

'A master of lost and forgotten epochs,  
a weaver of ancient epics'

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# STEVEN ERIKSON

## Gardens of the Moon

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 epic fantasy that has been hailed a masterwork of the imagination and one of the top ten fantasy series of all time. The first novel in the series, *Gardens of the Moon*, was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. He has also written several novellas set in the same world. *Forge of Darkness* is the first Kharkanas novel and takes readers back to the origins of the Malazan world. *Fall of Light* continues this epic tale. A lifelong science fiction reader, he has also written fiction affectionately parodying a long-running SF television series and *Rejoice*, a novel of first contact. *The God is Not Willing* is the opening chapter in a new sequence – *The Tales of Witness* – and is set in the world of the Malazan Empire, ten years after the events recounted in *The Crippled God*.

Steven Erikson lives in Victoria, Canada. To find out more, visit [www.steven-erikson.org](http://www.steven-erikson.org) – and you can also find him on Facebook: Steven Erikson – Author

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# Gardens of the Moon

A Tale of the  
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON



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This novel is dedicated to I. C. Esslemont  
*worlds to conquer worlds to share*

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# GENABACKIS:

## The Malazan Campaign ca. 1160 Burn's Sleep

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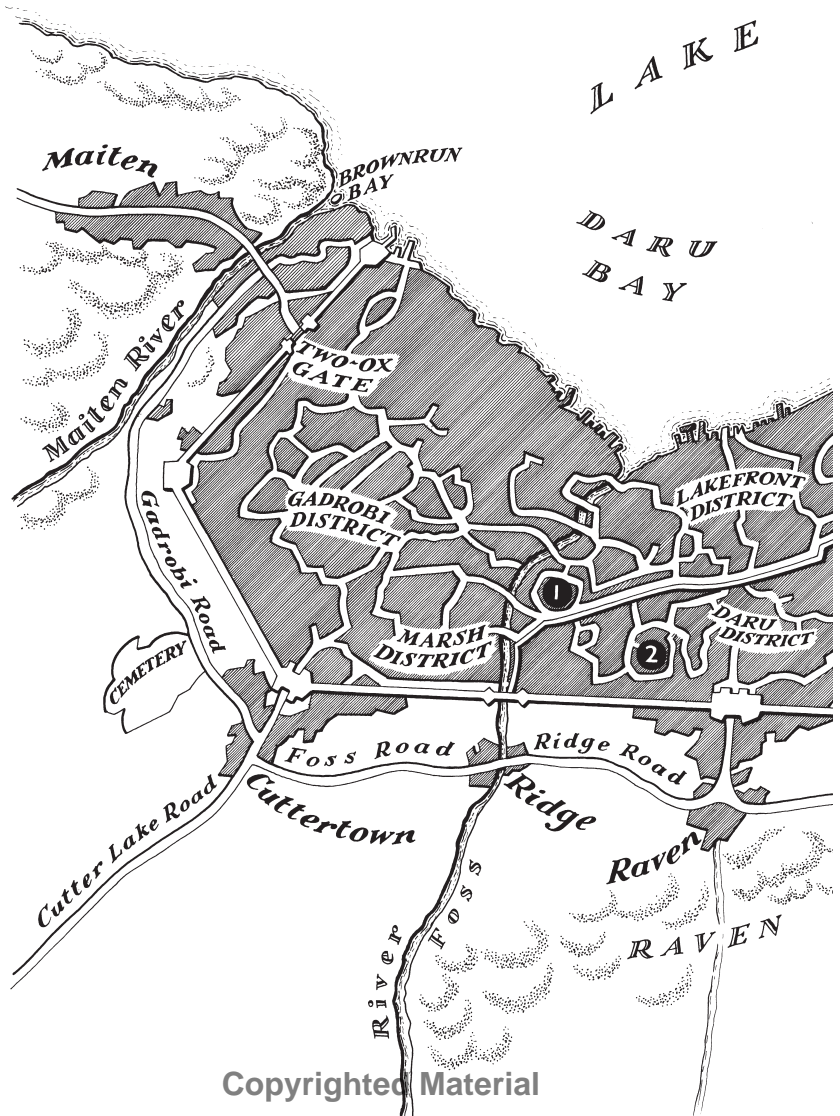
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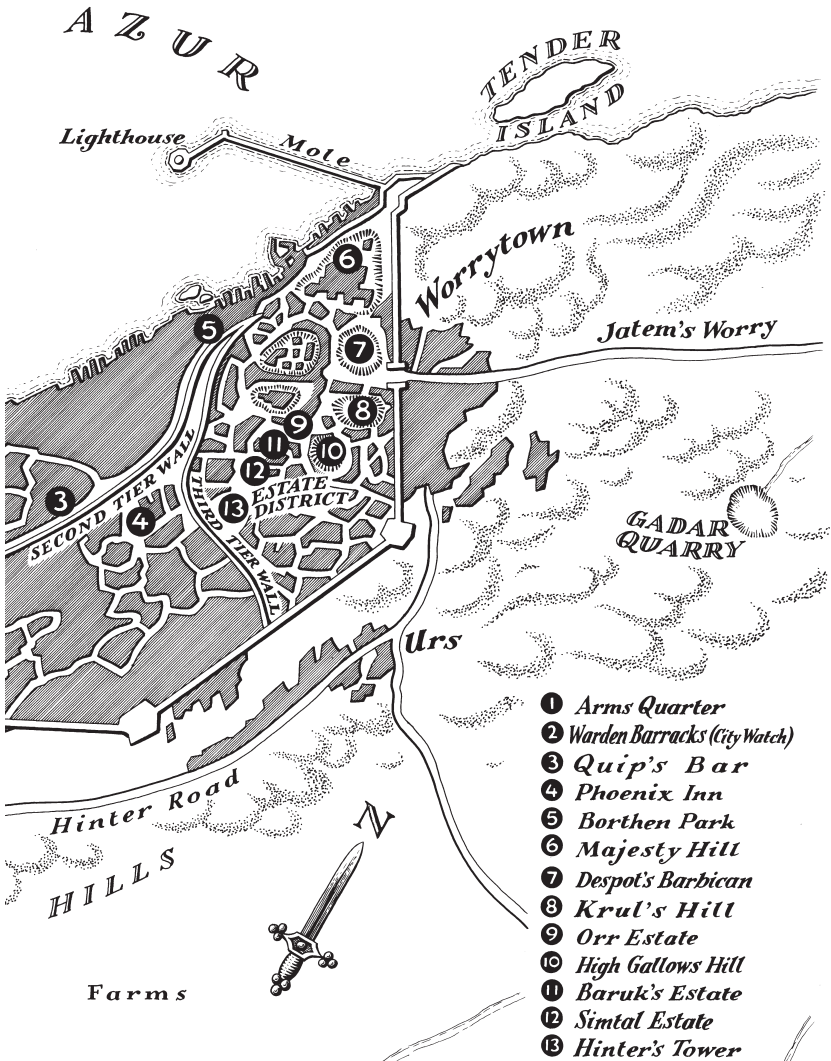
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# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

## The Malazan Empire

### Onearm's Host

**Tattersail**, Cadre Sorceress, 2nd Army, a reader of the Deck of Dragons

**Hairlock**, Cadre Mage, 2nd Army, an unpleasant rival of Tayschrenn

**Calot**, Cadre Mage, 2nd Army, Tattersail's lover

**Toc the Younger**, scout, 2nd Army, a Claw agent badly scarred at the Siege of Pale

### The Bridgeburners

**Sergeant Whiskeyjack**, 9th Squad, past commander of the 2nd Army

**Corporal Kalam**, 9th Squad, an ex-Claw from Seven Cities

**Quick Ben**, 9th Squad, a Seven Cities Mage

**Sorry**, 9th Squad, a deadly killer in the guise of a young girl

**Hedge**, 9th Squad, a sapper

**Fiddler**, 9th Squad, a sapper

**Trotts**, 9th Squad, a Barghast warrior

**Mallet**, 9th Squad, the squad healer

**Sergeant Antsy**, 7th Squad

**Picker**, 7th Squad

### The Imperial Command

**Ganoes Stabro Paran**, a noble-born officer in the Malazan Empire

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**Dujek Onearm**, High Fist, Malazan Armies, Genabackis Campaign

**Tayschrenn**, High Mage to the Empress

**Bellurdan**, High Mage to the Empress

**Nightchill**, High Sorceress to the Empress

**A'Karonys**, High Mage to the Empress

**Lorn**, Adjunct to the Empress

**Topper**, Commander of the Claw

**Empress Laseen**, Ruler of the Malazan Empire

House Paran (Unta)

**Tavore**, Ganoes' sister (middle-child)

**Felisin**, Ganoes' youngest sister

**Gamet**, House Guard and veteran

In the Emperor's Time

**Emperor Kellanved**, the founder of the Empire, assassinated by Laseen

**Dancer**, the Emperor's chief adviser, assassinated by Laseen

**Surly**, Laseen's old name when Commander of the Claw

**Dassem Ultor**, the First Sword of Empire, killed outside Y'ghatan, Seven Cities

**Toc** (the Elder), disappeared in Laseen's purges of the Old Guard

In Darujhistan

The Phoenix Inn Regulars

**Kruppe**, a man of false modesty

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**Crokus Younghand**, a young thief  
**Rallick Nom**, an assassin in the Guild  
**Murillio**, a courtier  
**Coll**, a drunk  
**Meese**, a regular  
**Irilta**, a regular  
**Scurve**, the barman  
**Sulty**, a serving woman  
**Chert**, an unlucky bully

### The T'orrud Cabal

**Baruk**, a High Alchemist  
**Derudan**, a Witch of Tennes  
**Mammot**, a High Priest of D'riss and eminent scholar, uncle to Crokus  
**Travale**, a pious soldier of the Cabal  
**Tholis**, a High Mage  
**Parald**, a High Mage

