spear of molten fire.

He felt one temple resting on the hard, damp stone.

Well, dying was dying. The assassin's art ever turns on its wielder. Nothing in the world could be more just, more proper—

Ten paces away, Shadowthrone bared his teeth. 'Get up, you fool. You're very nearly there. Get up!'

But the body did not stir.

Hissing in fury, the god slipped forward. A gesture and the three shadow-wraiths in his wake rushed forward, gathered round the motionless form of Kalam Mekhar.
One rasped, 'He's dead.'

Shadowthrone snarled, pushed his servants aside and crouched down. 'Not yet,' he said after a moment. 'But oh so very close.' He lurched back a step. 'Pick him up, you damned idiots! We're going to drag him!'

'We?' one asked.

'Careful,' the god murmured. Then watched as the wraiths reached down, grasped limbs, and lifted the assassin. 'Good, now follow me, and quickly.'

To the gate, the barrier squealing as Shadowthrone pushed it aside.

Onto the rough path, its tilted stones and snarls of dead grass.

Mounds to either side, the humps beginning to steam. Dawn's arrival? Hardly. No, the ones within ... sensed him. The god allowed himself a small, dry laugh. Then ducked as it came out louder than he had intended.

Approaching the front door.

Shadowthrone halted, edged as close as he could to one side of the path, then waved the wraiths forward. 'Quickly! Drop him there, at the threshold! Oh, and here, you, take his long-knives. Back in the sheaths, yes. Now, all of you, get out of here – and stay on the path, you brainless worms! Who are you trying to awaken?'

Another step, closer to that dark, dew-beaded door. Lifting the cane. A single rap with the silver head.

Then the god turned about and hurried down the path.

Reaching the gate, then spinning round as that door groaned open.

A huge armoured figure filled the portal, looking down.

Shadowthrone whispered, 'Take him, you oaf! Take him!' Then, with infuriating slowness, the enormous guardian of the Deadhouse reached down, collected the assassin by the scruff of the neck, and dragged him across the threshold.

The god, crouched at the gate, watched as Kalam's feet vanished into the gloom.

Then the door slammed shut.

In time? 'No way of knowing. Not for a while ... my, Shadowthrone's collection is most impressive, yes?' And he turned away, to see his wraiths fleeing down the street, even as a nearby tavern door thundered open.

And the god winced, ducking still lower. 'Uh oh, time to leave, I think.'

A swirl of shadows.

And then Shadowthrone was gone.

Master Sergeant Braven Tooth neared the entrance to Coop's. Not yet dawn. And the damned night was now quiet as a tomb. He shivered, as if he had just crossed the path of some hoary ghost, passing invisible yet pausing to give him a hungry glance.

Coop's door opened and closed, hard, the object of some anger, and Braven Tooth slowed.

An armoured monstrosity ascended into view.

Braven Tooth blinked, then grunted under his breath and approached.

'Evening, Temper.'

The helmed head turned to him, as if distracted by the Master Sergeant's sudden presence.
'Braven Tooth.'

'What brings you out?'

Temper seemed to sniff the air, then glanced across at the old Deadhouse. A softly clattering shrug as he said, 'Thought I'd take a walk.'

Braven Tooth nodded. 'I see you dressed appropriately.'

Both men stepped back as a woman emerged from a nearby alley and came right past them, descended the steps and vanished into the maw of Coop's.

'Now that was some swaying walk,' the Master Sergeant muttered in appreciation. But Temper's attention was on the cobbles, and Braven Tooth looked down.

She'd left footprints. Dark red.

'So, Temper. I suppose we can't hope that's mud, now can we?'

'I think not, Brav.'

'Well, think I'll plant myself in Coop's. You done with your walk?'

A final glance across at the Deadhouse, then the huge man nodded. 'So it seems.'

The two went down into the murky confines of the Hanged Man.

An auspicious guest had holed up in Coop's this night. Fist Aragan, who'd taken the cramped booth farthest from the door, in the darkest corner, where he sat alone, nursing a tankard of ale as bell after bell tolled outside, amidst a distant and sometimes not-so-distant chorus of riotous mayhem.

He was not alone in looking up, then holding his gaze fixed in admiration for the unknown black-haired Kanese woman who walked in moments before dawn. He watched from beneath hooded brows, as she headed to the bar and ordered Kanese rice wine, forcing Coop to scramble in desperate search before coming up with a dusty amber-hued glass bottle – in itself worth a small fortune.

Moments later Temper – weighed down in a heap of archaic armour – entered the tavern, followed by Master Sergeant Braven Tooth. And Aragan hunched down deep in his seat, averting his gaze.

No company for him this night.

He'd been battling a headache since dusk, and he'd thought it beaten – but suddenly the pounding in his skull returned, redoubled in intensity, and a small groan escaped him.

Braven Tooth tried talking to the woman, but got a knife-point pressed beneath his eye for the effort, and the woman then paid for the entire bottle, claimed a room upstairs, and headed up. Entirely on her own. And no-one followed.

The Master Sergeant, swearing, wiped sweat from his face, then roared for ale.

Strange goings-on at Coop's, but, as always, ale and wine soon muddied the waters, and as for dawn stealing into life outside, well, that belonged to another world, didn't it?
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Draw a breath, a deep breath, now hold it, my friends, hold it long for the world the world drowns.

Wu

There were many faces to chaos, to the realm between the realms, and this path they had taken, Taralack Veed reflected, was truly horrific. Defoliated trees rose here and there, broken-fingered branches slowly spinning in the chill, desultory wind, wreaths of smoke drifting across the blasted landscape of mud and, everywhere, corpses. Sheathed in clay, limbs jutting from the ground, huddled forms caked and half-submerged.

In the distance was the flash of sorcery, signs of a battle still underway, but the place where they walked was lifeless, silence like a shroud on all sides, the only sounds tremulously close by – the sob of boots pulling free of the grey slime, the rustle of weapons and armour, and the occasional soft-voiced curse in both Letherii and Edur.

Days of this madness, this brutal reminder of what was possible, the way things could slide down, ever down, until warriors fought without meaning and lives rushed away to fill muddy pools, cold flesh giving way underfoot.

And we march to our own battle, pretending indifference to all that surrounds us. He was no fool. He had been born to a tribe that most called primitive, backward. Warrior castes, cults of blood and ceaseless vendetta. The Gral were without sophistication, driven by shallow desires and baseless convictions. Worshippers of violence. Yet, was there not wisdom in imposing rules to keep madness in check, to never go too far in the bloodletting?

Taralack Veed realized now that he had absorbed something of civilized ways; like fever from bad water, his thoughts had been twisted with dreams of annihilation – an entire clan, he’d wanted every person in it killed, preferably by his own hand. Man, woman, child, babe. And then, in a measure of modest tempering, he had imagined a lesser whirlwind of slaughter, one that would give him enough kin over which he could rule, unopposed, free to do with them as he pleased. He would be the male wolf in its prime, commanding with a look in its eye, proving with a simple gesture its absolute domination.

None of it made sense any more.

Up ahead, the Edur warrior Ahlrada Ahn called out a rest, and Taralack Veed sank down against the sloped, sodden wall of a trench, stared down at his legs, which seemed to end just beneath his knees, the rest invisible beneath an opaque pool of water reflecting the grey sludge of sky.

The dark-skinned Tiste Edur made his way back along the line, halted before the Gral and the Jhag warrior behind him. 'Sathbaro Rangar says we are close,' he said. 'He will open the gate soon – we have outstayed our welcome in this realm in any case.'

'What do you mean?' Taralack asked.

'Ve would not do to be seen here, by its inhabitants. True, we would be as apparitions to them, ghostly, simply one more trudging line of soldiers. Even so, such witnessing could create ... ripples.'

'Ripples?'

Ahlrada Ahn shook his head. 'I myself am unclear, but our warlock is insistent. This realm is like the Nascent – to open the way is to invite devastation.' He paused, then said, 'I have seen the Nascent.'

Taralack Veed watched the Edur walk on, halting to speak every now and then with an Edur or Letherii.
'He commands with honour,' Icarium said.

'He is a fool,' the Gral said under his breath.

'You are harsh in your judgement, Taralack Veed.'

'He plays at deceit, Slayer, and they are all taken in, but I am not. Can you not see it? He is different from the others.'

'I am sorry,' Icarium said, 'but I do not see as you do. Different – how?'

Taralack Veed shrugged. 'He fades his skin. I can smell the compound he uses, it reminds me of gothar flowers, which my people use to whiten deer hide.'

'Fades ...' Icarium slowly straightened and looked back down the line. Then he sighed. 'Yes, now I see. I have been careless—'

'You have been lost inside yourself, my friend.'

'Yes.'

'It is not good. You must ready yourself, you must remain mindful, Slayer—'

'Do not call me that.'

'This too is inside yourself, this resistance to the truth. Yes, it is a harsh truth, but only a coward would not face it, would turn away and pretend to a more comforting falsehood. Such cowardice is beneath you.'

'Perhaps not, Taralack Veed. I believe I am indeed a coward. And yet, this is the least of my crimes, if all that you say of me is true—'

'Do you doubt me?'

'There is no hunger within me,' the Jhag said. 'No lust to kill. And all that you set at my feet, all that you say I have done – I recall nothing of it.'

'So is the nature of your curse, my friend. Would that I could confess, here and now, that I have deceived you. There have been changes in my soul, and now I feel as if we are trapped, doomed to our fate. I have come to know you better than I ever have before, and I grieve for you, Icarium.'

The pale grey eyes regarded him. 'You have told me that we have travelled together a long time, that we have made these journeys of the spirit before. And you have been fierce in your zeal, your desire to see me ... unleashed. Taralack Veed, if we have been together for many years ... what you now say makes no sense.'

Sweat prickled beneath the Gral's clothes and he looked away.

'You claim Ahlrada Ahn is the deceiver among us. Perhaps it takes a deceiver to know his kin.'

'Unkind words from you, my friend—'

'I no longer believe we are friends. I now suspect you are my keeper, and that I am little more than your weapon. And now you voice words of doubt as to its sharpness, as if through mutual uncertainty we may step closer to one another. But I will take no such step, Taralack Veed, except back – away from you.'

Bastard. He has pretended to be oblivious. But all the while, he has listened, he has observed. And now you voice words of doubt as to its sharpness, as if through mutual uncertainty we may step closer to one another. But I will take no such step, Taralack Veed, except back – away from you.'

He looked up as Ahlrada Ahn strode past them again, heading for the front of the column. 'Soon,' the warrior reminded them.
The journey resumed.

