

# MARK LAWRENCE



## THE BROKEN EMPIRE TRILOGY

**Mark Lawrence**

# **The Broken Empire Trilogy**

***Book 1: Prince of Thorns***  
***Book 2: King of Thorns***  
***Book 3: Emperor of Thorns***



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MARK LAWRENCE

# PRINCE OF THORNS

The Thorns Taught Him  
a Lesson in Blood



'Excellent -  
on a par with  
**GEORGE R. R.  
MARTIN**'  
Conn Iggulden



# **PRINCE OF THORNS**

# **Book One of The Broken Empire**

*Mark Lawrence*



*To Celyn, the best parts were never broken.*

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# 1

Ravens! Always the ravens. They settled on the gables of the church even before the injured became the dead. Even before Rike had finished taking fingers from hands, and rings from fingers. I leaned back against the gallows-post and nodded to the birds, a dozen of them in a black line, wise-eyed and watching.

The town-square ran red. Blood in the gutters, blood on the flagstones, blood in the fountain. The corpses posed as corpses do. Some comical, reaching for the sky with missing fingers, some peaceful, coiled about their wounds. Flies rose above the wounded as they struggled. This way and that, some blind, some sly, all betrayed by their buzzing entourage.

‘Water! Water!’ It’s always water with the dying. Strange, it’s killing that gives me a thirst.

And that was Mabberton. Two hundred dead farmers lying with their scythes and axes. You know, I warned them that we do this for a living. I said it to their leader, Bovid Tor. I gave them that chance, I always do. But no. They wanted blood and slaughter. And they got it.

War, my friends, is a thing of beauty. Those as says otherwise are losing. If I’d bothered to go over to old Bovid, propped up against the fountain with his guts in his lap, he’d probably take a contrary view. But look where disagreeing got him.

‘Shit-poor farm maggots.’ Rike discarded a handful of fingers over Bovid’s open belly. He came to me, holding out his takings, as if it was my fault. ‘Look! One gold ring. One! A whole village and one fecking gold ring. I’d like to set the bastards up and knock ’em down again. Fecking bog-farmers.’

He would too: he was an evil bastard, and greedy with it. I held his eye. ‘Settle down, Brother Rike. There’s more than one kind of gold in Mabberton.’

I gave him my warning look. His cursing stole the magic from the scene;

besides, I had to be stern with him. Rike was always on the edge after a battle, wanting more. I gave him a look that told him I had more. More than he could handle. He grumbled, stowed his bloody ring, and thrust his knife back in his belt.

Makin came up then and flung an arm about each of us, clapping gauntlet to shoulder-plate. If Makin had a skill, then smoothing things over was it.

‘Brother Jorg is right, Little Rikey. There’s treasure aplenty to be found.’ He was wont to call Rike ‘Little Rikey’, on account of him being a head taller than any of us and twice as wide. Makin always told jokes. He’d tell them to those as he killed, if they gave him time. Liked to see them go out with a smile.

‘What treasure?’ Rike wanted to know, still surly.

‘When you get farmers, what else do you always get, Little Rikey?’ Makin raised his eyebrows all suggestive.

Rike lifted his visor, treating us to his ugly face. Well brutal more than ugly. I think the scars improved him. ‘Cows?’

Makin pursed his lips. I never liked his lips, too thick and fleshy, but I forgave him that, for his joking and his deathly work with that flail of his. ‘Well, you can have the cows, Little Rikey. Me, I’m going to find a farmer’s daughter or three, before the others use them all up.’

They went off then, Rike doing that laugh of his – ‘*hur, hur, hur*’ – as if he was trying to cough a fishbone out.

I watched them force the door to Bovid’s place opposite the church, a fine house, high roofed with wooden slates and a little flower garden in front. Bovid followed them with his eyes, but he couldn’t turn his head.

I looked at the ravens, I watched Gemt and his halfwit brother, Maical, taking heads, Maical with the cart and Gemt with the axe. A thing of beauty, I tell you. At least to look at. I’ll agree war smells bad. But, we’d torch the place soon enough and the stink would all turn to wood-smoke. Gold rings? I needed no more payment.

‘Boy!’ Bovid called out, his voice all hollow like, and weak.

