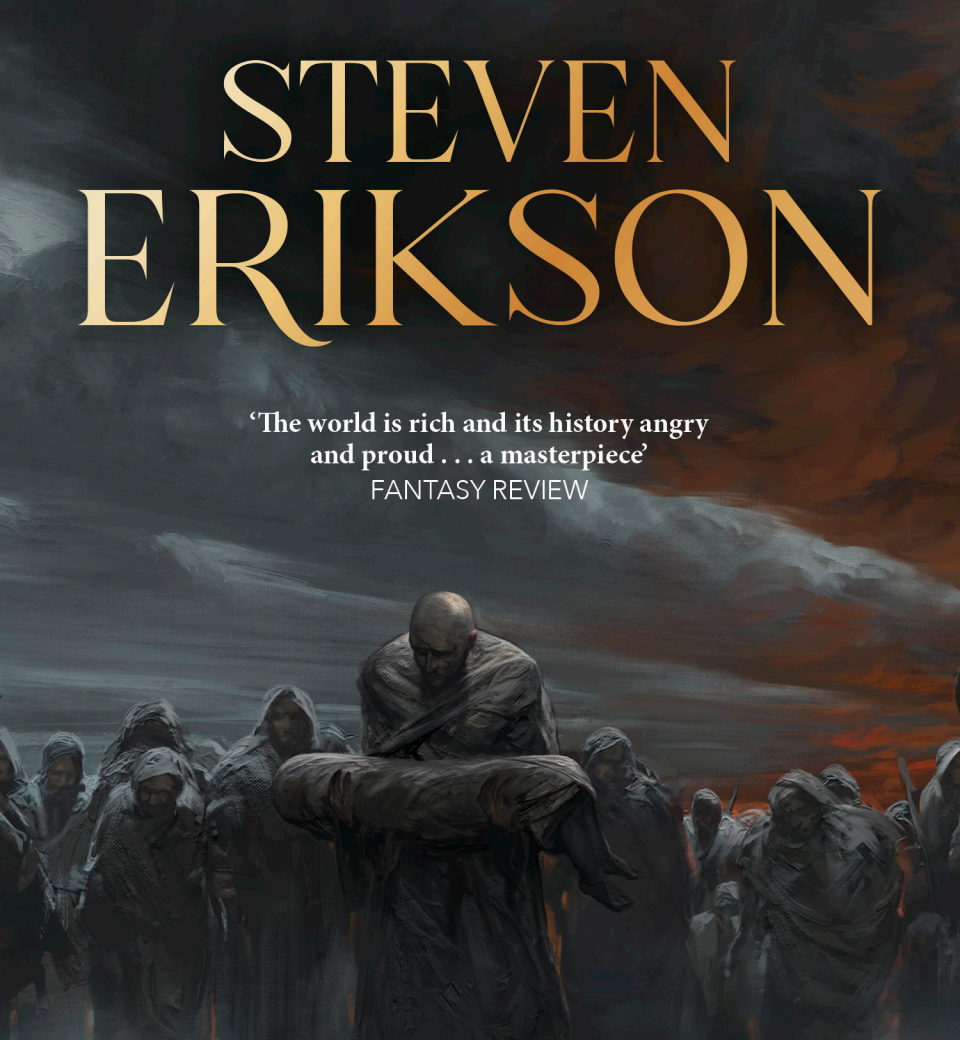
STEVEN ERIKSON

'The world is rich and its history angry and proud . . . a masterpiece'
FANTASY REVIEW



THE BONE HUNTERS

A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen

Archaeologist and anthropologist **Steven Erikson** is the bestselling author of the genre-defining The Malazan Book of the Fallen, a multi-volume fantasy that's been hailed 'a masterwork of the imagination' and one of the top ten fantasy series of all time. The first novel in the sequence, *Gardens of the Moon*, was shortlisted for a World Fantasy Award. He has written several novellas set in the same world. *Forge of Darkness* was the first Kharkanas novel, taking readers back to the origins of what would become the Malazan Empire; *Fall of Light* continued this momentous tale.

A lifelong science fiction reader, he's written a trilogy that affectionately parodies a long-running television series as well as *Rejoice, a Knife to the Heart*, a story of first contact.

Set in the world of the Malazan Empire, ten years after the events recounted in *The Crippled God*, *The God is Not Willing* heralded the start of a thrilling new series – The Tales of Witness – continued in *No Life Forsaken*. *Legacies of Betrayal* is the third novel in this epic adventure.

Steven Erikson lives in Victoria, Canada. To find out more, look for him on Facebook: Steven Erikson – Author.