Captain Varat Taun, second to Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, Twilight, waved his Letherii archers forward. He spat in an effort to get the taste of mud from his mouth, but it was hopeless. The sorcery of the Holds had been let loose here, in coruscating waves of annihilation – the air stank of it, and in the wind he could hear the echoes of ten thousand soldiers dying, and the mud on his tongue was that of pulverized flesh, gritty with fragments of bone.

Yet perhaps there was a kind of gift in all of this, a measure providing perspective. For, grim as the Letherii Empire under the rule of the Tiste Edur had become, well, there were still green hills, farms, and blue sky overhead. Children were born to mothers and joyous tears flowed easy down warm, soft cheeks, the eyes brimming with love ... ah, my darling wife, these memories of you are all that hold me together, all that keep me sane. You and our precious daughter. I will see you again. I promise that. Perhaps soon.

Ahlrada Ahn was, once more, at the head of the column. Poor man. His facial features gave him away quickly enough, to a soldier hailing from Bluerose, such as Varat Taun. An imposter – what were the reasons for such deception? Survival, maybe. That and nothing more. Yet he had heard from Letherii slaves serving the Tiste Edur there was an ancient enmity between the Edur and the Tiste Andii, and if the Edur knew of the hidden enclaves in Bluerose, of their hated dark-skinned kin, well ...

And so Ahlrada Ahn was among them here. A spy. Varat Taun wished him success. The Onyx Order had been benign rulers, after all – of course, under the present circumstances, the past was an invitation to romantic idealism.

*Even considering that, it could not have been worse than now.*

Another pointless battle awaited them. More Letherii dead. He so wanted Twilight's respect, and this command could prove a true testing ground. Could Varat command well? Could he show that fine balance between ferocity and caution? *Ah, but I have apprenticed myself to the best commander of the Letherii armies since Freda Unnutal Hebaz, have I not?*

That thought alone seemed to redouble the pressure he felt.

The trench they had been trudging along debouched onto a muddy plain, the surface chewed by horse hoofs and cart wheels and the craters of sorcerous detonations. Here, the reek of rotting flesh hung like a mist. Gravestones were visible here and there, pitched askew or broken, and there was splintered wood – black with sodden decay – and thin white bones amidst the dead still clothed in flesh.

Perhaps half a league away ran a ridge, possibly a raised road, and figures were visible there, in a ragged line, marching towards the distant battle, pikes on their backs.

'Quickly!' Sathbaro Rangar hissed, hobbling forward. 'Stay low, gather round – no, there! Crouch, you fools! We must leave!'

Steth and Aystar, brother and sister, who had shared memories of pain, hands and feet nailed to wood, ravens at their faces tearing at their eyes – terrible nightmares, the conjurings of creative imaginations, said their mother, Minala – crept forward through the gloom of the fissure, the rocky floor beneath them slick, sharp-edged, treacherous.

Neither had yet fought, although both voiced their zeal, for they were still too young, or so Mother had decided. But Steth was ten years of age, and Aystar his sister was nine; and they wore the armour of the Company of Shadow, weapons at their belts, and they had trained with the others, as hard and diligently as any of them. And somewhere ahead stood their favourite sentinel, guarding the passage. They were sneaking up on him, their favourite game of all.

Crouching, they drew closer to where he usually stood.
And then a grating voice spoke from their left. ‘You two breathe too loud.’

Aystar squealed in frustration, jumping up. ‘It’s Steth! I don’t breathe at all! I’m just like you!’ She advanced on the hulking T’lan Imass who stood with his back to the crevasse wall. Then she flung herself at him, arms wrapping about his midsection.

Onrack’s dark, empty gaze settled upon her. Then the withered hand not holding the sword reached up and gingerly patted her on the head. ‘You are breathing now,’ the warrior said.

‘And you smell like dust and worse.’

Steth moved two paces past Onrack’s position and perched himself atop a boulder, squinting into the gloom beyond. ‘I saw a rat today,’ he said. ‘Shot two arrows at it. One came close. Really close.’

‘Climb down from there,’ the T’lan Imass said, prying Aystar’s arms from his waist. ‘You present a target in silhouette.’

‘Nobody’s coming any more, Onrack,’ the boy said, twisting round as the undead warrior approached. ‘They’ve given up – we were too nasty for them. Mother was talking about leaving—’

The arrow took him full on the side of the head, in the temple, punching through bone and spinning the boy round, legs sliding out onto a side of the boulder, then, with a limp roll, Steth fell to the ground.

Aystar began screaming, a piercing cry that rang up and down the fissure, as Onrack shoved her behind him and said, ‘Run. Back, stay along a wall. Run.’

More arrows hissed down the length of the crevasse, two of them thudding into Onrack with puffs of dust. He pulled them loose and dropped them to the floor, striding forward and taking his sword into both hands.

Minala’s face looked old, drawn with days and nights of fear and worry, the relentless pressure of waiting, of looking upon her adopted children, rank on rank, and seeing naught but soldiers, who had learned to kill, who had learned to watch their comrades die.

All to defend a vacant throne.

Trull Sengar could comprehend the mocking absurdity of this stand. A ghost had claimed the First Throne, a thing of shadows so faded from this world even the undead T’lan Imass looked bloated with excess beside it. A ghost, a god, a gauze-thin web-tracing of desire, possessiveness and nefarious designs – this is what had claimed the seat of power, over all the T’lan Imass, and would now see it held, blocked against intruders.

There were broken T’lan Imass out there, somewhere, who sought to usurp the First Throne, to take its power and gift it to the Crippled God – to the force that now chained all of the Tiste Edur. The Crippled God, who had given Rhulad a sword riven with a terrible curse. Yet, for that fallen creature, an army of Edur was not enough. An army of Letherii was not enough. No, it wanted the T’lan Imass.

*And we would stop him, this Crippled God. This pathetic little army of ours.*

Onrack had promised anger, with the battle that would, inevitably, come at last. But Trull knew that anger would not be enough, nor what he himself felt: desperation. Nor Minala’s harsh terror, nor, he now believed, the stolid insensibility of Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan – that too, was doomed to fail. *What a menagerie we are.*

He pulled his gaze from Minala, glanced over to where stood Monok Ochem, motionless before the arched entranceway leading into the throne room. The bonecaster had not moved in at least three cycles of sleeping and waking. The silver-tipped fur on his shoulders shimmered vaguely in the lantern light. Then, as Trull studied the figure, he saw the head cock slightly.

*Well—*

A child’s shrieking, echoing from up the passage, brought Trull Sengar to his feet. His spear leaned against a
wall – snatching it in one hand he rushed towards the cries.

Aystar suddenly appeared, arms outflung, her face a blur of white – ‘Steth's dead! He's been killed! He's dead —’

And then Minala was in the child’s path, wrapping her in a fierce hug then twisting round. ‘Panek! Gather the soldiers!’

The second line of defence, halfway between Onrack’s position and the main encampment, was held by Ibra Gholan, and this T’lan Imass turned as Trull Sengar approached.

‘Onrack battles,’ Ibra Gholan said. ‘To slow their advance. There are many Tiste Edur this time. And humans. A shaman is among them, an Edur, wielding chaotic power. This time, Trull Sengar, they mean to take the First Throne.’

He could hear sounds of fighting now. Onrack, alone against a mass of Trull’s own kin. And a damned warlock. ‘Get Monok Ochem up here, then! If that warlock decides to unleash a wave of sorcery, we’re finished.’

‘Perhaps you are—’

‘You don’t understand, you sack of bones! Chaotic sorcery! We need to kill that bastard!’ And Trull moved forward, leaving Ibra Gholan behind.

Ahlrada Ahn watched three of his warriors fall to the T’lan Imass’s huge stone sword – the undead bastard had yet to take a step back from the narrow choke-point in the passage. Ahlrada Ahn turned to Sathbaro Rangar. ‘We need to drive that thing back! It won’t tire – it can hold that position for ever!’

Taralack Veed pushed into view. ‘Send Icarium against it!’

‘The Jhag is empty,’ the warlock said dismissively. ‘Withdraw your warriors, Ahlrada Ahn. And get those Letherii to cease with their arrows – I do not want an errant shaft in the back.’ Sathbaro Rangar then moved forward.

And Ahlrada Ahn saw a figure coming up behind the T’lan Imass, a figure wielding a spear – tall, hidden in shadows, yet ... a familiar silhouette, the fluid movement – he saw an arrow hiss past the undead's shoulder, then saw that spear shaft flick it aside.

*No. This cannot be. I am mistaken. 'Sathbaro!'

The T’lan Imass suddenly yielded its position, stepping back into darkness, and then it and the other figure moved away, up the passage—

Sathbaro Rangar hobbled closer to the choke-point, power building round him, a silver-etched rising wave, flickering argent. The damp stone of the fissure's walls began snapping, a strange percussive sound as water burst into steam. A large sheet of rock near the narrowed portal suddenly exfoliated, crashing down to shatter on the floor.

The sorcery lifted higher, fuller, spreading out to the sides, then over Sathbaro's head, a standing wave of power that crackled and hissed like a thousand serpents.

Ahlrada Ahn moved forward. ‘Sathbaro! Wait!’

But the warlock ignored him, and with a roar the seething wave of magic plunged into the choke-point, blistering a path up the channel—

—where it suddenly shattered.

The concussion pushed Ahlrada Ahn back three steps, a wave of heat striking him like a fist.
Sathbaro Rangar screamed.

As something huge appeared in the choke-point, humped shoulders pushing through the aperture. Gaunt with undeath, its skin a mottled map of grey and black, silver-tipped fur on the neck and reaching along the shoulders like hackles, the creature emerged from the choke-point and rushed on its knuckles and hand-like hind feet — straight for Sathbaro Rangar.

Ahlrada Ahn shouted out a warning —

— too late, for the beast reached out and closed enormous hands on the warlock, lifted him into the air, tore off one arm, then the other, blood gouting as the apparition then twisted the shrieking Sathbaro round and bit into the back of the Edur's neck, huge canines sinking deep. As the jaws clenched, the undead demon's head snapped back — and ripped half the neck away — Sathbaro's spine racing out like an anchor-chain, whipping bloody in the air —

The beast then flung the corpse aside, and advanced on Ahlrada Ahn.

Icarium stood over the corpse of a child, stared down at the fluids leaking from the broken skull, at the glazed eyes and half-open mouth. The Jhag stood as if rooted, trembling.

Taralack Veed was before him. 'Now, Slayer. Now is the time!'

'No need,' Icarium muttered. 'No need for this.'