I went to stand before him, leaning on my sword, tired in my arms and legs all of a sudden. ‘Best speak your piece quickly, farmer. Brother Gemt’s a-coming with his axe. Chop-chop.’

He didn’t seem too worried. It’s hard to worry a man so close to the worm-feast. Still it irked me that he held me so lightly and called me ‘boy’. ‘Do you have daughters, farmer? Hiding in the cellar maybe? Old Rike will sniff them

out.'

Bovid looked up sharp at that, pained and sharp. 'H-how old are you, boy?'

Again the 'boy'. 'Old enough to slit you open like a fat purse,' I said, getting angry now. I don't like to get angry. It makes me angry. I don't think he caught even that. I don't think he even knew it was me that opened him up not half an hour before.

'Fifteen summers, no more. Couldn't be more ...' His words came slow, from blue lips in a white face.

Out by two, I would have told him, but he'd gone past hearing. The cart creaked up behind me, and Gemt came along with his axe dripping.

'Take his head,' I told them. 'Leave his fat belly for the ravens.'

Fifteen! I'd hardly be fifteen and rousting villages.

By the time fifteen came around, I'd be King!

*Some people are born to rub you the wrong way. Brother Gemt was born to rub the world the wrong way.*

## 2

Mabberton burned well. All the villages burned well that summer. Makin called it a hot bastard of a summer, too mean to give out rain, and he wasn't wrong. Dust rose behind us when we rode in; smoke when we rode out.

'Who'd be a farmer?' Makin liked to ask questions.

'Who'd be a farmer's daughter?' I nodded toward Rike, rolling in his saddle, almost tired enough to fall out, wearing a stupid grin and a bolt of samite cloth over his half-plate. Where he found samite in Mabberton I never did get to know.

'Brother Rike does enjoy his simple pleasures,' Makin said.

He did. Rike had a hunger for it. Hungry like the fire.

The flames fair ate up Mabberton. I put the torch to the thatched inn, and the fire chased us out. Just one more bloody day in the years' long death throes of our broken empire.

Makin wiped at his sweat, smearing himself all over with soot-stripes. He had a talent for getting dirty, did Makin. 'You weren't above those simple pleasures yourself, Brother Jorg.'

I couldn't argue there. 'How old are you?' that fat farmer had wanted to know. Old enough to pay a call on his daughters. The fat girl had a lot to say, just like her father. Screeched like a barn owl: hurt my ears with it. I liked the older one better. She was quiet enough. So quiet you'd give a twist here or there just to check she hadn't died of fright. Though I don't suppose either of them was quiet when the fire reached them ...

Gemt rode up and spoiled my imaginings.

'The Baron's men will see that smoke from ten miles. You shouldn'ta burned it.' He shook his head, his stupid mane of ginger hair bobbing this way and that.

'Shouldn'ta,' his idiot brother joined in, calling from the old grey. We let him ride the old grey with the cart hitched up. The grey wouldn't leave the road. That horse was cleverer than Maical.

Gemt always wanted to point stuff out. ‘You shouldn’ta put them bodies down the well, we’ll go thirsty now.’ ‘You shouldn’ta killed that priest, we’ll have bad luck now.’ ‘If we’d gone easy on her we’d have a ransom from Baron Kennick.’ I just ached to put my knife through his throat. Right then. Just to lean out and plant it in his neck. ‘What’s that? What say you, Brother Gemt? Bubble, bubble? Shouldn’ta stabbed your bulgy old Adam’s apple?’

‘Oh no!’ I cried, all shocked like. ‘Quick, Little Rikey, go piss on Mabberton. Got to put that fire out.’

‘Baron’s men will see it,’ said Gemt, stubborn and red-faced. He went red as a beet if you crossed him. That red face just made me want to kill him even more. I didn’t, though. You got responsibilities when you’re a leader. You got a responsibility not to kill too many of your men. Or who’re you going to lead?

The column bunched up around us, the way it always did when something was up. I pulled on Gerrod’s reins and he stopped with a snicker and a stamp. I watched Gemt and waited. Waited until all thirty-eight of my brothers gathered around, and Gemt got so red you’d think his ears would bleed.

‘Where we all going, my brothers?’ I asked, and I stood in my stirrups so I could look out over their ugly faces. I asked it in my quiet voice and they all hushed to hear.