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THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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SALON.COM

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GLEN COOK

'The most masterful piece of fiction I have ever read. It has single-handedly changed everything we thought we knew about fantasy literature and redefined what is possible'
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PAT'S FANTASY HOTLIST

'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

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FANTASY BOOK REVIEW

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BOOK GEEKS

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SFFWORLD

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The Malazan Book of the Fallen
GARDENS OF THE MOON
DEADHOUSE GATES
MEMORIES OF ICE
HOUSE OF CHAINS
MIDNIGHT TIDES
THE BONEHUNTERS
REAPER'S GALE
TOLL THE HOUNDS
DUST OF DREAMS
THE CRIPPLED GOD

THE FIRST COLLECTED TALES OF BAUCHELAIN AND KORBAL BROACH
THE SECOND COLLECTED TALES OF BAUCHELAIN AND KORBAL BROACH

The Kharkanas Trilogy
FORGE OF DARKNESS
FALL OF LIGHT

The Tales of Witness
THE GOD IS NOT WILLING
NO LIFE FORSAKEN
LEGACIES OF BETRAYAL

THIS RIVER AWAKENS
THE DEVIL DELIVERED AND OTHER TALES
WILLFUL CHILD
REJOICE, A KNIFE TO THE HEART

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The Bonehunters

A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON



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Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
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Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



First published in Great Britain in 2006 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Bantam edition published 2007
Penguin paperback edition published 2024
Penguin paperback edition reissued 2026

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Typeset in Goudy by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781804995228

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To Courtney Welch.
Keep the music coming, friend.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the usual suspects, including my early-draft readers Chris, Mark, Rick, Courtney, and Bill Hunter who has proved invaluable on the mechanics and full listing of variants of the Deck of Dragons – but listen, Bill, no more walking miles through the rain, right? Cam Esslemont for a most diligent read-through – I'm glad at least one of us has got the timeline right. Clare and Bowen, as always. To the staff at Bar Italia for seeing me through another one – three novellas and four novels and twenty-two thousand lattes, that was quite a run, wasn't it? Steve, Perry and Ross Donaldson, for the friendship. Simon Taylor, Patrick Walsh and Howard Morhaim, for the good work done each and every time.

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MALAZ CITY
circa 1150 a.b.s.



1 *Deadhouse*
2 *Hanged Man Inn*
3 *Back Street*
4 *Obo's Tower*
5 *Agayla's Shop*
6 *Riverwalk (N)*
7 *Riverwalk (S)*
8 *Malaz River (lesser channel)*
9 *Rampart Way*

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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

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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

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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
Ormulogun, 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

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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

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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

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PROLOGUE

1164 Burn's Sleep
Istral'fennidahn, the season of D'rek, Worm of Autumn
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 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

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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 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

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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 lad 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

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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 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 sorcerors 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 sorcerors, 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.

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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

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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?'

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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

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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

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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 worm-riven 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

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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 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

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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

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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.

'We 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

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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.

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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.

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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 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 outcrop 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

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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. 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 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 outpost, but this had been motivated by the illegal trade in raw otataral, which, through other imperial efforts, had since dried up.

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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 un-official 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.

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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-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 were the old Emperor's sceptre.

Beside Jhelim was Filiad, carrying the iron-scaled gauntlets, a round-shield and the camailed, grille-faced helm.

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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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BOOK ONE



THE THOUSAND-FINGERED GOD

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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

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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

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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 ground-floor tavern.

Beside the tavern's entrance was an arched passage leading into a small garden. The woman stepped into that

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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, itralbe 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 Ehrlii, 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—'

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'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

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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 Ehrlitan before blowing out above the Ehrlitan 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,

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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

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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, leather-clad 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,

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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?'

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'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.

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'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

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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 silk-lined cloak, reversed it and slipped the garment over her

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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?'

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'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.

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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

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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

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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!'

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'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!'

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'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.'

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'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

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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 death-cries 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.

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'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.'

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'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

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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 lacking 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

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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

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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?'

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'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

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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?'

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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—'

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'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

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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?'

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'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.'

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'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

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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

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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

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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

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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,

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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.'

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CHAPTER TWO

It must be taken as given that a man who happens to be the world's most powerful, most terrible, most deadly sorceror, 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 mêlée 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.

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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,

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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

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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

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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.'

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'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

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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

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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.'

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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?*'

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'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 re-evaluate 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*.'

'Ah, I think I can now assume I know who imprisoned the three of you.'

'*He very nearly killed us*,' said the female dragon. '*An over-reaction 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 drypthara. 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*.'

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'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*.'

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'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 Kurald 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—'

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'*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?'

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'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?'

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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. Dammit.*

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

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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, sorceror clashed with sorceror. 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.

My crystal.

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

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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.

Splashing, 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

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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. 'Jaghut. 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.'

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'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—'

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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.'

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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 . . .

'*Belated observation. Grubs, there in the dark reaches of the nest. Nest? Bemused. Hive? Nest.*'

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?*'

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'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 much-awaited 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 short-lived 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.'

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'*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, worthily 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

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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?

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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 Destriant smiled. 'Come. That demon who speaks in our heads is obsessing about flesh at the moment, with watering mouth.'

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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

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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.

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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.

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'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

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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—'

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'Horses,' Heboric said as he walked towards the skittish animals. 'That's a bit of luck.'

'*Innocent. Scream? No, friend Cutter. Was Greyfrog . . . 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

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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, weed-wrapped. 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.'

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'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 half-blood'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

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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.

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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?'

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'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.

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'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 guldindha 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

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had been saved by Hedge's ghost . . . but where was Whiskeyjack? Had he been there as well?

That night in the camp of Sha'ik 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

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knows, her favoured Fist, that old man Gamet, 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

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