'Listen to me—'

'Be silent. I will not kill children. I will have none of this—'

A detonation of sorcery ahead, the concussion rolling back, rocking them both. Shouts, then screams. And a bestial snarl. Shrieks, cries of horror from the Letherii and Edur, then the sound of fear.

'Icarium! A demon is upon us! A demon! No child, no children — do you see? You must act — now! Show them! Show the Edur what is within you!'

Taralack was dragging at his arm. Frowning, Icarium allowed himself to be pulled forward, through a mass of cowering Edur. No, I do not want this — yet he could feel the pounding of his hearts, rising like war drums with songs of fire—

The stench of spilled blood and waste, and both warriors arrived to witness the savage death of Sathbaro Rangar.

And the Soletaken then surged into a charge — and Ahlrada Ahn — the brave warrior, seeking to protect his soldiers — stepped into the creature's path.

Icarium found his single-edged sword in his right hand — he did not recall unsheathing it — and he was moving forward, every motion seeming improbably slow, disjointed, as he reached out, grasping the Tiste Edur and throwing him back as if he weighed little more than a cloth hanging; and then the Jhag advanced to meet the undead ape.

He saw it suddenly recoil.

Another step forward, as a strange humming filled Icarium's skull, and the beast backed further away, into the choke-point, then beyond, where it whirled round and fled up the passage.

Icarium staggered, gasped, threw one hand up against one edge of the narrowed portal — felt its brittle surface beneath his palm. The eerie song in his mind faded—

And then Edur were plunging past him, rushing through the breach. And once more, ahead, the sounds of battle. Hard iron clashing, all scent of sorcery gone—
Beyond the choke-point, Ahlrada Ahn saw before him a widening of the fissure, and there, in a ragged line at least three deep, stood soldiers of some kind, weapons wavering, pale smudged faces beneath helms – *Sisters take me, they are so young! What is this? Children face us!*

And then he saw the two T’lan Imass, and between them a tall, grey-skinned figure – no. *No, it cannot be – we left him, we—*

A savage war-cry from Kholb Harat, echoed almost immediately by Saur Bathrada. *‘Trull Sengar! The traitor is before us!’*

*‘You are mine!’*

Despite Saur's bold claim, both he and Kholb lunged together, closing on Trull Sengar.

Then the remaining Edur were spreading out, rushing the line of armoured children, and the two forces collided in a cacophony of ringing weapons and shields. Screams of pain and rage rebounded off the battered stone walls.

And Ahlrada Ahn stood, frozen in place, watching, disbelieving.

Trull Sengar fought a frantic defence with his spear, as weapons slashed and thrust at him from both Saur and Kholb. They were forcing him back – and Ahlrada Ahn could see, could understand – Trull was seeking to protect these children – the ones behind him—

Edur screams – the two T’lan Imass were pushing forward in counter-attack, one to either side, and it seemed nothing could stop them.

Yet still he stood, and then, with a brutal, hoarse cry, he sprang forward.

Trull Sengar knew these two warriors. He could see the hatred in their eyes, felt their fury in the weight of their blows as they sought to batter through his guard – he could not hold them much longer. And when he fell, he knew the pitifully young soldiers behind would come face to face with these Edur killers.

Where was Apt? Why was Minala holding the demon back – what more could assail them?

Someone else was shouting his name now, from among the packed Edur. A name voiced, not in rage, but in anguish – but Trull had no time to look, no time even to wonder – Kholb had laid a blade along his left wrist, opening the flesh wide, and blood was streaming along the underneath of that forearm, seeping into the hand's grip on the shaft.

*Not much longer. They’ve improved, the both of them—*

He then saw a Merude cutlass slash inward from behind Kholb, taking the warrior solidly in the neck, through – and Kholb Harat’s head rolled on its side, tumbled down. The body wavered a moment, then crumpled.

A snarling curse from Saur Bathrada, who spun round, stabbing low, his sword digging deep into the newcomer’s right thigh—

And Trull lunged, sinking the point of his spear into Saur’s forehead, just beneath the rim of the helmet. And saw, with horror, both of the warrior's eyes leap from their sockets as if on strings as the head pitched back.

Trull dragged his weapon free as an Edur staggered into him, gasping, *‘Trull! Trull Sengar!’*

‘Ahlrada?’

The warrior twisted round, raising both cutlasses. *‘I fight at your side, Trull! Amends – please, I beg you!’*

Amends? *‘I don’t understand – but I do not doubt. Welcome—’*
A sound was building in Trull's head, seeming to assail him from every direction. He saw a child clamp hands to ears off to his left, then another one—

'Trull Sengar! It is the Jhag! Sisters take us, he is coming!'

Who? What?

What is that sound?

Onrack the Broken saw the Jhag, felt the power growing in the figure that staggered forward as if drunk, and the T'lan Imass moved into his path. Is this their leader? Jaghut blood, yes. Oh, how the old bitterness and fury rises again—

The Jhag suddenly straightened, raising his sword, and the high-pitched moaning burgeoned with physical force, pummelling Onrack back a step, and the T'lan Imass saw, at last, the Jhag's eyes.

Flat, lifeless, then seeming to light, all at once, with a dreadful rage.

The tall, olive-hued warrior surged at him, weapon flashing with blinding speed.

Onrack caught that blade on his sword, slashed high in riposte, intending to take off the Jhag's head — and, impossibly, that sword was there to meet his own, with a force that rocked the T'lan Imass. A hand punched outward, caught the undead warrior on the chest, lifting him clear from the rock floor—

A heavy crash against a wall, ribs splintering. Sliding down, Onrack landed on his feet, crouching to gather himself, then he launched himself forward once more—

The Jhag was moving past, straight for Minala's front line of young soldiers, the keening sound now deafening—

Onrack collided with the half-blood, indurate bone and the weight of a mule behind the force hammering into the Jhag's midsection.

And the T'lan Imass was thrown back, thumping hard to the floor.

His target had been staggered as well, and Onrack saw its bared teeth as it whirled and, shimmering fast, closed on the undead warrior — before he could even rise — that free hand snapping down, fingers pushing through thick, desiccated hide, wrapping round his sternum, lifting Onrack into the air, then flinging the T'lan Imass away — into the wall once again, this time with a force that shattered both bone and the stone flank of the fissure.

Onrack crumpled in a heap, amidst shards of rock, and did not move.

But the Jhag had been turned round by the effort, and now faced a mass of Tiste Edur and Letherii.

Trull Sengar saw the green-skinned monstrosity — who had crushed Onrack against a wall as if he had been a sack of melons — suddenly plunge among the Edur crowded behind him, and begin a terrible slaughter.

The keening sound rose yet higher, bringing with it a swirling, cavorting wind of raw power. Building — flailing the flesh from those Edur and Letherii closest to him — a nightmare had arrived, roaring a promise of obliteration. Trull stared, disbelieving, as blood blossomed in the air in a dreadful mist, as bodies fell — two, three at a time, then four, five — the warriors seemed to melt away, toppling, spun round by savage impacts—

A stained hand grasped his left forearm, drew him round. And, through the terrible keening: 'Trull — we shall die now, all of us — but, I have found you. Trull Sengar, I am sorry — for the Shorning, for all ... all the rest—'

Minala stumbled close. 'Where is Monok Ochem?' she demanded, spitting blood — a spear had thrust into her chest, just beneath the right clavicle, and her face was deathly white. 'Where is the bonecaster?'
Trull pointed, back towards the entranceway to the throne room. 'He went through there – like a knife-stuck dog—' And then he stared, for Ibra Gholan now stood in that archway, as if waiting.

All at once words were impossible, and they were pushed back by a raging wind, spinning, buffeting, so strong it lifted dead children into the air, whirled them round, limbs flailing about. The Jhag stood, twenty paces away, amidst heaps of corpses – and beyond him, Trull could see now, shimmered a gate; wavering as if jarred loose, unanchored to the rock floor, it appeared to be edging ever closer, as if pulled forward by the storm of power. Beyond it was a tunnel, seeming to spin, revealing flashes of a vast killing field, then, at the centre and impossibly distant, something like a rocking ship on rough seas.

Minala had staggered past, edging round Ibra Gholan and vanishing into the throne room—

The Jhag, silver light blazing from his eyes, then turned round—

And, leaning forward, with stilted overlong strides – as if his own flesh and bone had become impediments to the rage within him – he marched closer.

* Spirits bless me – * Trull launched himself to meet the apparition.

The sword seemed to come at him from everywhere at once. Trull had no opportunity for counter-attack, the shaft of the spear ringing, jumping in his hands with every blow he desperately shunted aside—

And then Ahrada Ahn attacked from the Jhag's right – two lightning clashes as the lone single-edged sword batted aside both Merude cutlasses, then licked out, and blood exploded from Ahrada Ahn's chest, an impact hard enough to fling the warrior from the ground, legs wheeling over his head, the body then sailing, wind-tossed and loosing sheets of crimson, through the air.

The Jhag redoubled his attack on Trull, the keening sound bursting from his mouth in a wail of outrage. Blurring sword, bone-jarring blocks, one after another – and still the Jhag could not get past.

Mostly buried beneath leaking corpses, Varat Taun lay motionless, one eye fixed on the battle between the two figures, Icarium and a Tiste Edur – it could not last, against the Jhag no-one could, yet that spear-wielder held on, defiant, displaying a skill so profound, so absolute, that the Letherii found himself unable to even draw breath.

Behind the Tiste Edur, children were retreating towards a rough-carved doorway at the apex of the chasm tunnel.

The storm was a whirlwind now, circling the two battling figures – gods, they moved faster than Varat's eye could follow, but now, finally, that spear began to splinter amidst the frenzy of parries—

Varat Taun heard weeping, closer to hand, and he shifted his gaze a fraction, to see Taralack Veed huddled against a wall, curled up and sobbing in terror. He had been clawing at the stone, as if seeking to dig his way out, and bloody streaks glistened on the latticed rock. *You wanted this, you bastard. Now live with it.*

Another splintering sound brought his gaze round once more, and he saw that the spear had shattered – the Edur flung himself backward, somehow avoiding a lateral slash of the sword that would have decapitated him. Roaring, Icarium advanced to finish off his foe, then suddenly ducked, twisted and threw himself to one side—

—as a midnight-hued demon swirled from shadows, the wide-mawed head on its sinuous neck darting out, jaws closing on Icarium's right shoulder, single foreleg raking huge talons down the front of the Jhag, along his ribs, seeking the softer flesh of his belly. The demon reared, dragging the Jhag into the air—

But the single-edged sword would not be denied, slashing down, cutting through the demon's neck. Black blood sprayed as the huge body pitched sideways, legs kicking spasmodically. Icarium landed into a crouch, then struggled to loosen the death-grip of those jaws clamped round his shoulder.