‘Where?’ I asked again. ‘Surely it isn’t just me that knows? Do I keep secrets from you, my brothers?’

Rike looked a bit confused at this, furrowing his brow. Fat Burlow came up on my right, on my left the Nuban with his teeth so white in that soot-black face. Silence.

‘Brother Gemt can tell us. He knows what should be and what is.’ I smiled, though my hand still ached with wanting my dagger in his neck. ‘Where we going, Brother Gemt?’

‘Wennith, on the Horse Coast,’ he said, all reluctant, not wanting to agree to anything.

‘Well and good. How we going to get there? Near forty of us on our fine oh-so-stolen horses?’

Gemt set his jaw. He could see where I was going.

‘How we going to get there, if we want us a slice of the pie while it’s still nice and hot?’ I asked.

‘Lich Road!’ Rike called out, all pleased that he knew the answer.

‘Lich Road,’ I repeated, still quiet and smiling. ‘What other way could we

go?’ I looked at the Nuban, holding his dark eyes. I couldn’t read him, but I let him read me.

‘Ain’t no other way.’

Rike’s on a roll, I thought, he don’t know what game’s being played, but he likes his part.

‘Do the Baron’s men know where we’re going?’ I asked Fat Burlow.

‘War dogs follow the front,’ he said. Fat Burlow ain’t stupid. His jowls quiver when he speaks, but he ain’t stupid.

‘So ...’ I looked around them, real slow-like. ‘So, the Baron knows where bandits such as ourselves will be going, and he knows the way we’ve got to go.’ I let that sink in. ‘And I just lit a bloody big fire that tells him and his what a bad idea it’d be to follow.’

I stuck Gemt with my knife then. I didn’t need to, but I wanted it. He danced pretty enough too, bubble bubble on his blood, and fell off his horse. His red face went pale quick enough.

‘Maical,’ I said. ‘Take his head.’

And he did.

Gemt just chose a bad moment.



*Whatever broke Brother Maical left the outside untouched. He looked as solid and as tough and as sour as the rest of them. Until you asked him a question.*

### 3

‘Two dead, two wrigglers.’ Makin wore that big grin of his.

We’d have camped by the gibbet in any case, but Makin had ridden on ahead to check the ground. I thought the news that two of the four gibbet cages held live prisoners would cheer the brothers.

‘Two,’ Rike grumbled. He’d tired himself out, and a tired Little Rikey always sees a gibbet as half empty.

‘Two!’ the Nuban hollered down the line.

I could see some of the lads exchanging coin on their bets. The Lich Road is as boring as a Sunday sermon. It runs straight and level. So straight it gets so as you’d kill for a left turn or a right turn. So level you’d cheer a slope. And on every side, marsh, midges, midges and more marsh. On the Lich Road it didn’t get any better than two caged wrigglers on a gibbet.

Strange that I didn’t think to question what business a gibbet had standing out there in the middle of nowhere. I took it as a bounty. Somebody had left their prisoners to die, dangling in cages at the roadside. A strange spot to choose, but free entertainment for my little band nonetheless. The brothers were eager, so I nudged Gerrod into a trot. A good horse, Gerrod. He shook off his weariness and clattered along. There’s no road like the Lich Road for clattering along.

‘Wrigglers!’ Rike gave a shout and they were all racing to catch up.

I let Gerrod have his head. He wouldn’t let any horse get past him. Not on this road. Not with every yard of it paved, every flagstone fitting with the next so close a blade of grass couldn’t hope for the light. Not a stone turned, not a stone worn. Built on a bog, mind you!

I beat them to the wrigglers, of course. None of them could touch Gerrod. Certainly not with me on his back and them all half as heavy again. At the gibbet I turned to look back at them, strung out along the road. I yelled out, wild with the joy of it, loud enough to wake the head-cart. Gemt would be in there, bouncing around at the back.

Makin reached me first, even though he'd rode the distance twice before.

'Let the Baron's men come,' I told him. 'The Lich Road is as good as any bridge. Ten men could hold an army here. Them that wants to flank us can drown in the bog.'

Makin nodded, still hunting his breath.

'The ones who built this road ... if they'd make me a castle—' Thunder in the east cut across my words.

'If the Road-men built castles we'd never get in anywhere,' Makin said. 'Be happy they're gone.'