### The Council

**Turban Orr**, a powerful councilman and Simtal's lover  
**Lim**, an ally of Turban Orr  
**Simtal**, Lady of Simtal Estate  
**Estraysian D'Arle**, a rival of Turban Orr  
**Chalice D'Arle**, his daughter

### The Guild of Assassins

**Vorcan**, Mistress of the Guild (also known as the Master of Assassins)  
**Ocelot**, Rallick Nom's Clan Leader

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**Talo Krafar**, an assassin of Jurrig Denatte's Clan  
**Krute of Talient**, an agent of the Guild

Also in the city

**The Eel**, a rumoured master-spy  
**Circle Breaker**, an agent of the Eel  
**Vildrom**, a city guard  
**Captain Stillis**, Captain of Guard, Simtal Estate

## Further players

The Tiste Andii

**Anomander Rake**, Lord of Moon's Spawn, Son of Darkness,  
Knight of Darkness  
**Serrat**, second-in-command to Rake  
**Korlat**, a night-hunter and blood-kin to Serrat  
**Orfantal**, a night-hunter  
**Horult**, a night-hunter

The T'lan Imass

**Logros**, Commander of the T'lan Imass Clans serving the  
Malazan Empire  
**Onos T'oolan**, a clanless warrior  
**Pran Chole**, a Bonecaster (shaman) of the Kron T'lan Imass  
**Kig Aven**, a Clan Leader

Others

**Crone**, a Great Raven and servant to Anomander Rake  
**Silannah**, an Eleint and companion to Anomander Rake

**Raest**, a Jaghut Tyrant  
**K'rul**, an Elder God, the Maker of Paths  
**Caladan Brood**, the warlord, opposing the Malazan armies in the North Campaign  
**Kallor**, Brood's second-in-command  
**Prince K'azz D'Avore**, Commander of the Crimson Guard  
**Jorrick Sharplance**, a Crimson Guard officer  
**Cowl**, a High Mage in the Crimson Guard  
**Corporal Blues**, Sixth Blade of the Crimson Guard  
**Fingers**, Sixth Blade of the Crimson Guard  
**The Hound Baran**, a Hound of Shadow  
**The Hound Blind**, a Hound of Shadow  
**The Hound Gear**, a Hound of Shadow  
**The Hound Rood**, a Hound of Shadow  
**The Hound Shan**, a Hound of Shadow  
**The Hound Doan**, a Hound of Shadow  
**The Hound Ganrod**, a Hound of Shadow  
**Shadowthrone/Ammanas**, Ruler of the Warren of Shadow

**The Rope/Cotillion**, Companion of Shadowthrone and Patron of Assassins  
**Icarium**, Builder of the Wheel of Ages in Darujhistan  
**Mappo**, Icarium's companion  
**The Pannion Seer**, a Prophet Tyrant ruling the Pannion Domin

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# Gardens of the Moon

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*Now these ashes have grown cold, we open the old book.  
These oil-stained pages recount the tales of the Fallen,  
a frayed empire, words without warmth. The hearth  
has ebbed, its gleam and life's sparks are but memories  
against dimming eyes – what cast my mind, what hue my  
thoughts as I open the Book of the Fallen  
and breathe deep the scent of history?  
Listen, then, to these words carried on that breath.  
These tales are the tales of us all, again yet again.  
We are history relived and that is all, without end that is all.*

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The Emperor is dead!  
So too his right hand – now cold, now severed!  
But mark these dying shadows,  
twinned and flowing bloody and beaten,  
down and away from mortal sight . . .  
From sceptre's rule dismissed,  
from gild candelabra the light now fled,  
from a hearth ringed in hard jewels,  
seven years this warmth has bled . . .

The Emperor is dead.  
So too his master'd companion, the rope cut clean.  
But mark this burgeoning return –  
faltering dark, the tattered shroud –  
embracing children in Empire's dying light.  
Hear now the dirge faint reprised,  
before the sun's fall, this day spills red  
on buckled earth, and in obsidian eyes  
vengeance chimes seven times . . .

*Call to Shadow (I.i. 1–18)*  
Felisin (b.1146)

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# Prologue

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*1154th Year of Burn's Sleep*  
*96th Year of the Malazan Empire*  
*The Last Year of Emperor Kellanved's Reign*

The stains of rust seemed to map blood seas on the black, pocked surface of Mock's Vane. A century old, it squatted on the point of an old pike that had been bolted to the outer top of the Hold's wall. Monstrous and misshapen, it had been cold-hammered into the form of a winged demon, teeth bared in a leering grin, and was tugged and buffeted in squealing protest with every gust of wind.

The winds were contrary the day columns of smoke rose over the Mouse Quarter of Malaz City. The Vane's silence announced the sudden falling-off of the sea breeze that came clambering over the ragged walls of Mock's Hold, then it creaked back into life as the hot, spark-scattered and smoke-filled breath of the Mouse Quarter reached across the city to sweep the promontory's heights.

Ganoes Stabro Paran of the House of Paran stood on tiptoe to see over the merlon. Behind him rose Mock's Hold, once capital of the Empire but now, since the mainland had been conquered, relegated once more to a Fist's holding. To his left rose the pike and its wayward trophy.

For Ganoes, the ancient fortification overlooking the city was too familiar to be of interest. This visit was his third in as many years; he'd long ago explored the courtyard with its heaved cobblestones, the Old Keep – now a stable, its upper floor home to pigeons and swallows and bats – and the citadel where even now his father negotiated the island export tithe with the harbour officials. In the last instance, of course, a goodly portion was out of bounds, even for a son of a noble house; for it was in the citadel that the Fist had his residence, and in the inner chambers that such affairs of the Empire as concerned this island were conducted.

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Mock's Hold forgotten behind him, Ganoes' attention was on the tattered city below, and the riots that ran through its poorest quarter. Mock's Hold stood atop a cliff. The higher land of the Pinnacle was reached by a switchback staircase carved into the limestone of the cliff wall. The drop to the city below was eighty armspans or more, with the Hold's battered wall adding still another six. The Mouse was at the city's inland edge, an uneven spreading of hovels and overgrown tiers cut in half by the silt-heavy river that crawled towards the harbour. With most of Malaz City between Ganoes' position and the riots, it was hard to make out any detail, beyond the growing pillars of black smoke.

It was midday, but the flash and thundering concussion of magery made the air seem dark and heavy.

Armour clanking, a soldier appeared along the wall near him. The man leaned vambraced forearms on the battlement, the scabbard of his longsword scraping against the stones. 'Glad for your pure blood, eh?' he asked, grey eyes on the smouldering city below.

The boy studied the soldier. He already knew the complete regimental accoutrements of the Imperial Army, and the man at his side was a commander in the Third – one of the Emperor's own, an élite. On his dark grey shoulder-cloak was a silver brooch: a bridge of stone, lit by ruby flames. *A Bridgeburner*.

High-ranking soldiers and officials of the Empire commonly passed through Mock's Hold. The island of Malaz remained a vital port of call, especially now that the Korel wars to the south had begun. Ganoes had brushed shoulders with more than his share, here and in the capital, Unta.

'Is it true, then?' Ganoes asked boldly.

'Is what true?'

'The First Sword of Empire. Dasseem Ultor. We heard in the capital before we left. He's dead. Is it true? Is Dasseem dead?'

The man seemed to flinch, his gaze unwavering on the

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Mouse. 'Such is war,' he muttered, under his breath, as if the words were not meant for anyone else's ears.

'You're with the Third. I thought the Third was with him, in Seven Cities. At Y'Ghatan—'

'Hood's Breath, they're still looking for his body in the still-hot rubble of that damned city, and here you are, a merchant's son three thousand leagues from Seven Cities with information only a few are supposed to possess.' He still did not turn. 'I know not your sources, but take my advice and keep what you know to yourself.'

Ganoes shrugged. 'It's said he betrayed a god.'

Finally the man faced him. His face was scarred, and something that might have been a burn marred his jaw and left cheek. For all that, he looked young for a commander. 'Heed the lesson there, son.'

'What lesson?'

'Every decision you make can change the world. The best life is the one the gods don't notice. You want to live free, boy, live quietly.'

'I want to be a soldier. A hero.'

'You'll grow out of it.'

Mock's Vane squealed as a wayward gust from the harbour cleared the grainy smoke. Ganoes could now smell rotting fish and the waterfront's stink of humanity.

Another Bridgeburner, this one with a broken, scorched fiddle strapped to his back, came up to the commander. He was wiry and if anything younger – only a few years older than Ganoes himself, who was twelve. Strange pockmarks covered his face and the backs of his hands, and his armour was a mixture of foreign accoutrements over a threadbare, stained uniform. A shortsword hung in a cracked wooden scabbard at his hip. He leaned against the merlon beside the other man with the ease of long familiarity.

'It's a bad smell when sorcerers panic,' the newcomer

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said. 'They're losing control down there. Hardly the need for a whole cadre of mages, just to sniff out a few wax-witches.'

The commander sighed. 'Thought to wait to see if they'd rein themselves in.'

The soldier grunted. 'They are all new, untested. This could scar some of them for ever. Besides,' he added, 'more than a few down there are following someone else's orders.'

'A suspicion, no more.'

'The proof's right there,' the other man said. 'In the Mouse.' 'Perhaps.'

'You're too protective,' the man said. 'Surly says it's your greatest weakness.'

'Surly's the Emperor's concern, not mine.'

A second grunt answered that. 'Maybe all of us before too long.'

The commander was silent, slowly turning to study his companion.

The man shrugged. 'Just a feeling. She's taking a new name, you know. Laseen.'

'Laseen?'

'Napan word. Means—'

'I know what it means.'

'Hope the Emperor does, too.'

Ganoes said, 'It means Thronemaster.'

The two looked down at him.

The wind shifted again, making the iron demon groan on its perch – a smell of cool stone from the Hold itself. 'My tutor's Napan,' Ganoes explained.

A new voice spoke behind them, a woman's, imperious and cold. 'Commander.'

Both soldiers turned, but without haste. The commander said to his companion, 'The new company needs help down there. Send Dujek and a wing, and get some sappers to contain the fires – wouldn't do to have the whole city burn.'