Beyond Icarium, the Tiste Edur was dragging Ahrada Ahn's body back, retreating towards the archway—
No point. No point at all – once he’s free—

The roaring wind was abrading the stone wall, filling the blood-laden air with glittering pieces of granite. Cracks travelled the stone in a crazed web – the storm's roar grew yet louder, and all at once Varat's left eardrum shattered in a burst of agony.

Staggering, his forearms bloody ribbons of flailed flesh, Trull pulled Ahlrada Ahn closer to the portal. Ibra Gholan no longer stood guard – in fact, the Edur saw no-one, no-one at all.

Have they fled? Surrendered the throne? Please, Sisters, please. Let them escape, out of here, away from this —

He reached the entranceway, and saw, just within, Ibra Gholan – the warrior's back to Trull, facing the First Throne – no, Trull saw, facing what was left of Monok Ochem. The sorcerous windstorm must have raced into the chamber, with a power the bonecaster could not withstand – the T'lan Imass had been thrown back, colliding with the right side of the throne, where, Trull saw with growing horror, Monok Ochem had melted. Fused, destroyed and twisted as its body was melded into the First Throne. Barely half of the bonecaster's face was visible, one eye surrounded by its cracked, collapsed socket.

To either side and against the wall crouched the pitifully few children still alive, Panek kneeling beside the prone, motionless form of Minala, who lay in a slowly spreading pool of blood.

Ibra Gholan turned as Trull dragged Ahlrada into the chamber.

'Monok Ochem has failed,' the undead warrior intoned. 'Move from the portal, Trull Sengar. I will now meet the Lifestealer.'

Trull pulled his friend to one side, then knelt and settled a hand on Ahlrada Ahn's spattered forehead. To his surprise, the eyes flickered open.

'Ahlrada...'

The dying warrior sought to speak, mouth opening then filling with bubbles of blood. A savage cough sprayed it into Trull's face, then a single word slurred free, a moment before Ahlrada Ahn died.

A single word.

'Home.'

Ibra Gholan strode out to meet the one he called Lifestealer. Four paces from the Jhag, who had finally managed to tear free the Aptorian's death-grip, the T'lan Imass charged.

Stone and iron, sparks at the heart of the roaring winds, and on those winds spun fragments of flesh, bone splinters, clumps of sodden hair and pieces of armour.

Collecting a spear from the scatter of weapons on the floor, Trull limped to place himself in the entranceway.

Ibra Gholan's attack had driven the Jhag back a step, then another—

A harsh cracking sound and the T'lan Imass reeled, its flint sword shattered. Lifestealer's weapon whirled down, tore through the undead warrior's left shoulder – another chop, ribs bursting, pieces caught on the wind – Ibra Gholan staggered back—

And the sword connected with the side of the warrior's head.

The skull exploded into a mass of shards—

Another swing ripped through the body, just above the hip, straight across, through the spine, out the other side, severing the T'lan Imass in half. Four more blows before what was left of the undead warrior could even
reach the floor. Bone fragments skirling in every direction.

Lifestealer tilted his head back and roared, the sound slamming Trull to the ground, driving all breath from his lungs—he stared, helpless, as the monstrosity took a step closer, then another.

A flash, solid ripping of the air, and a figure stumbled as if from nowhere into the Jhag's path. A figure who hissed, 'Damn you, Shadowthrone!' Trull saw it look up, take in the approaching apparition, manage a single step back, then, as the Jhag raised his sword, sorcery burst from the figure—blinding—and when it dispelled, the wind was racing with a banshee shriek back down the ragged corridor—and Lifestealer was nowhere to be seen.

Varat Taun watched Icarium annihilate the T'lan Imass, and saw once more the lone Tiste Edur, readying a spear moments before that triumphant roar battered the warrior from his feet.

The captain saw a gate open before Icarium, saw the unleashing of magic, and then Varat Taun ducked, as if to squeeze beneath more bodies, as the concussion that erupted when the sorcery struck the Jhag shook the very stone—the floor, the walls—and in an instant, a momentary flash, he saw Icarium wheeling through the air, towards him, then over, then past—and the furious wind plunged into the Jhag's wake.

Only to return with renewed force, and Varat felt the sodden bodies around him jostle and press down, as Icarium strode back over the dead, tilted forward, raising his sword once more.

The Ceda, dark-skinned, lithe, watched the Jhag's approach, and then released another thunderous gout of magic—

—and Icarium flew back—

The storm winds seemed to twist as if in berserker rage, howling, tearing at the stone walls, ripping huge chunks away. The bodies of the fallen were plucked into the air, the flesh scouring away from the bones, the bones thinning then splitting apart—weapons sailed past, withering into nothing.

And Trull Sengar, on his knees, watched as the stranger hammered Lifestealer. Again and again, each trembling detonation punching the Jhag back through the air, spinning, flailing, striking some distant obstruction with deep, rattling impacts.

And then, each time, the terrible slayer regained his feet, and marched forward once more.

Only to be struck again.

In the interval following the last one, the stranger turned and saw Trull Sengar, and, in Malazan, he yelled, 'Who in Hood's name is that man?'

Trull blinked, shook his head.

Wrong question. Who in Hood's name are you?

Roaring, Lifestealer clambered closer, and this time, he withstood the sorcerous blast, was pushed back but a few steps, and as the wild blaze faded, he shook his head, and lifted his sword. And came forward again.

Another eruption, but the Jhag leaned against it—

And Trull saw the mage jolt as if he had been punched. Skin split on the back of the man's hands, blood spurting.

Lifestealer stepped back, then surged forward yet again.

And the mage seemed to half-vanish in a mist of blood, flung back, stumbling, then, with a snarl, finding his balance once more—
In time for the Jhag’s next assault.

And Trull found the mage skidding to a halt directly in front of him. No skin was visible that was not sheathed in blood. Ruptures marred every limb, the face, the neck; the eyes were deep red, streaming crimson tears. One trembling hand lifted, and through torn lips, the mage seemed to smile as he said, ‘That’s it for me. All yours, Edur, and tell Shadowthrone and Cotillion, I’ll be waiting for them on the other side of Hood’s Gate.’

Trull looked up, then straightened, readying his spear.

Lifestealer's eyes blazed, and in that incandescence, Trull imagined he saw recognition. Yes, me again.

All at once the roaring wind stuttered, seemed to rip into itself, sending fragments of detritus flying against the walls – and there was heat, warm, sultry heat, flowing from behind the Jhag – who raised his sword and tottered closer—

Clawing part-way free of the bodies, Varat Taun felt the shattering of the storm. His breath caught, as a golden glow seemed to rise, suffusing the air – and in that glow, warmth, life.

Furtive movement to his left and he twisted his head round – a figure, furred, as if wearing a skin-tight brown pelt – no, naked, a woman – no, a female – not human at all. Yet—

In a half-crouch, moving lithe, sinuous, filled with trepidation, approaching Icarium from behind, as the Jhag began walking towards the lone Tiste Edur.

Then, a swift dart forward – Icarium heard and began his spin round – but she had reached out, a long-fingered hand – no weapon, reaching out, and Varat Taun saw the fingertips brush Icarium, just above the Jhag’s right hip – the slightest of touches—

And the Slayer crumpled to the ground.

Behind Varat, a wordless cry, and the Letherii flinched as someone scrambled past him – Taralack Veed—

The unhuman female had crouched beside the fallen form of Icarium. Softly stroking the slayer's forehead, as the amber glow began to fade, and with that fading, the female herself grew indistinct, then dissolved into gold light, which flickered, then vanished.

Taralack Veed turned his head and met Varat's eyes. ‘Help me!’ he hissed.

‘Do what?’ the Letherii demanded.

‘The gate behind you – it fades! We need to drag Icarium back through! We need to get him out of here!’

‘Are you insane?’

The Gral's face twisted. ’Don't you understand? Icarium – he is for your Emperor!’

A sudden chill, sweeping away the last vestiges of that healing warmth, and then, in its wake, a flood of emotion – scalding his mind. Varat Taun pushed himself upright, clambered to join Taralack Veed.

For Rhulad. Gods. Yes, I see now. Yes. For Rhulad – even Rhulad – even that sword – yes, I see, I see!

The entranceway to the throne room was unoccupied once more, as the Tiste Edur had pulled the Ceda into the sanctity of that chamber – now was their chance – he and Taralack reached the prostrate form of Icarium.

The Gral collected the sword and sheathed it beneath his belt, then grasped one arm. ‘Take the other,’ he commanded in a hiss. ‘Hurry! Before they realize – before that damned gate slams shut!’

And Varat grasped the other arm, and they began dragging Icarium back.

The slickness of what lay beneath the Jhag made it easier than expected.
Kneeling, Trull Sengar wiped blood from the mage's face, cautiously, gentle round the closed eyes. From beyond the archway, a profound silence. Within this chamber, the sounds of weeping, muted, hopeless.

'Will he live?'

The Tiste Edur started, then looked up. 'Cotillion. You said you'd send help. Is this him?'

The god nodded.

'He wasn't enough.'

'I know that.'

'So who would you have sent next?'

'Myself, Trull Sengar.'

Ah. He looked back down at the unconscious mage. 'The Eres'al ... she did what no-one else could do.'

'So it would seem.'

'Unanticipated, her arrival, I presume.'

'Most unexpected, Trull. It is unfortunate, nonetheless, that her power of healing did not reach through, into this chamber.'

The Tiste Edur frowned, then looked back up at the god. 'What do you mean?'

Cotillion could not meet his eyes. 'Onrack. Even now he rises. Mended, more or less. I think she feels for him ...'

'And who feels for us?' Trull demanded. He turned his head aside and spat out blood.

There was no answer from the god.

The Tiste Edur slumped down into a ragged sitting position. 'I'm sorry, Cotillion. I don't know if you deserved that. Probably not.'

'It has been an eventful night,' the god said. Then sighed. 'Such is convergence. I asked you earlier, will Quick Ben live?'

Quick Ben. Trull nodded. 'I think so. The blood's stopped flowing.'

'I have called Shadowthrone. There will be healing.'

Trull Sengar glanced over to where Panek sat beside his mother – one of his mothers – 'Shadowthrone had best hurry, before those children become orphans once again.'

A scuffling sound from the portal, and Onrack shuffled into view.

'Trull Sengar.'

He nodded, managed a broken smile. 'Onrack. It seems you and I are cursed to continue our pathetic existence for a while longer.'

'I am pleased.'

No-one spoke for a moment, and then the T'lan Imass said, 'Lifestealer is gone. He was taken away, back through the gate.'