We watched the brothers come in. The sunset turned the marsh pools to orange fire, and I thought of Mabberton.

'A good day, Brother Makin,' I said.

'Indeed, Brother Jorg,' he said.

So, the brothers came and set to arguing over the wrigglers. I went and sat against the loot-cart to read while the light stayed with us and the rain held off. The day left me in mind to read Plutarch. I had him all to myself, sandwiched between leather covers. Some worthy monk spent a lifetime on that book. A lifetime hunched over it, brush in hand. Here the gold, for halo, sun, and scrollwork. Here a blue like poison, bluer than a noon sky. Tiny vermilion dots to make a bed of flowers. Probably went blind over it, that monk. Probably poured his life in here, from young lad to grey-head, prettying up old Plutarch's words.

The thunder rolled, the wrigglers wriggled and howled, and I sat reading words that were older than old before the Road-men built their roads.

'You're cowards! Women with your swords and axes!' One of the crow-feasts on the gibbet had a mouth on him.

'Not a man amongst you. All pederasts, trailing up here after that little boy.' He curled his words up at the end like a Merssy-man.

'There's a fella over here got an opinion about you, Brother Jorg!' Makin called out.

A drop of rain hit my nose. I closed the cover on Plutarch. He'd waited a while to tell me about Sparta and Lycurgus, he could wait some more and not get wet doing it. The wriggler had more to say and I let him tell it to my back. On the road you've got to wrap a book well to keep the rain out. Ten turns of oilcloth, ten more turns the other way, then stash it under a cloak in a saddlebag. A good saddlebag mind, none of that junk from the Thurtans, good double-stitched leather from the Horse Coast.

The lads parted to let me up close. The gibbet stank worse than the head-cart, a crude thing of fresh-cut timber. Four cages hung there. Two held dead men. *Very* dead men. Legs dangling through the bars, raven-pecked to the bone. Flies thick about them, like a second skin, black and buzzing. The lads had taken a few pokes at one of the wrigglers, and he didn't look too cheerful for it. In fact he looked as if he'd pegged it. Which was a waste, as we had a whole night ahead of us, and I'd have said as much, but for the wriggler with the mouth.

'So now the boy comes over! He's finished looking for lewd pictures in his stolen book.' He sat crouched up in his cage, his feet all bleeding and raw. An old man, maybe forty, all black hair and grey beard and dark eyes glittering. 'Take the pages to wipe your dung, boy,' he said fierce-like, grabbing the bars all of a sudden, making the cage swing. 'It's the only use you'll get from it.'

'We could set a slow fire?' Rike said. Even Rike knew the old man just wanted us angry, so we'd finish him quick. 'Like we did at the Turston gibbets.'

A few chuckles went up at that. Not from Makin though. He had a frown on under his dirt and soot, staring at the wriggler. I held up a hand to quiet them down.

'It'd be a shameful waste of such a fine book, Father Gomst,' I said.

Like Makin, I'd recognized Gomst through all that beard and hair. Without that accent though he'd have got roasted.

'Especially an "On Lycurgus" written in high Latin, not that pidgin-Romano they teach in church.'

'You know me?' He asked it in a cracked voice, weepy all of a sudden.

'Of course I do.' I pushed both hands through my lovely locks, and set my hair back so he could see me proper in the gloom. I have the sharp dark looks of the Ancraths. 'You're Father Gomst, come to take me back to school.'

'Pr-prin ...' He was blubbing now, unable to get his words out. Disgusting really. Made me feel as if I'd bitten something rotten.

'Prince Honourous Jorg Ancrath, at your service.' I did my court bow.

'Wh-what became of Captain Bortha?' Father Gomst swung gently in his cage, all confused.

'Captain Bortha, sir!' Makin snapped a salute and stepped up. He had blood on him from the first wriggler.

We had us a deathly silence then. Even the chirp and whir of the marsh

hushed down to a whisper. The brothers looked from me, back to the old priest, and back to me, mouths hanging open. Little Rikey couldn't have looked more surprised if you'd asked him nine times six.

The rain chose that moment to fall, all at once as if the Lord Almighty had emptied his chamber pot over us. The gloom that had been gathering set thick as treacle.

'Prince Jorg!' Father Gomst had to shout over the rain. 'The night! You've got to run!' He held the bars of his cage, white-knuckled, wide eyes unblinking in the downpour, staring into the darkness.