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The soldier nodded, marched away, sparing the woman not a single glance.

She stood with two bodyguards near the portal in the citadel's square tower. Her dusky blue skin marked her as Napan, but she was otherwise plain, wearing a salt-stained grey robe, her mousy hair cut short like a soldier's, her features thin and unmemorable. It was, however, her bodyguards that sent a shiver through Ganoes. They flanked her: tall, swathed in black, hands hidden in sleeves, hoods shadowing their faces. Ganoes had never seen a Claw before, but he instinctively knew these creatures to be acolytes of the cult. Which meant the woman was . . .

The commander said, 'It's your mess, Surly. Seems I'll have to clean it up.'

Ganoes was shocked at the absence of fear – the near-contempt in the soldier's voice. Surly had created the Claw, making it a power rivalled only by the Emperor himself.

'That is no longer my name, Commander.'

The man grimaced. 'So I've heard. You must be feeling confident in the Emperor's absence. He's not the only one who remembers you as nothing more than a serving-wench down in the Old Quarter. I take it the gratitude's washed off long since.'

The woman's face betrayed no change of expression to mark if the man's words had stung. 'The command was a simple one,' she said. 'It seems your new officers are unable to cope with the task.'

'It's got out of hand,' the commander said. 'They're unseasoned—'

'Not my concern,' she snapped. 'Nor am I particularly disappointed. Loss of control delivers its own lessons to those who oppose us.'

'Oppose? A handful of minor witches selling their meagre talents – to what sinister end? Finding the coraval schools on the shoals in the bay. Hood's Breath, woman, hardly a threat to the Empire.'

‘Unsanctioned. Defiant of the new laws—’

‘Your laws, Surly. They won’t work, and when the Emperor returns he’ll quash your prohibition of sorcery, you can be certain of that.’

The woman smiled coldly. ‘You’ll be pleased to know that the Tower’s signalled the approach of the transports for your new recruits. We’ll not miss you or your restless, seditious soldiers, Commander.’

Without another word, or a single glance spared for the boy standing beside the commander, she swung about and, flanked by her silent bodyguards, re-entered the citadel.

Ganoes and the commander returned their attention to the riot in the Mouse. Flames were visible, climbing through the smoke.

‘One day I’ll be a soldier,’ Ganoes said.

The man grunted. ‘Only if you fail at all else, son. Taking up the sword is the last act of desperate men. Mark my words and find yourself a more worthy dream.’

Ganoes scowled. ‘You’re not like the other soldiers I’ve talked to. You sound more like my father.’

‘But I’m not your father,’ the man growled.

‘The world,’ Ganoes said, ‘doesn’t need another wine merchant.’

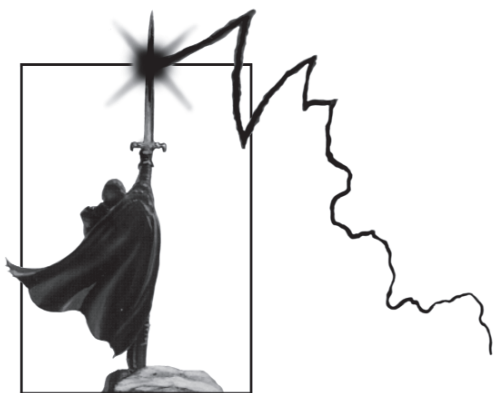
The commander’s eyes narrowed, gauging. He opened his mouth to make the obvious reply, then shut it again.

Ganoes Paran looked back down at the burning quarter, pleased with himself. *Even a boy, Commander, can make a point.*

Mock’s Vane swung once more. Hot smoke rolled over the wall, engulfing them. A reek of burning cloth, scorched paint and stone, and now of something sweet. ‘An abattoir’s caught fire,’ Ganoes said. ‘Pigs.’

The commander grimaced. After a long moment he sighed and leaned back down on the merlon. ‘As you say, boy, as you say.’

# BOOK ONE



PALE

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. . . In the eighth year the Free Cities of Genabackis established contracts with a number of mercenary armies to oppose the Imperium's advance; prominent among these were the Crimson Guard, under the command of Prince K'azz D'Avore (see Volumes III & V); and the Tiste Andii regiments of Moon's Spawn, under the command of Caladan Brood and others.

The forces of the Malazan Empire, commanded by High Fist Dujek Onearm, consisted in that year of the 2nd, 5th and 6th Armies, as well as legions of Moranth.

In retrospect two observations can be made. The first is that the Moranth alliance of 1156 marked a fundamental change in the science of warfare for the Malazan Imperium, which would prove efficacious in the short term. The second observation worth noting is that the involvement of the sorcerous Tiste Andii of Moon's Spawn represented the beginning of the continent's Sorcery Enfilade, with devastating consequences.

In the Year of Burn's Sleep 1163, the Siege of Pale ended with a now legendary sorcerous conflagration . . .

*Imperial Campaigns 1158–1194*  
*Volume IV, Genabackis*  
Imrygyn Tallobant (b.1151)

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## CHAPTER ONE

The old stones of this road  
have rung with iron  
black-shod hoofs and drums  
where I saw him walking  
up from the sea between the hills soaked red  
in sunset he came, a boy among the echoes  
sons and brothers all in ranks  
of warrior ghosts he came to pass  
where I sat on the worn final  
league-stone at day's end –  
his stride spoke loud all I needed  
know of him on this road of stone –  
the boy walks  
another soldier, another one  
bright heart not yet cooled  
to hard iron

*Mother's Lament*  
Anonymous

*1161st Year of Burn's Sleep*  
*103rd Year of the Malazan Empire*  
*7th Year of Empress Laseen's Rule*

‘**P**rod and pull,’ the old woman was saying, ‘tis the way of the Empress, as like the gods themselves.’ She leaned to one side and spat, then brought a soiled cloth to her wrinkled lips. ‘Three husbands and two sons I saw off to war.’

The fishergirl’s eyes shone as she watched the column of mounted soldiers thunder past, and she only half listened to the hag standing beside her. The girl’s breath had risen to the pace of the magnificent horses. She felt her face burning, a flush that had nothing to do with the heat. The day was dying, the sun’s red smear over the trees on her right, and the sea’s sighing against her face had grown cool.

‘That was in the days of the Emperor,’ the hag continued. ‘Hood roast the bastard’s soul on a spit. But look on, lass. Laseen scatters bones with the best of them. Heh, she started with *his*, didn’t she, now?’

The fishergirl nodded faintly. As befitted the lowborn, they waited by the roadside, the old woman burdened beneath a rough sack filled with turnips, the girl with a heavy basket balanced on her head. Every minute or so the old woman shifted the sack from one bony shoulder to the other. With the riders crowding them on the road and the ditch behind them a steep drop to broken rocks, she had no place to put down the sack.

‘Scatters bones, I said. Bones of husbands, bones of sons, bones of wives and bones of daughters. All the same to her. All the same to the Empire.’ The old woman spat a second time. ‘Three husbands and two sons, ten coin apiece a year. Five of ten’s fifty. Fifty coin a year’s cold company, lass. Cold in winter, cold in bed.’

The fishergirl wiped dust from her forehead. Her bright eyes darted among the soldiers passing before her. The young men

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atop their high-backed saddles held expressions stern and fixed straight ahead. The few women who rode among them sat tall and somehow fiercer than the men. The sunset cast red glints from their helms, flashing so that the girl's eyes stung and her vision blurred.

'You're the fisherman's daughter,' the old woman said. 'I seen you afore on the road, and down on the strand. Seen you and your dad at market. Missing an arm, ain't he? More bones for her collection is likely, eh?' She made a chopping motion with one hand, then nodded. 'Mine's the first house on the track. I use the coin to buy candles. Five candles I burn every night, five candles to keep old Rigga company. It's a tired house, full of tired things and me one of them, lass. What you got in the basket there?'

Slowly the fishergirl realized that a question had been asked of her. She pulled her attention from the soldiers and smiled down at the old woman. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'the horses are so loud.'

Rigga raised her voice. 'I asked what you got in your basket, lass?'

'Twine. Enough for three nets. We need to get one ready for tomorrow. Dadda lost his last one – something in the deep waters took it and a whole catch, too. Ilgrand Lender wants the money he loaned us and we need a catch tomorrow. A good one.' She smiled again and swept her gaze back to the soldiers. 'Isn't it wonderful?' she breathed.

Rigga's hand shot out and snagged the girl's thick black hair, yanked it hard.

The girl cried out. The basket on her head lurched, then slid down on to one shoulder. She grabbed frantically for it but it was too heavy. The basket struck the ground and split apart. 'Aaai!' the girl gasped, attempting to kneel. But Rigga pulled and snapped her head around.

'You listen to me, lass!' The old woman's sour breath hissed

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against the girl's face. 'The Empire's been grinding this land down for a hundred years. You was born in it. I wasn't. When I was your age Itko Kan was a country. We flew a banner and it was ours. We were free, lass.'

The girl was sickened by Rigga's breath. She squeezed shut her eyes.

'Mark this truth, child, else the Cloak of Lies blinds you for ever.' Rigga's voice took on a droning cadence, and all at once the girl stiffened. *Rigga, Riggalai the Seer, the wax-witch who trapped souls in candles and burned them. Souls devoured in flame*— Rigga's words carried the chilling tone of prophecy. 'Mark this truth. I am the last to speak to you. You are the last to hear me. Thus are we linked, you and I, beyond all else.'

Rigga's fingers snagged tighter in the girl's hair. 'Across the sea the Empress has driven her knife into virgin soil. The blood now comes in a tide and it'll sweep you under, child, if you're not careful. They'll put a sword in your hand, they'll give you a fine horse, and they'll send you across that sea. But a shadow will embrace your soul. Now, listen! Bury this deep! Rigga will preserve you because we are linked, you and I. But it is all I can do, understand? Look to the Lord spawned in Darkness; his is the hand that shall free you, though he'll know it not—'

'What's this?' a voice bellowed.