Cotillion hissed in frustration. 'The damned Nameless Ones! They never learn, do they?'
Trull was staring at Onrack. 'Taken? He lives? Why – how? Taken?'

But it was the god who answered. 'Icarium – Lifestealer – is their finest weapon, Trull Sengar. The Nameless Ones intend to fling him against your brother, the Emperor of Lether.'

As comprehension reached through the numbness of exhaustion, Trull slowly closed his eyes. *Oh no, please...* 'I see. What will happen then, Cotillion?'

'I don't know. No-one does. Not even the Nameless Ones, although in their arrogance they would never admit to it.'

A squeal from Panek drew their attention – and there was Shadowthrone, crouching down over Minala, settling a hand on her forehead.

Trull spat again – the insides of his mouth were lacerated – then grunted and squinted up at Cotillion. 'I will not fight here again,' he said. 'Nor Onrack, nor these children – Cotillion, please—'

The god turned away. 'Of course not, Trull Sengar.'

Trull watched Cotillion walk through the archway, and the Tiste Edur's gaze fell once more on the body of Ahlrama Ahn. As Shadowthrone approached Quick Ben, Trull climbed to his feet and made his way to where his friend was lying. *Ahlrama Ahn. I do not understand you – I have never understood you – but I thank you nonetheless. I thank you...* 

He stepped to the entranceway, looked out, and saw Cotillion, the Patron of Assassins, the god, sitting on a shelf of stone that had slipped down from one wall, sitting, alone, with his head in his hands.
EPILOGUE

In a journey through the wastes, I found a god kneeling as it pushed its hands into the sand again and again, each time lifting them up to watch the lifeless grains stream down.

Dismounting from my weary horse, I walked to stand before this apparition and its dusty hands and watched for a time the cycles of their motion when at last up it looked, eyes beseeching.

'Where,' asked this god, 'are my children?'

The Lost Believers
Fisher

The bite, then the blessed numbness of smoke in her lungs, slowly released as Scillara moved up to lean on the rail at Cutter's side. 'You look far away,' she said, scanning the endless seas.

He sighed, then nodded.

'Thinking of her, were you? What was her name again?'

'Apsalar.'

She smiled, mostly to herself, drew in more smoke, watched it swirl away from her nostrils and her pursed lips, three streams becoming one. 'Tell me about her.'

Cutter glanced back over a shoulder, and Scillara, to be companionable, did the same. Barathol was at the stem, Chaur seated almost at the huge blacksmith's boots. Iskaral Pust and Mogora were nowhere in sight, likely in the cabin below, arguing over supper's mysterious ingredients. The black mule had vanished days ago, probably over the side although Iskaral simply smiled at their enquiries.

Mappo was at the bow, crouched down, knees drawn up. Rocking, weeping. He had been that way since morning and no-one seemed able to get through to find out what assailed him.

Cutter turned and stared back over the seas. Scillara happily did the same, pulling hard on her pipe.

And the Daru spoke. 'I was remembering back. After the big fête in Darujhistan, there was another one, a smaller one, celebrating the withdrawal of Malazan interests ... for the time being. Anyway, it was in Coil's estate, just before we left the city – gods below, it seems so long ago now ...'

'You'd just met, then.'

'Yes. Well, there was music. And Apsalar ... she danced.' He looked across at her. 'She danced so beautifully, all conversation stopped, everyone watched.' Cutter shook his head. 'I couldn't even draw breath, Scillara ...'

And yours is a love that will not die.

So be it.

'A good memory, Cutter. Hold on to it. Me, I could never dance well, unless drunk or otherwise softened up.'

'Do you miss those days, Scillara?'

'No. It's more fun this way.'

'What way?'
'Well now, you see, I don't miss a thing any more. Not a thing. That's very ... satisfying.'

'You know, Scillara, I do envy your happiness.'

She smiled across at him once more, a simple act that took all her will, all her strength. _So be it._

Cutter said, 'I think ... I think I need to lie in your arms right now, Scillara.'

_For all the wrong reasons. But there's this – in this Hood-damned world, it's worth taking what you can get. Whatever you can get._

Three streams.

Into one.

Karsa Orlong turned about as Samar Dev moved up beside him and settled down – a fierce gale was busy ripping off the surface of the waves in the sea beyond, and the hammering against the hull was incessant, as if eager spirits sought to tear the craft to pieces. 'Well, woman, what has got you looking so excited?'

'Something's happened,' she said. 'Here, give me some of that fur cloak, I'm chilled to the bone.'

He yielded the bear fur. 'Take it.'

'I bless your martyrdom, Karsa Orlong.'

'A wasted effort, then,' he rumbled in reply. 'I will be martyr to no-one, not even the gods.'

'Just a saying, you thick-skulled oaf. But listen, something happened. There was an assault. Hundreds of Edur warriors and Letherii auxiliaries. And, _another champion._'

Karsa grunted. 'Plenty of those in this fleet.'

'But only that champion and his servant returned. And one Letherii. The rest were slaughtered.'

'Where was this battle? We have seen no other ships.'

'Through a warren, Karsa Orlong. In any case, I heard the name of the champion. And this is why you have to listen to me. We have to get off this damned ship – if we even come in sight of land between here and that empire, we should go over the side. You said I was excited? Wrong. I am terrified.'

'And who is this terrifying champion, then?'

'He is named Icarium. The Slayer—'

'Whose servant is a Trell.'

She frowned. 'No, a Gral. Do you know Icarium? Do you know the awful legends surrounding him?'

'I know nothing of legends, Samar Dev. But we fought, once, Icarium and I. It was interrupted before I could kill him.'

'Karsa—'

But the Toblakai was smiling. 'Your words please me, woman. I will face him again, then.'

She stared at him in the gloom of the hold, but said nothing.

On another ship in the fleet, Taralack Veed was curled up in the hold, back to the sloping, sweating hull, as shivers racked through him.
Icarium stood before him, and was speaking: '
... difficult to understand. The Letherii seemed so contemptuous of me before, so what has changed? Now I see worship and hope in their eyes, their deference unnerves me, Taralack Veed.'

'Go away,' the Gral mumbled. 'I'm not well. Leave me.'

'What ails you is not physical, I fear, my friend. Please, come up on deck, breathe deep this enlivening air – it will soothe you, I am certain of it.'

'No.'

Icarium slowly crouched until his grey eyes were level with Taralack's belligerent stare. 'I awoke that morning more refreshed, more hopeful than I have ever been – I feel the truth of that claim. A warmth, deep within me, soft and welcoming. And it has not diminished since that time. I do not understand it, friend—'

'Then,' the Gral said in a grating voice, bitter with venom, 'I must tell you once more. Who, what you are. I must tell you, prepare you for what you must do. You leave me no choice.'

'There is no need,' Icarium said in a soft tone, reaching out one hand and resting it on Taralack Veed's shoulder.

'You fool!' the Gral hissed, twisting away from that touch. 'Unlike you,' he spat, 'I remember!'

Icarium straightened, looked down on his old friend. 'There is no need,' he said again, then turned away. You do not understand.

There is no need.

He stood on the highest tower of Mock's Hold, expressionless eyes on the chaos in the city below. The Adjunct's ships were drawing away from the harbour, out into the unlit waters of the bay beyond.

To his right, less than three strides away, was the fissure that gave the far side of the platform an alarming cant. The crack was recent, no more than a year old, reaching all the way down the keep into the cellars below, and the repairs by the engineers seemed desultory, verging on incompetent. The old heart of the Malazan Empire was wounded, and he did not expect it to survive much longer.

After a time, he sensed a presence behind him, but did not turn. 'Emperor,' he said in his quiet voice, 'it has been a long time, hasn't it?'

Shadowthrone's whisper reached out to him, like a chilling caress. 'Must this be your way, Tayschrenn? Each and every time.' A soft snort, the voice drawing closer as it continued, 'You've let yourself be caged. Again. You drive me mad.'

'You have had a busy night,' the Imperial High Mage observed.

'Ah, you sensed my ... activities? Of course you did. So, not as caged as it would seem.'

'I endeavour,' said Tayschrenn, 'to take the long view on such matters.' He paused, then added, 'As do you.' He glanced over at the insubstantial smear of darkness at his side. 'Your new role would not have changed you that much, I suspect.'

'You schemed with Quick Ben and Kalam,' Shadowthrone said. 'You travelled all the way to Seven Cities to do it, yet what have your plans achieved? The Empress on shifting sands, a Jhistal priest waddling unfettered in the corridors of power, the Claw infiltrated and decimated and my loyal Wickans assailed – but tell me this, Tayschrenn, could you have ever predicted D'rek's answer to the betrayal of the priests and priestesses?'

'Betrayal?'

'D'rek slaughtered your kin! Every temple!'
The High Mage was silent for a dozen heartbeats, as the god at his side grew ever more agitated. Then Tayschrenn said, 'A year ago, an old friend of mine set out, in haste, from here – sailing to the Grand Temple of D'rek in Kartool City.'

'You knew all that?'

Tayschrenn half-smiled. 'The ship he hired was mine. Alas, he was unaware of that detail.'

'I knew it!' Shadowthrone hissed. 'You never left the cult!'

'The Worm of Autumn is the harbinger of death, and death comes to us all. Us mortals, that is. How can one leave the acceptance of that? What would be the point?'

'This empire was mine! Not D'rek's! Not yours!'

'Emperor, your paranoia always disturbed me more than your acquisitiveness. In any case, Laseen now rules ... for the moment. Unless,' he squinted at the god, 'you are planning a triumphant return?'

'To save everyone from themselves? I think not. Hate is the world's most pernicious weed ... especially when people like you do nothing.'

'Every garden I have tended is either dead or wild, Emperor.'

'Why did you agree to be Quick Ben's shaved knuckle in the hole, Tayschrenn?'

The High Mage blinked in surprise.

'And why didn't he call on you when I sent him into that nightmare?'

'I would have been disappointed indeed,' Tayschrenn slowly said, 'had he called on me so soon. As I said earlier, Emperor, I hold to the long view on matters of this realm.'

'Why didn't D'rek kill you?'

'She tried.'

'What?'

'I talked her out of it.'

'Abyss take me, how I hate you!'

'Even gods must learn to control their tempers,' Tayschrenn said, 'lest they set a bad example.'

'You said that to D'rek?'

'I am saying that to you, Shadowthrone.'

'My temper is fine! I am perfectly calm – seething with fury and hatred, mind you, but calm!'

Neither spoke for a time after that, until the god murmured, 'My poor Wickans ...'