And through the night, through the rain, over the marsh where no man could walk, we saw them coming. We saw their lights. Pale lights such as the dead burn in deep pools where men aren't meant to look. Lights that'd promise whatever a man could want, and would set you chasing them, hunting answers and finding only cold mud, deep and hungry.

I never liked Father Gomst. He'd been telling me what to do since I was six, most often with the back of his hand as the reason.

'Run Prince Jorg! Run!' old Gomsty howled, sickeningly self-sacrificing. So I stood my ground.

*Brother Gains wasn't the cook because he was good at cooking. He was just bad at everything else.*

## 4

The dead came on through the rain, the ghosts of the bog-dead, of the drowned, and of men whose corpses were given to the mire. I saw Red Kent run blind and flounder in the marsh. A few of the brothers had the sense to take the road when they ran, most ended in the mire.

Father Gomst started praying in his cage, shouting out the words like a shield: 'Father who art in heaven protect thy son. Father who art in heaven.' Faster and faster, as the fear got into him.

The first of them came up over the sucking pool, and onto the Lichway. He had a glow about him like moonlight, something that you knew would never warm you. You could see his body limned in the light, with the rain racing through him and bouncing on the road.

Nobody stood with me. The Nuban ran, eyes wide in a dark face. Fat Burlow looking as if the blood was let from him. Rike screaming like a child. Even Makin, with a horror on him.

I held my arms wide to the rain. I could feel it beat on me. I didn't have so many years under my belt, but even to me the rain fell like memory. It woke wild nights in me when I stood on the Keep Tower, on the edge above a high fall, near drowned in the deluge and daring the lightning to touch me.

'Our Father who art in heaven. Father who art ...' Gomst started to gabble when the lich came close. It burned with a cold fire and you could feel it licking at your bones.

I kept my arms wide and my face to the rain.

'My father isn't in heaven, Gomsty,' I said. 'He's in his castle, counting out his men.'

The dead thing closed on me, and I looked in its eyes. Hollow they were.

'What have you got?' I said.

And it showed me.

And I showed it.

There's a reason I'm going to win this war. Everyone alive has been



fighting a battle that grew old before they were born. I cut my teeth on the wooden soldiers in my father's war-room. There's a reason I'm going to win where they failed. It's because I understand the game.

'Hell,' the dead man said. 'I've got hell.'

And he flowed into me, cold as dying, edged like a razor.

I felt my mouth curl in a smile. I heard my laughing over the rain.

A knife is a scary thing right enough, held to your throat, sharp and cool. The fire too, and the rack. And an old ghost on the Lichway. All of them might give you pause. Until you realize what they are. They're just ways to lose the game. You lose the game, and what have you lost? You've lost the game.

That's the secret, and it amazes me that it's mine and mine alone. I saw the game for what it was the night when Count Renar's men caught our carriage. There was a storm that night too, I remember the din of rain on the carriage roof and the thunder beneath it.

Big Jan had fair hauled the door off its hinges to get us out. He only had time for me though. He threw me clear; into a briar patch so thick that the Count's men persuaded themselves I'd run into the night. They didn't want to search it. But I hadn't run. I'd hung there in the thorns, and I saw them kill Big Jan. I saw it in the frozen moments the lightning gave me.

I saw what they did to Mother, and how long it took. They broke little William's head against a milestone. Golden curls and blood. And I'll admit that William was the first of my brothers, and he did have his hooks in me, with his chubby hands and laughing. Since then I've taken on many a brother, and evil ones at that, so I'd not miss one or three. But at the time, it did hurt to see little William broken like that, like a toy. Like something worthless.

When they killed him, Mother wouldn't hold her peace, so they slit her throat. I was stupid then, being only nine, and I fought to save them both. But the thorns held me tight. I've learned to appreciate thorns since.

The thorns taught me the game. They let me understand what all those grim and serious men who've fought the Hundred War, have yet to learn. You can only win the game when you understand that it *is* a game. Let a man play chess, and tell him that every pawn is his friend. Let him think both bishops holy. Let him remember happy days in the shadows of his castles. Let him love his queen. Watch him lose them all.

'What have you got for me, dead thing?' I asked.