Rigga swung to face the road. An outrider had slowed his mount. The Seer released the girl's hair.

The girl staggered back a step. A rock on the road's edge turned underfoot and she fell. When she looked up the outrider had trotted past. Another thundered up in his wake.

'Leave the pretty one alone, hag,' this one growled, and as he rode by he leaned in his saddle and swung an open, gauntleted hand. The iron-scaled glove cracked against Rigga's head, spinning her around. She toppled.

The fishergirl screamed as Rigga landed heavily across her thighs. A thread of crimson spit splattered her face.

Whimpering, the girl pushed herself back across the gravel, then used her feet to shove away Rigga's body. She climbed to her knees.

Something within Rigga's prophecy seemed lodged in the girl's head, heavy as a stone and hidden from light. She found she could not retrieve a single word the Seer had said. She reached out and grasped Rigga's woollen shawl. Carefully, she rolled the old woman over. Blood covered one side of Rigga's head, running down behind the ear. More blood smeared her lined chin and stained her mouth. The eyes stared sightlessly.

The fishergirl pulled back, unable to catch her breath. Desperate, she looked about. The column of soldiers had passed, leaving nothing but dust and the distant tremble of hoofs. Rigga's bag of turnips had spilled on to the road. Among the trampled vegetables lay five tallow candles. The girl managed a ragged lungful of dusty air. Wiping her nose, she looked to her own basket.

'Never mind the candles,' she mumbled, in a thick, odd voice. 'They're gone, aren't they, now? Just a scattering of bones. Never mind.' She crawled towards the bundles of twine that had fallen from the breached basket, and when she spoke again her voice was young, normal. 'We need the twine. We'll work all night and get one ready. Dadda's waiting. He's right at the door, he's looking up the track, he's waiting to see me.'

She stopped, a shiver running through her. The sun's light was almost gone. An unseasonal chill bled from the shadows, which now flowed like water across the road.

'Here it comes, then,' the girl grated softly, in a voice that wasn't her own.

A soft-gloved hand fell on her shoulder. She ducked down, cowering.

'Easy, girl,' said a man's voice. 'It's over. Nothing to be done for her now.'

The fishergirl looked up. A man swathed in black leaned over

her, his face obscured beneath a hood's shadow. 'But he hit her,' the girl said, in a child's voice. 'And we have nets to tie, me and Dadda—'

'Let's get you on your feet,' the man said, moving his long-fingered hands down under her arms. He straightened, lifting her effortlessly. Her sandalled feet dangled in the air before he set her down.

Now she saw a second man, shorter, also clothed in black. This one stood on the road and was turned away, his gaze in the direction the soldiers had gone. He spoke, his voice reed-thin. 'Wasn't much of a life,' he said, not turning to face her. 'A minor talent, long since dried up of the Gift. Oh, she might have managed one more, but we'll never know, will we?'

The fishergirl stumbled over to Rigga's bag and picked up a candle. She straightened, her eyes suddenly hard, then deliberately spat on to the road.

The shorter man's head snapped towards her. Within the hood it seemed the shadows played alone.

The girl shrank back a step. 'It was a good life,' she whispered. 'She had these candles, you see. Five of them. Five for—'

'Necromancy,' the short man cut in.

The taller man, still at her side, said softly, 'I see them, child. I understand what they mean.'

The other man snorted. 'The witch harboured five frail, weak souls. Nothing grand.' He cocked his head. 'I can hear them now. Calling for her.'

Tears filled the girl's eyes. A wordless anguish seemed to well up from that black stone in her mind. She wiped her cheeks. 'Where did you come from?' she asked abruptly. 'We didn't see you on the road.'

The man beside her half turned to the gravel track. 'On the other side,' he said, a smile in his tone. 'Waiting, just like you.'

The other giggled. 'On the other side indeed.' He

faced down the road again and raised his arms.

The girl drew in a sharp breath as darkness descended. A loud, tearing sound filled the air for a second, then the darkness dissipated and the girl's eyes widened.

Seven massive Hounds now sat around the man in the road. The eyes of these beasts glowed yellow, and all were turned in the same direction as the man himself.

She heard him hiss, 'Eager, are we? Then go!'

Silently, the Hounds bolted down the road.

Their master turned and said to the man beside her, 'Something to gnaw on Laseen's mind.' He giggled again.

'Must you complicate things?' the other answered wearily.

The short man stiffened. 'They are within sight of the column.' He cocked his head. From up the road came the scream of horses. He sighed. 'You've reached a decision, Cotillion?'

The other grunted amusedly. 'Using my name, Ammanas, means you've just decided for me. We can hardly leave her here now, can we?'

'Of course we can, old friend. Just not breathing.'

Cotillion looked down on the girl. 'No,' he said quietly, 'she'll do.'

The fishergirl bit her lip. Still clutching Rigga's candle, she took another step back, her wide eyes darting from one man to the other.

'Pity,' Ammanas said.

Cotillion seemed to nod, then he cleared his throat and said, 'It'll take time.'

An amused note entered Ammanas's reply. 'And have we time? True vengeance needs the slow, careful stalking of the victim. Have you forgotten the pain she once delivered us? Laseen's back is against the wall already. She might fall without our help. Where would be the satisfaction in that?'

Cotillion's response was cool and dry. 'You've always

underestimated the Empress. Hence our present circumstances . . . No.’ He gestured at the fishergirl. ‘We’ll need this one. Laseen’s raised the ire of Moon’s Spawn, and that’s a hornet’s nest if ever there was one. The timing is perfect.’

Faintly, above the screaming horses, came the shrieks of men and women, a sound that pierced the girl’s heart. Her eyes darted to Rigga’s motionless form on the roadside, then back to Ammanas, who now approached her. She thought to run but her legs had weakened to a helpless trembling. He came close and seemed to study her, even though the shadows within his hood remained impenetrable.

‘A fishergirl?’ he asked, in a kindly tone.

She nodded.

‘Have you a name?’

‘Enough!’ Cotillion growled. ‘She’s not some mouse under your paw, Ammanas. Besides, I’ve chosen her and I will choose her name as well.’

Ammanas stepped back. ‘Pity,’ he said again.

The girl raised imploring hands. ‘Please,’ she begged Cotillion, ‘I’ve done nothing! My father’s a poor man, but he’ll pay you all he can. He needs me, and the twine – he’s waiting right now!’ She felt herself go wet between her legs and quickly sat down on the ground. ‘I’ve done nothing!’ Shame rose through her and she put her hands in her lap. ‘Please.’

‘I’ve no choice any more, child,’ Cotillion said. ‘After all, you know our names.’

‘I’ve never heard them before!’ the girl cried.

The man sighed. ‘With what’s happening up the road right now, well, you’d be questioned. Unpleasantly. There are those who know our names.’

‘You see, lass,’ Ammanas added, suppressing a giggle, ‘we’re not supposed to be here. There are names, and then there are *names*.’ He swung to Cotillion and said, in a chilling voice, ‘Her father must be dealt with. My Hounds?’

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‘No,’ Cotillion said. ‘He lives.’

‘Then how?’

‘I suspect,’ Cotillion said, ‘greed will suffice, once the slate is wiped clean.’ Sarcasm filled his next words. ‘I’m sure you can manage the sorcery in that, can’t you?’

Ammanas giggled. ‘Beware of shadows bearing gifts.’

Cotillion faced the girl again. He lifted his arms out to the sides. The shadows that held his features in darkness now flowed out around his body.

Ammanas spoke, and to the girl his words seemed to come from a great distance. ‘She’s ideal. The Empress could never track her down, could never even so much as guess.’ He raised his voice. ‘It’s not so bad a thing, lass, to be the pawn of a god.’

‘Prod and pull,’ the fishergirl said quickly.

Cotillion hesitated at her strange comment, then he shrugged. The shadows whirled out to engulf the girl. With their cold touch her mind fell away, down into darkness. Her last fleeting sensation was of the soft wax of the candle in her right hand, and how it seemed to well up between the fingers of her clenched fist.

The captain shifted in his saddle and glanced at the woman riding beside him. ‘We’ve closed the road on both sides, Adjunct. Moved the local traffic inland. So far, no word’s leaked.’ He wiped sweat from his brow and winced. The hot woollen cap beneath his helm had rubbed his forehead raw.

‘Something wrong, Captain?’

He shook his head, squinting up the road. ‘Helmet’s loose. Had more hair the last time I wore it.’

The Adjunct to the Empress did not reply.

The mid-morning sun made the road’s white, dusty surface almost blinding. The captain felt sweat running down his body, and the mail of his helm’s lobster tail kept nipping the hairs on his neck. Already his lower back ached. It had been years since

he'd last ridden a horse, and the roll was slow in coming. With every saddle-bounce he felt vertebrae crunch.

It had been a long time since somebody's title had been enough to straighten him up. But this was the Adjunct to the Empress, Laseen's personal servant, an extension of her Imperial will. The last thing the captain wanted was to show his misery to this young, dangerous woman.

Up ahead the road began its long, winding ascent. A salty wind blew from their left, whistling through the newly budding trees lining that side of the road. By mid-afternoon, that wind would breathe hot as a baker's oven, carrying with it the stench of the mudflats. And the sun's heat would bring something else as well. The captain hoped to be back in Kan by then.

He tried not to think about the place they rode towards. Leave that to the Adjunct. In his years of service to the Empire, he'd seen enough to know when to shut everything down inside his skull. This was one of those times.

The Adjunct spoke. 'You've been stationed here long, Captain?'

'Aye,' the man growled.

The woman waited, then asked, 'How long?'

He hesitated. 'Thirteen years, Adjunct.'

'You fought for the Emperor, then,' she said.

'Aye.'

'And survived the purge.'

The captain threw her a look. If she felt his gaze, she gave no indication. Her eyes remained on the road ahead; she rolled easily in the saddle, the scabbarded longsword hitched high under her left arm – ready for mounted battle. Her hair was either cut short or drawn up under her helm. Her figure was lithe enough, the captain mused.