'They are not as vulnerable as you fear, Emperor. They will have Nil and Nether. They will have Temul, and when Temul is old, decades from now, he will have a young warrior to teach, whose name shall be Coltaine.' He clasped his hands behind his back, frowning down at the smoke-wreathed city as the first greying of dawn approached. 'If you would fear,' he said, 'fear for your own child.'

'I fear nothing—'

'Liar. You heard Temper step out of Coop's – and you fled.'

'Expedience!'
'Unquestionably.'

'You're in a nest of vipers here – I am happy to leave you to it.'

Tayschrenn sketched a modest bow. 'Emperor. Please convey my greetings to Cotillion.'

'Tell him yourself, if you dare.'

'It was not me who stole Kalam from him – tell me, does the assassin live?'

'He's in the Deadhouse – isn't that answer enough?'

'Not really.'

'I know!' Shadowthrone cackled in glee, then vanished like mist in the wind.

The morning was bright, the sun already warm, as the Master Investigator paused outside the Imperial Domicile in the city of Kartool. He adjusted his uniform, ensuring that every wrinkle was smoothed away. Then he licked the palms of his hands and carefully, tenderly, eased back his unruly hair – unruly in his own mind, at least. A last glance down at his boots, reassured by their unmarred polish, then he smartly ascended the steps and entered the squat building.

A nod rather than an answering salute to the guards stationed just within, then down the hallway to the door of the Commander's office. A knock, sharp and sure, and, upon hearing a muffled invitation to enter, he opened the door and marched inside, halting before the desk, behind which sat the Commander.

Who now looked up, and scowled. 'All right, you pompous ass, let's have it.'

The slight deflation was involuntary on the Master Investigator's part, but he managed to mask it as best as possible. 'I have the following to report, sir, regarding the investigation I rigorously undertook on the mysterious deaths of the acolytes and priests of the temple dedicated to D'rek on the Street of—'

'Will you shut up! You want to report your conclusions, yes? Then do just that!'

'Of course, sir. Given lack of evidence to the contrary, sir, only one conclusion is possible. The devotees of D'rek have, one and all, committed a thorough orgy of suicide in the span of a single night.'

Lizard eyes regarded him for an uncomfortably long time. Then he said, 'Sergeant Hellian, the original investigator, said precisely the same thing.'

'Clearly a perceptive woman, sir.'

'A drunk. I shipped her to the Fourteenth.'

The ... *Fourteenth ... ?*

'Write up your conclusions,' the Commander then said, 'and close the investigation. Now get out of here.'

The Master Investigator saluted and escaped with as much dignity as he could manage. Along the corridor, another nod to the guards, then out through the main doors, onto the landing, then down the steps.

Where he paused, looked up. The sunlight was glistening from the magnificent webs of the paralt spiders now resident in the towers of Kartool. A skein of crystal beauty, scintillating like threads of diamond against the stunning blue sky.

Optimism returning, he sighed, deciding that he had never before seen such a wondrous, breathtaking sight. And so he set off with a lighter step, boots ringing smartly on the cobbles.

While a score of huge spiders, crouched in their small caves dug into the walls of the towers, looked with cold, multifaceted eyes. Looked down upon all that crawled below, occasionally curious, ever patient, even as
the sweet whispers of hunger flitted through their liquid brains.

The webs were set.

And the traps, in their elaborate elegance, were never empty for long.

This ends the sixth tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen
GLOSSARY

ASCENDANTS

Anomander Rake: Son of Darkness
Apsalar: Lady of Thieves
Bern: 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, worshipped as either male or female
Eres/Eres'al: a progenitor spirit/goddess
Fener: the Bereft, the Boar of Five Tusks
Gedderone: Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Grizzin Farl: an Elder God
Hood: King of High House Death
Jhess: Queen of Weaving
Kilmandaros: an Elder God
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
Scalissara: a discredited goddess of olive oil, ruling over Y'Ghatan
Shadowthrone: Ammanas, King of High House Shadow
Sha'ilk: The Whirlwind Goddess

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

Togg and Fanderay: The Wolves of Winter

Treach/Trake: The Tiger of Summer and Lord of War

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)

ELDER RACES

**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

**Kur ald Galain**: The Elder Warren of Darkness

**Kur ald Emurlahn**: The Elder Warren of Shadow, the Shattered Warren

**Kur ald Liosan**

**Kur ald Thyrllan**: The Elder Warren of Light

**Omtose Phellack**: The Elder Jaghut Warren of Ice

**Tellann**: The Elder Imass Warren of Fire

**Star vald Demelain**: The Eleint Warren
Thyr: The Path of Light
Denul: The Path of Healing
Hood’s Path: The Path of Death
Sere: The Path of the Sky
Meanas: 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

PEOPLES AND PLACES

Anibar: a tribe dwelling in Shield lands north of the Jhag Odhan, Seven Cities
Ehrlitan: a port city in Seven Cities
G’danisban: a city in Seven Cities
Gral: a tribe of Seven Cities
Hanar Ara: an ancient city, City of the Fallen
Hatra: a city in Seven Cities
Hedori Kwil: extinct city, Seven Cities
Inath’an Mersin: old name for Mersin, Seven Cities
Kanarbar Belid: old name for Belid, city in Seven Cities
Karashimesh: a city of Seven Cities
Kartool: city and island off Quon Tali mainland
Malaz City: birthplace of the Malazan Empire, on Malaz Island, off the Quon Tali mainland
Minikenar: extinct city of the First Empire, Seven Cities
Mock’s Hold – old keep overlooking Malaz City
Monkan: sister island of Sepik (smaller)
Nemil: an expansionist kingdom northwest of the Jhag Odhan
N’Karaphal: extinct city, Seven Cities
Pan’potsun: a city in Seven Cities
Pardu: a tribe of Seven Cities
Perish: a kingdom west of Nemil
Rampart Way: descent from Mock's Hold, Malaz City
Raven Hill Park: a park in Malaz City
Sepik Island: an island kingdom, Seven Cities
Septarch District: the temple district of Kartool City
Shal-Morzinn: an empire southwest of Nemil
Tramara: extinct city, Seven Cities
Trebur: extinct city, Seven Cities (City of Domes)
Ugarat: a city in Seven Cities
Vedanik: a tribe of the Thalas Mountains, Seven Cities
Vinith: extinct city, Seven Cities
Vithan Taur: extinct city of the First Empire, Seven Cities
Y’Ghatan: a city of Seven Cities

TERMS

Aptorian: a species of demon native to the Shadow Realm
Ashok Regiment: old regiment, now in the Fourteenth Army
Atri-Preda: equivalent of Commander or Fist among the Letherii
Avower: term for Royal Torturer in Ugarat
Azalan: a species of demon native to the Shadow Realm
Bhederin: a large semi-domesticated or wild ungulate
Black Glove (The): a secret cult within the Claw
Blackwood: a rare seaworthy wood
Bloodwood: a rare wood used by the Tiste Edur
Bokh’aral: a small rock-dwelling ape
Bonecaster: T’lan Imass term for a shaman of their kind
Capemoth: a large scavenging insect of Seven Cities
Carelbarra: a honey also known as the God Bringer for its hallucinogenic qualities
Carrier: a vector for plague
Chigger fleas: a wind-borne insect of Seven Cities
Child Death Song: a Seti rite of passage into adulthood involving ritual burial
Coraval: a type of fish, the primary harvest around Malaz Island
D'bayang: an opiate
D'ivers: a form of shape-shifting into multiple animals
Demidrek: a high priest or priestess of D'rek
Destriant: a mortal representative for a particular faith
Dinal: a species of demon in the Shadow Realm
Drake: a Tanno pilgrim ship
Dromon: a warship
Eleint: another term for pure-blood dragons
Enkar'al: a large predator of Seven Cities (now extinct)
Eraga: a breed of cattle thought to be extinct on Seven Cities
Escura: a plant used to kill chigger fleas
Goldfinch: a tree native to Seven Cities
Gothar flower: used as a bleaching agent
Grey Helms: a military religious order
Imbrules: an unspecified animal native to Starvald Demelain
Jhistal: a high priest of an Elder God who employs human blood in ritual magic (Elder equivalent of Destriant)
Kethra knife: a large wide-bladed knife from Seven Cities
Long-tails: another name for K'Chain Che'Malle
Luthuras: an unspecified animal native to Starvald Demelain
Maethgara: Y'Ghanii name for buildings used to store olive oil
Mahybe: ancient term meaning vessel (now known as Mhybe among the Rhivi)
Meer-rat: a reptilian rodent
Mortal Sword: a martial champion to a god
Nameless Ones (The): an ancient cult devoted to the Azath Houses
Obsidian Throne: traditional seat of power of Bluerose
Onyx Wizards/Council: traditional rulers in Bluerose
Paralt: the name for a spider and a snake, both venomous (also the name for the poison itself)
Preda: Letherii equivalent to Captain
Purlith: a species of bat native to Starvald Demelain
Rhizan: a small winged, insectivorous reptile
Shield Anvil: mortal repository for the fallen (dead), sworn to a particular god
Short-Tails: another name for K'Chain Nah'ruck
Soletaken: shape-shifting

Stantars: an unspecified animal native to Starvald Demelain

Stormriders: an ocean-dwelling species

Stormwall: a barrier to the predations of the Stormriders on Korel

Surveyants: a maker of maps among the Trygalle Trade Guild

Telaba: a traditional outer garment worn in Seven Cities

T'rolbarahl: an ancient form of D'ivers from the period of the First Empire

Thrones of War: name for the war catamarans used by the Perish

Trell Wars (The): wars of genocide against the Trell conducted by the Nemil

Troughs: a board game popular among Malazans

Verdith'anath: The Bridge of Death (Jaghut underworld)

Watcher: a Tiste Andii agent hidden among the Tiste Edur of the Lether Continent

Whispers (The): voices of guidance in the cult of Sha'ik Reborn
STEVEN ERIKSON'S EPIC FANTASY SEQUENCE CONTINUES IN

REAPER'S GALE

published by Bantam Press. Here's the Prologue as a taster ...
In a landscape torn with grief, the carcasses of six dragons lay strewn in a ragged row reaching a thousand or more paces across the plain, flesh split apart, broken bones jutting, jaws gaping and eyes brittle-dry. Where their blood had spilled out onto the ground wraiths had gathered like flies to sap and were now ensnared, the ghosts writhing and voicing hollow cries of despair, as the blood darkened, fusing with the lifeless soil, and, when at last the substance grew indurate, hardening into glassy stone, those ghosts were doomed to an eternity trapped within that murky prison.