*It's a game. I will play my pieces.*

I felt him cold inside me. I saw his death. I saw his despair. And his hunger. And I gave it back. I'd expected more, but he was only dead.

I showed him the empty time where my memory won't go. I let him look there.

He ran from me then. He ran, and I chased him. But only to the edge of the marsh. Because it's a game. And I'm going to win.

## *Four years earlier*

For the longest time I studied revenge to the exclusion of all else. I built my first torture chamber in the dark vaults of imagination. Lying on bloody sheets in the Healing Hall I discovered doors within my mind that I'd not found before, doors that even a child of nine knows should not be opened. Doors that never close again.

I threw them wide.

Sir Reilly found me, hanging within the hook-briar, not ten yards from the smoking ruin of the carriage. They almost missed me. I saw them reach the bodies on the road. I watched them through the briar, silver glimpses of Sir Reilly's armour, and flashes of red from the tabards of Ancrath foot-soldiers.

Mother was easy to find, in her silks.

'Sweet Jesu! It's the Queen!' Sir Reilly had them turn her over. 'Gently! Show some respect—' He broke off with a gasp. The Count's men hadn't left her pretty.

'Sir! Big Jan's over here, Grem and Jassar too.' I saw them heave Jan over, then turn to the other guardsmen.

'They'd better be dead!' Sir Reilly spat. 'Look for the princes!'

I didn't see them find Will, but I knew they had by the silence that spread across the men. I let my chin fall back to my chest and watched the dark patterning of blood on the dry leaves around my feet.

'Ah, hell ...' One of the men spoke at last.

'Get him on a horse. Easy with him,' Sir Reilly said. A crack ran through his voice. 'And find the heir!' With more vigour, but no hope.

I tried to call to them, but the strength had run from me, I couldn't even lift

my head.

‘He’s not here, Sir Reilly.’

‘They’ve taken him as a hostage,’ Sir Reilly said.

He had part of it right, something held me against my will.

‘Set him by the Queen.’

‘Gentle! Gentle with him ...’

‘Secure them,’ Sir Reilly said. ‘We ride hard for the Tall Castle.’

Part of me wanted to let them go. I felt no pain any more, just a dull ache, and even that was fading. A peace folded me with the promise of forgetting.

‘Sir!’ A shout went up from one of the men.

I heard the clank of armour as Sir Reilly strode across to see.

‘Piece of a shield?’ he asked.

‘Found it in the mud, the carriage wheel must have pushed it under.’ The soldier paused. I heard scraping. ‘Looks like a black wing to me ...’

‘A crow. A crow on a red field. It’s Count Renar’s colours,’ Reilly said.

Count Renar? I had a name. A black crow on a red field. The insignia flashed across my eyes, seared deep by the lightning of last night’s storm. A fire lit within me, and the pain from a hundred hooks burned in every limb. A groan escaped me. My lips parted, dry skin tearing.

And Reilly found me.

‘There’s something here!’ I heard him curse as the hook-briar found every chink in his armour. ‘Quickly now! Pull this stuff apart.’

‘Dead.’ I heard the whisper from behind Sir Reilly as he cut me free.

‘He’s so white.’

I guess the briar near bled me dry.

So they fetched a cart and took me back. I didn’t sleep. I watched the sky turn black, and I thought.

In the Healing Hall Friar Glen and his helper, Inch, dug the hooks from my flesh. My tutor, Lundist, arrived while they had me on the table with their knives out. He had a book with him, the size of a Teuton shield, and three times as heavy by the look of it. Lundist had more strength in that wizened old stick of a body than anyone guessed.

‘Those are fire-cleaned knives I hope, Friar?’ Lundist carried the accent of his homelands in the Utter East, and a tendency to leave half of a word unspoken, as if an intelligent listener should be able to fill in the blanks.

‘It is purity of spirit that will keep corruption from the flesh, Tutor,’ Friar Glen said. He spared Lundist a disapproving glance, and returned to his

digging.

‘Even so, clean the knives, Friar. Holy office will prove scant protection from the King’s ire if the Prince dies in your halls.’ Lundist set his book down on the table beside me, rattling a tray of vials at the far end. He lifted the cover and turned to a marked page.

“‘The thorns of the hook-briar are like to find the bone.’” He traced a wrinkled yellow finger down the lines. “‘The points can break off and sour the wound.’”