'Finished?' she asked. 'I was asking about the purges commanded by Empress Laseen following her predecessor's untimely death.'

The captain gritted his teeth, ducked his chin to draw up the helm's strap – he hadn't had time to shave and the buckle was chafing. 'Not everyone was killed, Adjunct. The people of Itko Kan aren't exactly excitable. None of those riots and mass executions that hit other parts of the Empire. We all just sat tight and waited.'

'I take it,' the Adjunct said, with a slight smile, 'you're not noble-born, Captain.'

He grunted. 'If I'd been noble-born, I wouldn't have survived, even here in Itko Kan. We both know that. Her orders were specific, and even the droll Kanese didn't dare disobey the Empress.' He scowled. 'No, up through the ranks, Adjunct.'

'Your last engagement?'

'Wickan Plains.'

They rode on in silence for a time, passing the occasional soldier stationed on the road. Off to their left the trees fell away to ragged heather, and the sea beyond showed its white-capped expanse. The Adjunct spoke. 'This area you've contained, how many of your guard have you deployed to patrol it?'

'Eleven hundred,' the captain replied.

Her head turned at this, her cool gaze tightening beneath the rim of her helm.

The captain studied her expression. 'The carnage stretches half a league from the sea, Adjunct, and a quarter-league inland.'

The woman said nothing.

They approached the summit. A score of soldiers had gathered there, and others waited along the slope's rise. All had turned to watch them.

'Prepare yourself, Adjunct.'

The woman studied the faces lining the roadside. She knew these to be hardened men and women, veterans of the siege of

Li Heng and the Wickan Wars out on the north plains. But something had been clawed into their eyes that had left them raw and exposed. They looked upon her with a yearning that she found disturbing, as if they hungered for answers. She fought the urge to speak to them as she passed, to offer whatever comforting words she could. Such gifts were not hers to give, however, nor had they ever been. In this she was much the same as the Empress.

From beyond the summit she heard the cries of gulls and crows, a sound that rose into a high-pitched roar as they reached the rise. Ignoring the soldiers on either side, the Adjunct moved her horse forward. The captain followed. They came to the crest and looked down. The road dipped here for perhaps a fifth of a league, climbing again at the far end to a promontory.

Thousands of gulls and crows covered the ground, spilling over into the ditches and among the low, rough heather and gorse. Beneath this churning sea of black and white the ground was a uniform red. Here and there rose the ribbed humps of horses, and from among the squalling birds came the glint of iron.

The captain reached up and unstrapped his helm. He lifted it slowly from his head, then set it down over his saddle horn. 'Adjunct . . .'

'I am named Lorn,' the woman said softly.

'One hundred and seventy-five men and women. Two hundred and ten horses. The Nineteenth Regiment of the Itko Kanese Eighth Cavalry.' The captain's throat tightened briefly. He looked at Lorn. 'Dead.' His horse shied under him as it caught an updraught. He closed savagely on the reins and the animal stilled, nostrils wide and ears back, muscles trembling under him. The Adjunct's stallion made no move. 'All had their weapons bared. All fought whatever enemy attacked them. But the dead are all ours.'

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‘You’ve checked the beach below?’ Lorn asked, still staring down on the road.

‘No signs of a landing,’ the captain replied. ‘No tracks anywhere, neither seaward nor inland. There are more dead than these, Adjunct. Farmers, peasants, fisherfolk, travellers on the road. All of them torn apart, limbs scattered – children, livestock, dogs.’ He stopped abruptly and turned away. ‘Over four hundred dead,’ he grated. ‘We’re not certain of the exact count.’

‘Of course,’ Lorn said, her tone devoid of feeling. ‘No witnesses?’

‘None.’

A man was riding towards them on the road below, leaning close to his horse’s ear as he talked the frightened animal through the carnage. Birds rose in shrieking complaint in front of him, settling again once he had passed.

‘Who is that?’ the Adjunct asked.

The captain grunted. ‘Lieutenant Ganoes Paran. He’s new to my command. From Unta.’

Lorn’s eyes narrowed on the young man. He’d reached the edge of the depression, stopping to relay orders to the work crews. He leaned back in his saddle then and glanced in their direction. ‘Paran. From House Paran?’

‘Aye, gold in his veins and all that.’

‘Call him up here.’

The captain gestured and the lieutenant kicked his mount’s flanks. Moments later he reined in beside the captain and saluted.

The man and his horse were covered from head to toe in blood and bits of flesh. Flies and wasps buzzed hungrily around them. Lorn saw in Lieutenant Paran’s face none of the youth that rightly belonged there. For all that, it was an easy face to rest eyes upon.

‘You checked the other side, Lieutenant?’ the captain asked.

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Paran nodded. 'Yes, sir. There's a small fishing settlement down from the promontory. A dozen or so huts. Bodies in all but two. Most of the barques look to be in, though there's one empty mooring pole.'

Lorn cut in. 'Lieutenant, describe the empty huts.'

He batted at a threatening wasp before answering. 'One was at the top of the strand, just off the trail from the road. We think it belonged to an old woman we found dead on the road, about half a league south of here.'

'Why?'

'Adjunct, the hut's contents were that of an old woman. Also, she seemed in the habit of burning candles. Tallow candles, in fact. The old woman on the road had a sack full of turnips and a handful of tallow candles. Tallow's expensive here, Adjunct.'

Lorn asked, 'How many times have you ridden through this battlefield, Lieutenant?'

'Enough to be getting used to it, Adjunct.' He grimaced.

'And the second empty hut?'

'A man and a girl, we think. The hut's close to the tidemark, opposite the empty mooring pole.'

'No sign of them?'

'None, Adjunct. Of course, we're still finding bodies, along the road, out in the fields.'

'But not on the beach.'

'No.'

The Adjunct frowned, aware that both men were watching her. 'Captain, what kind of weapons killed your soldiers?'

The captain hesitated, then turned a glare on the lieutenant. 'You've been crawling around down there, Paran, let's hear your opinion.'

Paran's answering smile was tight. 'Yes, sir. Natural weapons.'

The captain felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He'd hoped he'd been wrong.

‘What do you mean,’ Lorn asked, ‘natural weapons?’

‘Teeth, mostly. Very big, very sharp ones.’

The captain cleared his throat, then said, ‘There haven’t been wolves in Itko Kan for a hundred years. In any case, no carcasses around—’

‘If it was wolves,’ Paran said, turning to eye the basin, ‘they were as big as mules. No tracks, Adjunct. Not even a tuft of hair.’

‘Not wolves, then,’ Lorn said.

Paran shrugged.

The Adjunct drew a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a slow sigh. ‘I want to see this fishing village.’

The captain made ready to don his helmet, but the Adjunct shook her head. ‘Lieutenant Paran will suffice, Captain. I suggest you take personal command of your guard in the meantime. The dead must be removed as quickly as possible. All evidence of the massacre is to be erased.’

‘Understood, Adjunct,’ the captain said, hoping he’d kept the relief out of his voice.

Lorn turned to the young noble. ‘Well, Lieutenant?’

He nodded and clucked his horse into motion.

It was when the birds scattered from their path that the Adjunct found herself envying the captain. Before her the roused carrion-eaters exposed a carpet of armour, broken bones and meat. The air was hot, turgid and cloying. She saw soldiers, still helmed, their heads crushed by what must have been huge, terribly powerful jaws. She saw torn mail, crumpled shields, and limbs that had been ripped from bodies. Lorn managed only a few moments of careful examination of the scene around them before she fixed her gaze on the promontory ahead, unable to encompass the magnitude of the slaughter. Her stallion, bred of the finest lines of Seven Cities stock, a warhorse trained in the blood for generations, had lost its proud, unyielding strut,

and now picked its way carefully along the road.

Lorn realized she needed a distraction, and sought it in conversation. ‘Lieutenant, have you received your commission yet?’

‘No, Adjunct. I expect to be stationed in the capital.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Indeed. And how will you manage that?’

Paran squinted ahead, a tight smile on his lips. ‘It will be arranged.’

‘I see.’ Lorn fell silent. ‘The nobles have refrained from seeking military commissions, kept their heads low for a long time, haven’t they?’

‘Since the first days of the Empire. The Emperor held no love for us. Whereas Empress Laseen’s concerns seem to lie elsewhere.’

Lorn eyed the young man. ‘I see you like taking risks, Lieutenant,’ she said. ‘Unless your presumption extends to goading the Adjunct to the Empress. Are you that confident of your blood’s invincibility?’

‘Since when is speaking the truth presumptuous?’

‘You *are* young, aren’t you?’

This seemed to sting Paran. A flush rose in his smooth-shaven cheeks. ‘Adjunct, for the past seven hours I have been knee-deep in torn flesh and spilled blood. I’ve been fighting crows and gulls for bodies – do you know what these birds are doing here? Precisely? They’re tearing off strips of meat and fighting over them; they’re getting fat on eyeballs and tongues, livers and hearts. In their frantic greed they fling the meat around . . .’ He paused, visibly regaining control over himself as he straightened in his saddle. ‘I’m not young any more, Adjunct. As for presumption, I honestly couldn’t care less. Truth can’t be danced around, not out here, not now, not ever again.’

They reached the far slope. Off to the left a narrow track led

down towards the sea. Paran gestured to it, then angled his horse forward.

Lorn followed, her thoughtful expression holding on the lieutenant's broad back, before she turned her attention to the route they took. The path was narrow, skirting the promontory's bluff. Off to the left the trail's edge dropped away to rocks sixty feet below. The tide was out, the waves breaking on a reef a few hundred yards offshore. Pools filled the black bedrock's cracks and basins, dully reflecting an overcast sky.

They came to a bend, and beyond and below stretched a crescent-shaped beach. Above it, at the promontory's foot, lay a broad, grassy shelf on which squatted a dozen huts.

The Adjunct swung her gaze seaward. The barques rested on their low flanks beside their mooring poles. The air above the beach and the tidal flat was empty – not a bird in sight.