The naked creature that traversed the rough path formed by the fallen dragons was a match to their mass, yet bound to the earth, and it walked on two bowed legs, the thighs thick as thousand-year-old trees. The width of its shoulders was equal to the length of a Tartheno Toblakai's height; from a thick neck hidden beneath a mane of glossy black hair, the frontal portion of the head was thrust forward – brow, cheekbones and jaw, and its deep-set eyes revealed black pupils surrounded in opalescent white. The huge arms were disproportionately long, the enormous hands almost scraping the ground. Its breasts were large, pendulous and pale. As it strode past the battered, rotting carcasses, the motion of its gait was strangely fluid, not at all lumbering, and each limb was revealed to possess extra joints.

Skin the hue of sun-bleached bone, darkening to veined red at the ends of the creature's arms, bruises surrounding the knuckles, a lattice-work of cracked flesh exposing the bone here and there. The hands had seen damage, the result of delivering devastating blows.

It paused to tilt its head, upward, and watched as three dragons sailed the air high amidst the rolling clouds, appearing then disappearing in the smoke of the dying realm.

The earth-bound creature's hands twitched, and a low growl emerged from deep in its throat.

After a long moment, it resumed its journey.

Beyond the last of the dead dragons, to a place where rose a ridge of hills, the largest of these cleft through as if a giant claw had gouged out the heart of the rise, and in that crevasse raged a rent, a tear in space that bled power in necrous streams. The malice of that energy was evident in the manner in which it devoured the sides of the fissure, eating like acid into the rocks and boulders of the ancient berm.

The rent would soon close, and the one who had last passed through had sought to seal the gate behind him. But such healing could never be done in haste, and this wound bled anew.

Ignoring the virulence pouring from the rent, the creature strode closer. At the threshold it paused again and turned to look back the way it had come.

Draconean blood hardening into stone, horizontal sheets of the substance, already beginning to separate from the surrounding earth, to lift up on edge, forming strange, disarticulated walls. Some then began sinking, vanishing from this realm. Falling through world after world. To reappear, finally, solid and impermeable, in other realms, depending on the blood's aspect, and these were laws that could not be challenged. Starvald Demelain, the blood of dragons and the death of blood.

In the distance behind the creature, Kurald Emurlahn, the Realm of Shadows, the first realm born of the conjoining of Dark and Light, convulsed in its death-throes. Far away, the civil wars still raged on, whilst in other areas the fragmenting had already begun, vast sections of this world's fabric torn away, disconnected and lost and abandoned – to either heal round themselves, or die. Yet interlopers still arrived here, like scavengers gathered round a fallen leviathan, eagerly tearing free their own private pieces of the realm. Destroying each other in fierce battles over the scraps.

It had not been imagined – by anyone – that an entire realm could die in such a manner. That the vicious acts of its inhabitants could destroy ... everything. Worlds lived on, had been the belief – the assumption – regardless of the activities of those who dwelt upon it. Torn flesh heals, the sky clears, and something new
crawls from the briny muck.

But not this time.

Too many powers, too many betrayals, too vast and all-consuming the crimes.

The creature faced the gate once more.

Then Kilmandaros, the Elder goddess, strode through.

***

*The mined K’Chain Che’Malle demesne after the fall of Silchas Ruin*

Trees were exploding in the bitter cold that descended like a shroud, invisible yet palpable, upon this wracked, devastated forest.

Gothos had no difficulty following the path of the battle, the successive clashes of two Elder Gods warring with the Soletaken dragon, and as the Jaghut traversed its mangled length, he brought with him the brutal chill of Omtose Phellack, the Warren of Ice. *Sealing the deal, as you asked of me, Mael. Locking the truth in place, to make it more than memory. Until the day that witnesses the shattering of Omtose Phellack itself. Gothos wondered, idly, if there had been a time when he believed that such a shattering would not come to pass. That the Jaghut, in all their perfected brilliance, were unique, triumphant in eternal domination. A civilization immortal, when all others were doomed.*

Well, it was possible. He had once believed that all of existence was under the benign control of a caring omnipotence, after all. *And crickets exist to sing us to sleep, too. There was no telling what other foolishness might have crept into his young, naïve brain all those millennia ago.*

No longer, of course. Things end. Species die out. Faith in anything else was a conceit, the produce of unchained ego, the curse of supreme self-importance.

*So what do I now believe?*

He would not permit himself a melodramatic laugh in answer to that question. What was the point? There was no one nearby who might appreciate it. Including himself. *Yes, I am cursed to live with my own company.*

*It’s a private curse.*

*The best kind.*

He ascended a broken, fractured rise, some violent uplift of bedrock, where a vast fissure had opened, its vertical sides already glistening with frost when Gothos came to the edge and looked down. Somewhere in the darkness below, two voices were raised in argument.

Gothos smiled.

He opened his warren, made use of a sliver of power to fashion a slow, controlled descent towards the gloomy base of the crevasse.

As Gothos neared, the two voices ceased, leaving only a rasping, hissing sound, pulsating – the drawing of breath on waves of pain, and the Jaghut heard the slithering of scales on stone, slightly off to one side.

He alighted atop broken shards of rock, a few paces from where stood Mael, and, ten paces beyond him, the huge form of Kilmandaros, her skin vaguely luminescent – in a sickly sort of way – standing with hands closed into fists, a belligerent cast to her brutal mein.

Scabandari, the Soletaken Dragon, had been driven into a hollow in a cliffside and now crouched, splintered
ribs no doubt making every breath an ordeal of agony. One wing was shattered, half-torn away. A hind limb was clearly broken, bones punched through flesh. Its flight was at an end.

The two Elders were now eyeing Gothos, who strode forward, then spoke. 'I am always delighted,' he said, 'when a betrayer is in turn betrayed. In this instance, betrayed by his own stupidity. Which is even more delightful.'

Mael, Elder God of the Seas, asked, 'The Ritual ... are you done, Gothos?'

'More or less.' The Jaghut fixed his gaze on Kilmandaros. 'Elder Goddess. Your children in this realm have lost their way.'

The huge bestial woman shrugged, and said in a faint, melodic voice, 'They're always losing their way, Jaghut.'

'Well, why don't you do something about it?'

'Why don't you?'

One thin brow lifted, then Gothos bared his tusks in a smile. 'Is that an invitation, Kilmandaros?'

She looked over at the dragon. 'I have no time for this. I need to return to Kurald Emurlahn. I will kill him now—' and she stepped closer.

'You must not,' Mael said.

Kilmandaros faced him, huge hands opening then closing again into fists. 'So you keep saying, you boiled crab.'

Shrugging, Mael turned to Gothos. 'Explain it to her, please.'

'How many debts do you wish to owe me?' the Jaghut asked him.

'Oh now really, Gothos!'

'Very well. Kilmandaros. Within the Ritual that now descends upon this land, upon the battlefields and these ugly forests, death itself is denied. Should you kill the Tiste Edur here, his soul will be unleashed from his flesh, but it will remain, only marginally reduced in power.'

'I mean to kill him,' Kilmandaros said in her soft voice.

'Then,' Gothos' smile broadened, 'you will need me.'

Mael snorted.

'Why do I need you?' Kilmandaros asked the Jaghut.

He shrugged. 'A Finnest must be prepared. To house, to imprison, this Soletaken's soul.'

'Very well, then make one.'

'As a favour to you both? I think not, Elder Goddess. No, alas, as with Mael here, you must acknowledge a debt. To me.'

'I have a better idea,' Kilmandaros said. 'I crush your skull between a finger and thumb, then I push your carcass down Scabandari's throat, so that he suffocates on your pompous self. This seems a fitting demise for the both of you.'

'Goddess, you have grown bitter and crabby in your old age,' Gothos said.

'It is no surprise,' she replied. 'I made the mistake of trying to save Kurald Emurlahn.'
'Why bother?' Mael asked her.

Kilmandaros bared jagged teeth. 'The precedent is ... unwelcome. You go bury your head in the sands again, Mael, but I warn you, the death of one realm is a promise to every other realm.'

'As you say,' the Elder God said after a moment. 'And I do concede that possibility. In any case, Gothos demands recompense.'

The fists unclenched, then clenched again. 'Very well. Now, Jaghut, fashion a Finnest.'

'This will do,' Gothos said, drawing an object into view from a tear in his ragged shirt.

The two Elders stared at it for a time, then Mael grunted. 'Yes, I see, now. Rather curious choice, Gothos.'

'The only kind I make,' the Jaghut replied. 'Go on, then, Kilmandaros, proceed with your subtle conclusion to the Soletaken's pathetic existence.'

The dragon hissed and screamed in rage and fear as the Elder Goddess advanced.

When she drove a fist into Scabandari's skull, centred on the ridge between and above the draconic eyes, the crack of the thick bone rang like a dirge down the length of the crevasse, and with the impact blood spurted from the Goddess's knuckles.

The dragon's broken head thumped heavily onto the broken bedrock, fluids spilling out from beneath the sagging body.

Kilmandaros wheeled to face Gothos.

He nodded. 'I have the poor bastard.'

Mael stepped towards the Jaghut, holding out a hand. 'I will take the Finnest then—'

'No.'

Both Elders now faced Gothos, who smiled once more. 'Repayment of the debt. For each of you. I claim the Finnest, the soul of Scabandari, for myself. Nothing remains between us, now. Are you not pleased?'

'What do you intend to do with it?' Mael demanded.

'I have not yet decided, but I assure you, it will be most curiously unpleasant.'

Kilmandaros made fists again with her hands and half-raised them. 'I am tempted, Jaghut, to send my children after you.'

'Too bad they've lost their way, then.'

Neither Elder said another word as Gothos departed from the fissure. It always pleased him, outwitting doddering old wrecks and all their hoary, brutal power. Well, a momentary pleasure, in any case.

_The best kind._

Upon her return to the rent, Kilmandaros found another figure standing before it. Black-coated, white-haired. An expression of arched contemplation, fixed upon the torn fissure.

About to enter the gate, or waiting for her? The Elder Goddess scowled. 'You are not welcome in Kurald Emurlahn,' she said.

Anomandaris Purake settled cool eyes upon the monstrous creature. 'Do you imagine I contemplate claiming the throne for myself?'

'You would not be the first.'
He faced the rent again. 'You are besieged, Kilmandaros. I offer you my help.'

'With you, Tiste Andii, my trust is not easily earned.'

'Unjustified,' he replied. 'Unlike many others of my kind, I accept that the rewards of betrayal are never sufficient to overwhelm the cost. There are Soletaken now, in addition to feral dragons, warring in Kurald Emurlahn.'