She halted her mount. A moment later Paran glanced back at her then did the same. He watched her as she removed her helmet and shook out her long, auburn hair. It was wet and stringy with sweat. The lieutenant rode back to her side, a questioning look in his eyes.

'Lieutenant Paran, your words were well spoken.' She breathed in the salty air, then met his gaze. 'You won't be stationed in Unta, I'm afraid. You will be taking your orders from me as a commissioned officer on my staff.'

His eyes slowly narrowed. 'What happened to those soldiers, Adjunct?'

She didn't answer immediately, leaning back on her saddle and scanning the distant sea. 'Someone's been here,' she said. 'A sorcerer of great power. Something's happened, and we're being diverted from discovering it.'

Paran's mouth dropped open. 'Killing four hundred people was a diversion?'

'If that man and his daughter had been out fishing, they'd have come in with the tide.'

‘But—’

‘You won’t find their bodies, Lieutenant.’

Paran was puzzled. ‘Now what?’

She glanced at him, then swung her horse around. ‘We go back.’

‘That’s it?’ He stared after her as she directed her mount back up the trail, then rode to catch up. ‘Wait a minute, Adjunct,’ he said, as he came alongside.

She gave him a warning look.

Paran shook his head. ‘No. If I’m now on your staff, I have to know more about what’s going on.’

She placed her helmet back on and cinched tight the strap under her chin. Her long hair dangled in tattered ropes down over her Imperial cape. ‘Very well. As you know, Lieutenant, I’m no mage—’

‘No,’ Paran cut in, with a cold grin, ‘you just hunt them down and kill them.’

‘Don’t interrupt me again. As I was saying, I am anathema to sorcery. That means, Lieutenant, that, even though I’m not a practitioner, I have a relationship with magic. Of sorts. We know each other, if you will. I know the patterns of sorcery, and I know the patterns of the minds that use it. We were meant to conclude that the slaughter was thorough, and random. It was neither. There’s a path here, and we have to find it.’

Slowly Paran nodded.

‘Your first task, Lieutenant, is to ride to the market town – what’s its name again?’

‘Gerrom.’

‘Yes, Gerrom. They’ll know this fishing village, since that’s where the catch is sold. Ask around, find out which fisher family consisted of a father and daughter. Get me their names, and their descriptions. Use the militia if the locals are recalcitrant.’

‘They won’t be,’ Paran said. ‘The Kanese are co-operative folk.’

They reached the top of the trail and stopped at the road. Below, wagons rocked among the bodies, the oxen braying and stamping their blood-soaked hoofs. Soldiers shouted in the press, while overhead wheeled thousands of birds. The scene stank of panic. At the far end stood the captain, his helmet hanging from its strap in one hand.

The Adjunct stared down on the scene with hard eyes. ‘For their sake,’ she said, ‘I hope you’re right, Lieutenant.’

As he watched the two riders approach, something told the captain that his days of ease in Itko Kan were numbered. His helmet felt heavy in his hand. He eyed Paran. That thin-blooded bastard had it made. *A hundred strings pulling him every step of the way to some cushy posting in some peaceful city.*

He saw Lorn studying him as they came to the crest. ‘Captain, I have a request for you.’

The captain grunted. *Request, hell. The Empress has to check her slippers every morning to make sure this one isn’t already in them.* ‘Of course, Adjunct.’

The woman dismounted, as did Paran. The lieutenant’s expression was impassive. Was that arrogance, or had the Adjunct given him something to think about?

‘Captain,’ Lorn began, ‘I understand there’s a recruiting drive under way in Kan. Do you pull in people from outside the city?’

‘To join? Sure, more of them than anyone else. City folk got too much to give up. Besides, they get the bad news first. Most of the peasants don’t know everything’s gone to hell on Genabackis. A lot of them figure city folk whine too much anyway. May I ask why?’

‘You may.’ Lorn turned to watch the soldiers cleaning up the road. ‘I need a list of recent recruits. Within the last two days.’

Forget the ones born in the city, just the outlying ones. And only the women and/or old men.'

The captain grunted again. 'Should be a short list, Adjunct.'

'I hope so, Captain.'

'You figured out what's behind all this?'

Still following the activity on the road below, Lorn said, 'No idea.'

Yes, the captain thought, and I'm the Emperor reincarnated. 'Too bad,' he muttered.

'Oh.' The Adjunct faced him. 'Lieutenant Paran is now on my staff. I trust you'll make the necessary adjustments.'

'As you wish, Adjunct. I love paperwork.'

That earned him a slight smile. Then it was gone. 'Lieutenant Paran will be leaving now.'

The captain looked at the young noble and smiled, letting the smile say everything. Working for the Adjunct was like being the worm on the hook. The Adjunct was the hook, and at the other end of the line was the Empress. Let him squirm.

A sour expression flitted across Paran's face. 'Yes, Adjunct.' He climbed back into the saddle, saluted, then rode off down the road.

The captain watched him leave, then said, 'Anything else, Adjunct?'

'Yes.'

Her tone brought him around.

'I would like to hear a soldier's opinion of the nobility's present inroads on the Imperial command structure.'

The captain stared hard at her. 'It ain't pretty, Adjunct.'

'Go on.'

The captain talked.

It was the eighth day of recruiting and Staff Sergeant Aragan sat bleary-eyed behind his desk as yet another whelp was prodded forward by the corporal. They'd had some luck here in

Kan. Fishing's best in the backwaters, Kan's Fist had said. All they get around here is stories. Stories don't make you bleed. Stories don't make you go hungry, don't give you sore feet. When you're young and smelling of pigshit and convinced there ain't a weapon in all the damn world that's going to hurt you, all stories do is make you want to be part of them.

The old woman was right. As usual. These people had been under the boot so long they actually liked it. Well, Aragan thought, the education begins here.

It had been a bad day, with the local captain roaring off with three companies and leaving not one solid rumour in their wake about what was going on. And if that wasn't bad enough, Laseen's Adjunct arrived from Unta not ten minutes later, using one of those eerie magical Warrens to get here. Though he'd never seen her, just her name on the hot, dry wind was enough to give him the shakes. Mage killer, the scorpion in the Imperial pocket.

Aragan scowled down at the writing tablet and waited until the corporal cleared his throat. Then he looked up.

The recruit standing before him took the staff sergeant aback. He opened his mouth, on his tongue a lashing tirade designed to send the young ones scampering. A second later he shut it again, the words unspoken. Kan's Fist had made her instructions abundantly clear: if they had two arms, two legs and a head, take them. The Genabackis campaign was a mess. Fresh bodies were needed.

He grinned at the girl. She matched the Fist's description perfectly. Still. 'All right, lass, you understand you're in line to join the Malazan Marines, right?'

The girl nodded, her gaze steady and cool and fixed on Aragan.

The recruiter's expression tightened. *Damn, she can't be more than twelve or thirteen. If this was my daughter . . .*

*What's got her eyes looking so bloody old?* The last time he'd

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seen anything like them had been outside Mott Forest, on Genabackis – he'd been marching through farmland hit by five years' drought and a war twice as long. Those old eyes were brought by hunger, or death. He scowled. 'What's your name, girl?'

'Am I in, then?' she asked quietly.

Aragan nodded, a sudden headache pounding against the inside of his skull. 'You'll get your assignment in a week's time, unless you got a preference.'

'Genabackan campaign,' the girl answered immediately. 'Under the command of High Fist Dujek Onearm. Onearm's Host.'

Aragan blinked. 'I'll make a note,' he said softly. 'Your name, soldier?'

'Sorry. My name is Sorry.'

Aragan jotted the name down on his tablet. 'Dismissed, soldier. The corporal will tell you where to go.' He looked up as she was near the door. 'And wash all that mud off your feet.' Aragan continued writing for a moment, then stopped. It hadn't rained in weeks. And the mud around here was half-way between green and grey, not dark red. He tossed down the stylus and massaged his temples. *Well, at least the headache's fading.*

Gerrom was a league and a half inland along the Old Kan Road, a pre-Empire thoroughfare rarely used since the Imperial raised coast road had been constructed. The traffic on it these days was mostly on foot, local farmers and fishers with their goods. Of them only unravelled and torn bundles of clothing, broken baskets and trampled vegetables littering the track remained to give evidence of their passage. A lame mule, the last sentinel overseeing the refuse of an exodus, stood dumbly nearby, ankle-deep in a rice paddy. It spared Paran a single forlorn glance as he rode past.

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The detritus looked to be no more than a day old, the fruits and green-leaved vegetables only now beginning to rot in the afternoon heat.

His horse carrying him at a slow walk, Paran watched as the first outbuildings of the small trader town came into view through the dusty haze. No one moved between the shabby mudbrick houses; no dogs came out to challenge him, and the only cart in sight leaned on a single wheel. To add to the uncanny scene, the air was still, empty of birdsong. Paran loosened the sword in its scabbard.

As he neared the outbuildings he halted his mount. The exodus had been swift, a panicked flight. Yet he saw no bodies, no signs of violence beyond the haste evident in those leaving. He drew a deep breath, slowly released it, then clicked his horse forward. The main street was in effect the town's only street, leading at its far end to a T intersection marked by a single two-storey stone building: the Imperial Constabulary. Its tin-backed shutters were closed, its heavy banded door shut. As he approached Paran held his eyes on the building.

He dismounted before it, tying his mare to the hitching rail then looking back up the street. No movement. Unsheathing his blade, Paran swung back to the Constabulary door.

A soft, steady sound from within stopped him, too low to be heard from any distance but now, as he stood before the huge door, he could hear a liquid murmuring that raised the hairs on his neck. Paran reached out with his sword and set its point under the latch. He lifted the iron handle upward until it disengaged, then pushed open the door.

Movement rippled in the gloom within, a flap and soft thumping of air carrying to Paran the redolent stench of putrifying flesh. Breathing hard and with a mouth dry as old cotton, he waited for his eyes to adjust.

He stared into the Constabulary's outer room, and it was a mass of movement, a chilling soft sussuration of throats giving

voice. The chamber was filled with black pigeons cooing in icy calm. Uniformed human shapes lay in their midst, stretched haphazardly across the floor amid droppings and drifting black down. Sweat and death clung to the air thick as gauze.

He took a step inside. The pigeons rustled but otherwise ignored him. None made for the open doorway.

Swollen faces with coin-dull eyes stared up from the shadows; the faces were blue, as of men suffocated. Paran looked down at one of the soldiers. 'Not a healthy thing,' he muttered, 'wearing these uniforms these days.'

*A conjuring of birds to keep mocking vigil. Dark humour's not to my liking any more, I think.* He shook himself, walked across the room. The pigeons tracked away from his boots, clucking. The door to the captain's office was ajar. Musty light bled through the shuttered windows' uneven joins. Sheathing his sword, Paran entered the office. The captain still sat in his chair, his face bloated and bruised in shades of blue, green and grey.

Paran swept damp feathers from the desktop, rummaged through the scroll work. The papyrus sheets fell apart under his touch, the leaves rotten and oily between his fingers.

*A thorough eliminating of the trail.*

He turned away, walked swiftly back through the outer room until he stepped into the warm light. He closed the Constabulary door as, no doubt, the villagers had.

The dark bloom of sorcery was a stain few cared to examine too closely. It had a way of spreading.

Paran untethered his mare, climbed into the saddle and rode from the abandoned town. He did not look back.

The sun sat heavy and bloated amid a smear of crimson cloud on the horizon. Paran fought to keep his eyes open. It had been a long day. *A horrific day.* The land around him, once familiar and safe, had become something else, a place stirred with the

dark currents of sorcery. He was not looking forward to a night camped in the open.

His mount plodded onward, head down, as dusk slowly enveloped them. Pulled by the weary chains of his thoughts, Paran tried to make sense of what had happened since morning.

Snatched out from the shadow of that sour-faced, laconic captain and the garrison at Kan, the lieutenant had seen his prospects begin a quick rise. Aide to the Adjunct was an advancement in his career he could not have even imagined a week ago. Despite the profession he had chosen, his father and his sisters were bound to be impressed, perhaps even awed, by his achievement. Like so many other noble-born sons and daughters, he'd long since set his sights on the Imperial military, hungry for prestige and bored with the complacent, static attitudes of the noble class in general. Paran wanted something more challenging than co-ordinating shipments of wine, or overseeing the breeding of horses.

Nor was he among the first to enlist, thus easing the way for entrance into officer training and selective postings. It had just been ill-luck that saw him sent to Kan, where a veteran garrison had been licking its wounds for nigh on six years. There'd been little respect for an untested lieutenant, and even less for a noble-born.

Paran suspected that that had changed since the slaughter on the road. He'd handled it better than many of those veterans, helped in no small part by the superb breeding of his horse. More, to prove to them all his cool, detached professionalism, he'd volunteered to lead the inspection detail.

He'd done well, although the detail had proved . . . difficult. He'd heard screaming while crawling around among the bodies, coming from somewhere inside his own head. His eyes had fixed on details, oddities – the peculiar twist of this body, the inexplicable smile on that dead soldier's face – but what

had proved hardest was what had been done to the horses. Crusted foam-filled nostrils and mouths – the signs of terror – and the wounds were terrible, huge and devastating. Bile and faeces stained the once-proud mounts, and over everything was a glittering carpet of blood and slivers of red flesh. He had nearly wept for those horses.

He shifted uneasily on the saddle, feeling a clamminess come to his hands where they rested on the ornate horn. He'd held on to his confidence through the whole episode; yet now, as his thoughts returned to that horrid scene, it was as if something that had always been solid in his mind now stuttered, shied, threatening his balance; the faint contempt he'd shown for those veterans in his troop, kneeling helpless on the roadside racked by dry-heaves, returned to him now with a ghoulish cast. And the echo that came from the Constabulary at Gerrom, arriving like a late blow to his already bruised and battered soul, rose once again to pluck at the defensive numbness still holding him in check.

Paran straightened with an effort. He'd told the Adjunct his youth was gone. He'd told her other things as well, fearless, uncaring, lacking all the caution his father had instilled in him when it came to the many faces of the Empire.

From a great distance in his mind came old, old words: *live quietly*. He'd rejected that notion then; he rejected it still. The Adjunct, however, had noticed him. He wondered now, for the first time, if he was right to feel pride. That hard-bitten commander of so many years ago, on the walls of Mock's Hold, would have spat at Paran's feet, with contempt, had he now stood before him. The boy was a boy no longer, but a man. *Should've heeded my words, son. Now look at you.*

His mare pulled up suddenly, hoofs thumping confusedly on the rutted road. Paran reached for his weapon as he looked uneasily around in the gloom. The track ran through rice paddies, the nearest shacks of the peasants on a parallel ridge a

hundred paces from the road. Yet a figure now blocked the road.

A cold breath swirled lazily past, pinning back the mare's ears and widening her nostrils as she flinched.

The figure – a man by his height – was swathed in shades of green: cloaked, hooded, wearing a faded tunic and linen leggings above green-dyed leather boots. A single long-knife, the weapon of choice among Seven Cities warriors, was slung through a thin belt. The man's hands, faintly grey in the afternoon light, glittered with rings, rings on every finger, above and below the knuckles. He raised one now, holding up a clay jug.

'Thirsty, Lieutenant?' The man's voice was soft, the tone strangely melodic.

'Have I business with you?' Paran asked, his hand remaining on the grip of his longsword.

The man smiled, pulling back his hood. His face was long, the skin a lighter shade of grey, the eyes dark and strangely angled. He looked to be in his early thirties, though his hair was white. 'The Adjunct asked of me a favour,' he said. 'She grows impatient for your report. I am to escort you . . . with haste.' He shook the jug. 'But first, a repast. I have a veritable feast secreted in my pockets – far better fare than a brow-beaten Kanese village can offer. Join me, here on the roadside. We can amuse ourselves in conversation and idle watching of peasants toiling endlessly. I am named Topper.'

'I know that name,' Paran said.

'Well, you should,' Topper replied. 'I am he, alas. The blood of a Tiste Andii races in my veins, seeking escape, no doubt, from its more common human stream. Mine was the hand that took the life of Unta's royal line, king, queen, sons and daughters.'

'And cousins, second cousins, third—'

'Expunging all hope, indeed. Such was my duty as a Claw of unsurpassed skill. But you have failed in answering my question.'

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‘Which was?’

‘Thirsty?’

Scowling, Paran dismounted. ‘I thought you said the Adjunct wished for haste.’

‘Hasten we shall, Lieutenant, once we’ve filled our bellies, and conversed in civil fashion.’

‘Your reputation puts civility far down your list of skills, Claw.’

‘It’s a most cherished trait of mine that sees far too little opportunity for exercise these fell days, Lieutenant. Surely you’d grant me some of your precious time, since I’m to be your escort?’

‘Whatever arrangement you made with the Adjunct is between you and her,’ Paran said, approaching. ‘I owe you nothing, Topper. Except enmity.’

The Claw squatted, removing wrapped packages from his pockets, followed by two crystal goblets. He uncorked the jug. ‘Ancient wounds. I was led to understand you’ve taken a different path, leaving behind the dull, jostling ranks of the nobility.’ He poured, filling the goblets with amber-coloured wine. ‘You are now one with the body of Empire, Lieutenant. It commands you. You respond unquestioningly to its will. You are a small part of a muscle in that body. No more. No less. The time for old grudges is long past. So,’ he set down the jug and handed Paran a goblet, ‘we now salute new beginnings, Ganoes Paran, lieutenant and aide to Adjunct Lorn.’

Scowling, Paran accepted the goblet.

The two drank.

Topper smiled, producing a silk handkerchief to dab against his lips. ‘There now, that wasn’t so difficult, was it? May I call you by your chosen name?’

‘Paran will do. And you? What title does the commander of the Claw hold?’

Topper smiled again. ‘Laseen still commands the Claw. I

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assist her. In this way I too am an aide of sorts. You may call me by my chosen name, of course. I'm not one for maintaining formalities beyond a reasonable point in an acquaintance.'

Paran sat down on the muddy road. 'And we've passed that point?'

'Indeed.'

'How do you decide?'

'Ah, well.' Topper began unwrapping his packages, revealing cheese, fistbread, fruit and berries. 'I make acquaintances in one of two ways. You've seen the second of those.'

'And the first?'

'No time for proper introductions in those instances, alas.'

Wearily Paran unstrapped and removed his helm. 'Do you wish to hear what I found in Gerrom?' he asked, running a hand through his black hair.

Topper shrugged. 'If you've the need.'

'Perhaps I'd better await my audience with the Adjunct.'

The Claw smiled. 'You have begun to learn, Paran. Never be too easy with the knowledge you possess. Words are like coin – it pays to hoard.'

'Until you die on a bed of gold,' Paran said.

'Hungry? I hate eating alone.'

Paran accepted a chunk of fistbread. 'So, was the Adjunct truly impatient, or are you here for other reasons?'

With a smile, the Claw rose. 'Alas, genteel conversation is done. Our way opens.' He faced the road.

Paran turned to see a curtain in the air tear open on the road, spilling dull yellow light. A *Warren*, the secret paths of sorcery. 'Hood's Breath.' He sighed, fighting off a sudden chill. Within he could see a greyish pathway, humped on either side by low mounded walls and vaulted overhead by impenetrable ochre-hued mist. The air swept past into the portal like a drawn breath, revealing the pathway to be of ash as invisible currents stirred and raised spinning dust-devils.

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‘You will have to get used to this,’ Topper said.

Paran collected his mare’s reins and slung his helm on the saddlehorn. ‘Lead on,’ he said.

The Claw cast him a quick appraising glance, then strode into the Warren.

Paran followed. The portalway closed behind them, in its place a continuation of the path. Itko Kan had vanished, and with it all signs of life. The world they had entered was barren, deathly. The banked mounds lining the trail proved to be more ash. The air was gritty, tasting of metal.

‘Welcome to the Imperial Warren,’ Topper said, with a hint of mockery.