'Where is Osserc?' the Elder Goddess asked. 'Mael informed me that he—'

'Was planning to get in my way again. Osserc imagined I would take part in slaying Scabandari. Why should I? You and Mael were more than enough.' He then grunted. 'I can picture Osserc, circling round and round. Looking for me. Idiot'

'And Scabandari's betrayal of your brother? You have no desire to avenge that?'

Anomandaris glanced at her, then gave her a faint smile. 'The rewards of betrayal. The cost to Scabandari proved high, didn't it? As for Silchas, well, even the Azath do not last forever. I almost envy him his newfound isolation from all that will afflict us in the millennia to come.'

'Indeed. Do you wish to join him in a similar barrow?'

'I think not.'

'Then I imagine that Silchas Ruin will not be inclined to forgive you your indifference, the day he is freed.'

'You might be surprised, Kilmandaros.'

'You and your kind are mysteries to me, Anomandaris Purake.'

'I know. So, Goddess, have we a pact?'

She cocked her head. 'I mean to drive the pretenders from the realm – if Kurald Emurlahn must die, then let it do so on its own.'

'In other words, you want to leave the Throne of Shadow unoccupied.'

'Yes.'

He thought for a time, then he nodded. 'Agreed.'

'Do not wrong me, Soletaken.'

'I shall not. Are you ready, Kilmandaros?'

'They will forge alliances,' she said. 'They will all war against us.'

Anomandaris shrugged. 'I have nothing better to do today.'

The two Ascendants then walked through the gate, and, together, they closed the rent behind them. There were other paths, after all, to this realm. Paths that were not wounds.

Arriving within Kurald Emurlahn, they looked upon a ravaged world.

Then set about cleansing what was left of it.

***

The Awl'dan
Two years before the Tiste Edur conquest of Lether
Preda Bivatt, a captain in the Drènë garrison, was far from home. Twenty-one days by wagon, commanding an expedition of two hundred soldiers of the Tattered Banner Army, a troop of thirty Bluerose light cavalry, and four hundred support staff, including civilians, she had, after delivering orders for the setting of camp, slid down from the back of her horse to walk the fifty-odd paces to the edge of the bluff.

Upon reaching the rise the wind struck her a hammer blow to her chest, as if eager to fling her back, to scrape her from this battered lip of land. The ocean beyond the ridge was a vision from an artist's nightmare, a seascape torn, churning, with heavy twisting clouds shredding apart overhead. The water was more white than blue-green, foam boiling, spume flying out from between rocks as the waves pounded the shore.

Yet, she saw with a chill rushing in to bludgeon her bones, this was the place.

A fisher boat, blown well off course, into the deadly maelstrom that was this stretch of ocean, a stretch that no trader ship, no matter how large, would willingly venture into. A stretch that had, eighty years ago, caught a Meckros City and had torn it to pieces, pulling into the depths twenty or more thousand dwellers of that floating settlement.

The fisher crew had survived, long enough to draw their beleaguered craft safely aground in hip-deep water thirty or so paces from the bedrock strand. Their catch lost, their boat punched into kindling by relentless waves, the four Letherii managed to reach dry land.

To find ... this.

Tightening the strap of her helm, lest the wind tear it and her head from her shoulders, Preda Bivatt continued scanning the wreckage lining this shoreline. The promontory upon which she stood was undercut, dropping away three man-heights to a bank of white sand heaped with elongated rows of dead kelp, uprooted trees, and remnants of eighty-year-old Meckros City. And something else. Something more unexpected.

War canoes. The seagoing kind, each as long as a coralface whale, high-powered, longer and broader than Tiste Edur craft. Not flung ashore as wreckage – no, not one she could see displayed anything like damage. They were drawn up in rows high along the beach, although it was clear that that had happened some time past – months at least, perhaps years.

A presence at her side. The merchant from Drènë who had been contracted to supply this expedition. Paleskinned, his hair pallid blond, so fair as to be nearly white. The wind was blasting red the man's round face, but she could see his light blue eyes fixed on the array of war canoes, tracking, first westward along the beach, then eastward. 'I have some talent,' he said to her, loudly so as to be heard over the gale.

Bivatt said nothing. The merchant no doubt had skill with numbers – his claim to talent. And she was an officer in the Letherii Army, and could well gauge the likely complement of each enormous craft without his help. A hundred, give or take twenty.

'Preda?'

'What?'

The merchant gestured helplessly. 'These canoes.' He waved up the beach, then down. 'There must be—' And then he was at a loss for words.

She well understood him.

Yes. Rows upon rows, all drawn up to this forbidding shore. Drènë, the nearest city of the kingdom, was three weeks away, to the southwest. Directly south of here was the land of the Awl'dan, and of the tribes' seasonal rounds with their huge herds, virtually all was known. The Letherii were in the process of conquering them, after all. There had been no report of anything like this.

Thus. Two, three years ago, a fleet arrived upon this shore. Whereupon everyone had disembarked, taking all they had with them, and then, presumably, set off inland.

There should have been signs, rumours, a reverberation among the Awl at the very least. *We should have*
heard about it.

But they hadn't. The foreign invaders had simply ... disappeared.

*Not possible. How can it be? She scanned the rows once again, as if hoping that some fundamental detail would reveal itself, would ease the hammering of her heart and the leaden chill of her limbs.*

'Preda ...'

*Yes. One hundred per craft. And here before us ... stacked four, five deep – what? Four, maybe five thousand?*

The north shoreline was a mass of grey-wooded war canoes, for almost as far as she could see to the west and to the east. Drawn up. Abandoned. Filling the shore like a toppled forest.

'Upwards of a half million,' the merchant said. 'That is my estimate. Preda, where in the Errant's name did they all go?'

She scowled. 'Kick that mage nest of yours, Letur Anict. Make them earn their exorbitant fees. The king needs to know. Every detail. Everything.'

'At once,' the man said.

While she would do the same with the Ceda's squad of acolytes. The redundancy was necessary. Without the presence of Kuru Qan's chosen students, she would never learn all that Letur Anict held back on his final report, would never be able to distill the truths from the half-truths, the outright lies. A perennial problem with hiring private contractors – they had their own interests, after all, and loyalty to the crown was, for creatures like Letur Anict, the new Factor of Drene, always secondary.

She began looking for a way down onto the beach. Bivatt wanted a closer look at these canoes, especially since it seemed that sections of their prows had been dismanted. Which is an odd thing to do. Yet, a manageable mystery, one I can deal with and so not think about all the rest.

'Upwards of a half million.'

*Errant's blessing, who is now among us?*

* ***

The Awl'dan
Two years following the Tiste Edur conquest of Lethur

The wolves had come, then gone, and where corpses had been dragged out from the solid press atop the hill-top – where the unknown soldiers had made their last stand – the signs of their feeding were evident, and this detail remained with the lone rider as he walked his horse amidst the motionless, sprawled bodies. Such pillaging of the dead was ... unusual. The dun-furred wolves of this plain were as opportunistic as any other predator on the Awl-dan, of course. Even so, long experience with humans should have sent the beasts fleeing at the first sour scent, even if it was commingled with that of spilled blood. What, then, had drawn them to this silent battlefield?

The lone rider, face hidden behind a crimson, scaled mask, drew rein near the base of the low hill. His horse was dying, wracked with shivers; before the day's end the man would be walking. As he was breaking camp this dawn, a horn-nosed snake had nipped the horse as it fed on a tuft of silver-stem grasses at the edge of a gully. The poison was slow but inevitable, and could not be neutralized by any of the herbs and medicines the man carried. The loss was regrettable but not disastrous, since he had not been travelling in haste.

Ravens circled overhead, yet none descended – nor had his arrival stirred them from this feast; indeed, it had been the sight of them, wheeling above this hill, that had guided him to this place. Their cries were infrequent,
strangely muted, almost plaintive.

The Drene legions had taken away their dead, leaving naught but their victims to feed the grasses of the plain. The morning's frost still mapped glistening patterns on death-dark skin, but the melt had already begun, and it seemed to him that these dead soldiers now wept, from stilled faces, from open eyes, from mortal wounds.

Rising on his stirrups, he scanned the horizon – as much of it as he could see, seeking sight of his two companions, but the dread creatures had yet to return from their hunt, and he wondered if they had found a new, more inviting trail somewhere to the west – the Letherii soldiers of Drene, marching triumphant and gluttoned back to their city. If so, then there would be slaughter on this day. The notion of vengeance, however, was incidental. His companions were indifferent to such sentiments. They killed for pleasure, as far as he could tell. Thus, the annihilation of the Drene and any vengeance that could be ascribed to the deed existed only in his own mind. The distinction was important.

Even so, a satisfying conceit.

Yet, these victims here were strangers, these soldiers in their grey and black uniforms. Stripped now of weapons and armour, standards taken as trophies, their presence here in the Awl'dan – in the heart of the rider's homeland – was perturbing.

He knew the invading Letherii, after all. The numerous legions with their peculiar names and fierce rivalries; he knew as well the fearless cavalry of the Bluenose. And the still-free kingdoms and territories bordering the Awl'dan, the rival D'rhasilhani, the Keryn, the Bolkando Kingdom and the Saphinand State – he had treated with or crossed blades with them all, years ago, and none were as these soldiers here.

Pale-skinned, hair the colour of straw or red as rust. Eyes of blue or grey. And ... so many women.

His gaze settled upon one such soldier, a woman near the hill's summit. Mangled by sorcery, her armour melded with the twisted flesh – there were sigils visible on that armour ...

Dismounting, he ascended the slope, picking his way round bodies, moccasins skidding on blood-soaked mud, until he crouched down at her side.

Paint on the blackened bronze hauberk. Wolf heads, a pair. One was white-furred and one-eyed, the other furred silver and black. A sigil he had not seen before.

Strangers indeed.

Foreigners. Here, in the land of his birth.

Behind the mask, he scowled. Gone. Too long. Am I now the stranger?

Heavy drumbeats reverberated through the ground beneath his feet. He straightened. His companions were returning.

So, no vengeance after all.

Well, there was time yet.

The mournful howl of wolves had awakened him this morning, their calls the first to draw him here, to this place, as if they sought a witness, as if indeed they had summoned them. While their cries had urged him on, he had not caught sight of the beasts, not once.

The wolves had fed, however, some time this morning. Dragging bodies from the press.

His steps slowed as he made his way down the slope, slowed, until he stood, his breath drawn in and held as he looked more closely at the dead soldiers on all sides.

The wolves have fed. But not as wolves do ... not like ... like this.
Chests torn open, ribs jutting ... they had devoured hearts. Nothing else. Just the hearts.

The drumbeats were louder now, the rake of talons hissing through grass. Overhead, the ravens, screaming, fled in all directions.

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