‘Pleasant.’

‘Carved by force out of . . . what was here before. Has such an effort ever been achieved before? Only the gods can say.’

They began walking.

‘I take it, then,’ Paran said, ‘that no god claims this Warren. By this, you cheat the tolls, the gatekeepers, the guardians on unseen bridges, and all the others said to dwell in the Warrens in service to their immortal masters.’

Topper grunted. ‘You imagine the Warrens as crowded as that? Well, the beliefs of the ignorant are ever entertaining. You shall be good company on this short journey, I think.’

Paran fell silent. The horizons beyond the banked heaps of ash were close, a vague blending of ochre sky and grey-black ground. Sweat trickled under his mail hauberk. His mare snorted heavily.

‘In case you were wondering,’ Topper said, after a time, ‘the Adjunct is now in Unta. We will use this Warren to cross the distance – three hundred leagues in only a few short hours. Some think the Empire has grown too large, some even think their remote provinces are beyond the Empress Laseen’s reach. As you have just learned, Paran, such beliefs are held by fools.’

The mare snorted again.

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‘I’ve shamed you into silence, then? I do apologize, Lieutenant, for mocking your ignorance—’

‘It’s a risk you’ll have to live with,’ Paran said.

The next thousand paces of silence belonged to Topper.

No shifting of light marked the passing of hours. A number of times they came upon places where the ash embankments had been disturbed, as if by the passage of something large, shambling; and wide, slithery trails led off into the gloom. In one such place they found a dark encrusted stain and the scatter of chain links like coins in the dust. Topper examined the scene closely while Paran watched.

*Hardly the secure road he’d have me believe. There’re strangers here, and they’re not friendly.*

He was not surprised to find Topper increasing their pace thereafter. A short while later they came to a stone archway. It had been recently constructed, and Paran recognized the basalt as Untan, from the Imperial quarries outside the capital. The walls of his family’s estate were of the same grey-black glittering stone. At the centre of the arch, high over their heads, was carved a taloned hand holding a crystal globe: the Malazan Imperial sigil.

Beyond the arch was darkness.

Paran cleared his throat. ‘We have arrived?’

Topper spun to him. ‘You answer civility with arrogance, Lieutenant. You’d do well to shed the noble hauteur.’

Smiling, Paran gestured. ‘Lead on, escort.’

In a whirl of cloak Topper stepped through the arch and vanished.

The mare bucked as Paran pulled her closer to the arch, head tossing. He tried to soothe her but it was no use. Finally, he climbed into the saddle and gathered up the reins. He straightened the horse, then drove hard his spurs into her flanks. She bolted, leaped into the void.

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Light and colours exploded outward, engulfing them. The mare's hoofs landed with a crunching thump, scattering something that might be gravel in all directions. Paran halted his horse, blinking as he took in the scene around them. A vast chamber, its ceiling glittering with beaten gold, its walls lined with tapestries, and a score of armoured guards closing in on all sides.

Alarmed, the mare sidestepped to send Topper sprawling. A hoof lashed out after him, missing by a handspan. More gravel crunched – only it was not gravel, Paran saw, but mosaic stones. Topper rolled to his feet with a curse, his eyes flashing as he glared at the lieutenant.

The guardsmen seemed to respond to some unspoken order, slowly withdrawing to their positions along the walls. Paran swung his attention from Topper. Before him was a raised dais surmounted by a throne of twisted bone. In the throne sat the Empress.

Silence fell in the chamber except for the crunch of semi-precious gems beneath the mare's hoofs. Grimacing, Paran dismounted, warily eyeing the woman seated on the throne.

Laseen had changed little since the only other time he'd been this close to her; plain and unadorned, her hair short and fair above the blue tint of her unmemorable features. Her brown eyes regarded him narrowly.

Paran adjusted his sword-belt, clasped his hands and bowed from the waist. 'Empress.'

'I see,' Laseen drawled, 'that you did not heed the commander's advice of seven years ago.'

He blinked in surprise.

She continued, 'Of course, he did not heed the advice given him, either. I wonder what god tossed you two together on that parapet – I would do service to acknowledge its sense of humour. Did you imagine the Imperial Arch would exit in the stables, Lieutenant?'

‘My horse was reluctant to make the passage, Empress.’

‘With good reason.’

Paran smiled. ‘Unlike me, she’s of a breed known for its intelligence. Please accept my humblest apologies.’

‘Topper will see you to the Adjunct.’ She gestured, and a guardsman came forward to collect the mare’s reins.

Paran bowed again then faced the Claw with a smile.

Topper led him to a side door.

‘You fool!’ he snapped, as the door was closed soundly behind them. He strode quickly down the narrow hallway. Paran made no effort to keep pace, forcing the Claw to wait at the far end where a set of stairs wound upward. Topper’s expression was dark with fury. ‘What was that about a parapet? You’ve met her before – when?’

‘Since she declined to explain I can only follow her example,’ Paran said. He eyed the saddle-backed stairs. ‘This would be the West Tower, then. The Tower of Dust—’

‘To the top floor. The Adjunct awaits you in her chambers – there’s no other doors so you won’t get lost, just keep on until you reach the top.’

Paran nodded and began climbing.

The door to the tower’s top room was ajar. Paran rapped a knuckle against it and stepped inside. The Adjunct was seated at a bench at the far end, her back to a wide window. Its shutters were thrown open, revealing the red glint of sunrise. She was getting dressed. Paran halted, embarrassed.

‘I’m not one for modesty,’ the Adjunct said. ‘Enter and close the door behind you.’

Paran did as he was bidden. He looked around. Faded tapestries lined the walls. Ragged furs covered the stone tiles of the floor. The furniture – what little there was – was old, Napan in style and thus artless.

The Adjunct rose to shrug into her leather armour. Her hair

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shimmered in the red light. ‘You look exhausted, Lieutenant. Please, sit.’

He looked around, found a chair and slumped gratefully into it. ‘The trail’s been thoroughly obscured, Adjunct. The only people left in Gerrom aren’t likely to talk.’

She fastened the last of the clasps. ‘Unless I were to send a necromancer.’

He grunted. ‘Tales of pigeons – I think the possibility was foreseen.’

She regarded him with a raised brow.

‘Pardon, Adjunct. It seems that death’s heralds were . . . birds.’

‘And were we to glance through the eyes of the dead soldiers, we would see little else. Pigeons, you said?’

He nodded.

‘Curious.’ She fell silent.

He watched her for a moment longer. ‘Was I bait, Adjunct?’

‘No.’

‘And Topper’s timely arrival?’

‘Convenience.’

He fell silent. When he closed his eyes his head spun. He’d not realized how weary he’d become. It was a moment before he understood that she was speaking to him. He shook himself, straightened.

The Adjunct stood before him. ‘Sleep later, not now, Lieutenant. I was informing you of your future. It would be well if you paid attention. You completed your task as instructed. Indeed, you have proved yourself highly . . . resilient. To all outward appearances, I am done with you, Lieutenant. You will be returned to the Officer Corps here in Unta. What will follow will be a number of postings, completing your official training. As for your time in Itko Kan, nothing unusual occurred there, do you understand me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

‘And what of what really happened there, Adjunct? Do we abandon pursuit? Do we resign ourselves to never knowing exactly what happened, or why? Or is it simply me who is to be abandoned?’

‘Lieutenant, this is a trail we must not follow too closely, but follow it we shall, and you will be central to the effort. I have assumed – perhaps in error – that you would wish to see it through, to be witness when the time for vengeance finally arrives. Was I wrong? Perhaps you’ve seen enough and seek only a return to normality.’

He closed his eyes. ‘Adjunct, I would be there when the time came.’

She was silent and he knew without opening his eyes that she was studying him, gauging his worth. He was beyond unease and beyond caring. He’d stated his desire; the decision was hers.

‘We proceed slowly. Your reassignment will take effect in a few days’ time. In the meanwhile, go home to your father’s estate. Get some rest.’

He opened his eyes and rose to his feet. As he reached the doorway she spoke again. ‘Lieutenant, I trust you won’t repeat the scene in the Hall of the Throne.’

‘I doubt I’d earn as many laughs the second time around, Adjunct.’

As he reached the stairs he heard what might have been a cough from the room behind him. It was hard to imagine that it could have been anything else.

As he led his horse through the streets of Unta he felt numb inside. The familiar sights, the teeming, interminable crowds, the voices and clash of languages all struck Paran as something strange, something altered, not before his eyes but in that unknowable place between his eyes and his thoughts. The

change was his alone, and it made him feel shorn, outcast.

Yet the place was the same: the scenes before him were as they always had been and even in watching it pass by all around him, nothing had changed. It was the gift of noble blood that kept the world at a distance, to be observed from a position unsullied, unjustled by the commonry. *Gift . . . and curse.*

Now, however, Paran walked among them without the family guards. The power of blood was gone, and all he possessed by way of armour was the uniform he now wore. Not a craftsman, not a hawker, not a merchant, but a soldier. A weapon of the Empire, and the Empire had those in the tens of thousands.

He passed through Toll Ramp Gate and made his way along Marble Slope Road, where the first merchant estates appeared, pushed back from the cobbled street, half hidden by courtyard walls. The foliage of gardens joined their lively colours with brightly painted walls; the crowds diminished and private guards were visible outside arching gates. The sweltering air lost its reek of sewage and rotting food, slipping cooler across unseen fountains and carrying into the avenue the fragrance of blossoms.

Smells of childhood.

The estates spread out as he led his horse deeper into the Noble District. Breathing-space purchased by history and ancient coin. The Empire seemed to melt away, a distant, mundane concern. Here, families traced their lines back seven centuries to those tribal horsemen who had first come to this land from the east. In blood and fire, as was always the way, they had conquered and subdued the cousins of the Kanese who'd built villages along this coast. From warrior horsemen to horsebreeders to merchants of wine, beer and cloth. An ancient nobility of the blade, now a nobility of hoarded gold, trade agreements, subtle manoeuvrings and hidden corruptions in gilded rooms and oil-lit corridors.

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