Friar Glen gave a sharp jab at that, which made me cry out. He set his knife down and turned to face Lundist. I could see only the friar’s back, the brown cloth straining over his shoulders, dark with sweat over his spine.

‘Tutor Lundist,’ he said. ‘A man in your profession is wont to think all things may be learned from the pages of a book, or the right scroll. Learning has its place, sirrah, but do not think to lecture me on healing on the basis of an evening spent with an old tome!’

Well, Friar Glen won that argument. The sergeant-at-arms had to ‘help’ Tutor Lundist from the hall.

I guess even at nine I had a serious lack of spiritual purity, for my wounds soured within two days, and for nine weeks I lay in fever, chasing dark dreams along death’s borderlands.

They tell me I raged and howled. That I raved as the pus oozed from slices where the briar had held me. I remember the stink of corruption. It had a kind of sweetness to it, a sweetness that’d make you want to hurl.

Inch, the friar’s aide, grew tired of holding me down, though he had the arms of a lumberjack. In the end they tied me to my bed.

I learned from Tutor Lundist that the friar would not attend me after the first week. Friar Glen said a devil was in me. How else could a child speak such horror?

In the fourth week I slipped the bonds that held me to my pallet, and set a fire in the hall. I have no memory of the escape, or my capture in the woods. When they cleared the ruin, they found the remains of Inch, with the poker from the hearth lodged in his chest.

Many times I stood at the Door. I had seen my mother and brother thrown through that doorway, torn and broken, and in dreams my feet would take me to stand there, time and again. I lacked the courage to follow them, held on the barbs and hooks of cowardice.

Sometimes I saw the dead-lands across a black river, sometimes across a

chasm spanned by a narrow bridge of stone. Once I saw the Door in the guise of the portals to my father's throne room, but edged with frost and weeping pus from every join. I had but to set my hand upon the handle ...

The Count of Renar kept me alive. The promise of his pain crushed my own under its heel. Hate will keep you alive where love fails.

And then one day my fever left me. My wounds remained angry and red, but they closed. They fed me chicken in soup, and my strength crept back, a stranger to me.

The spring came to paint the leaves back upon the trees. I had my strength, but I felt something else had been taken. Taken so completely I could no longer name it.

The sun returned, and, much to Friar Glen's distaste, Lundist returned to instruct me once more.

The first time he came, I sat abed. I watched him set out his books upon the table.

'Your father will see you on his return from Gelleth,' Lundist said. His voice held a note of reproach, but not for me. 'The death of the Queen and Prince William weigh heavy on him. When the pain eases he will surely come to speak with you.'

I didn't understand why Lundist should feel the need to lie. I knew my father would not waste time on me whilst it seemed I would die. I knew he would see me when seeing me served some end.

'Tell me, tutor,' I said. 'Is revenge a science, or an art?'

## 6

The rain faltered when the spirits fled. I'd only broken the one, but the others ran too, back to whatever pools they haunted. Maybe my one had been their leader; maybe men become cowards in death. I don't know.

As to my own cowards, they had nowhere to flee, and I found them easily enough. I found Makin first. He, at least, was headed back toward me.

'So you found a pair then?' I called to him.

He paused a moment and looked at me. The rain didn't fall so heavy now, but he still looked like a drowned rat. The water ran in rivulets over his breastplate, in and out of the dents. He checked the marsh to either side, still nervy, and lowered his sword.

'A man who's got no fear is missing a friend, Jorg,' he said, and a smile found its way onto those thick lips of his. 'Running ain't no bad thing. Leastways if you run in the right direction.' He waved a hand toward where Rike wrestled with a clump of bulrushes, the mud up to his chest already. 'Fear helps a man pick his fights. You're fighting them all, my prince.' And he bowed, there on the Lichway with the rain dripping off him.

I spared a glance for Rike. Maical had similar problems in a pool to the other side of the road. Only he'd got his problems up to the neck.

'I'm going to fight them all in the end,' I said to him.

'Pick your fights,' Makin said.

'I'll pick my ground,' I said. 'I'll pick my ground, but I'm not running. Not ever. That's been done, and we still have the war. I'm going to win it, Brother Makin, it's going to end with me.'

He bowed again. Not so deep, but this time I felt he meant it. 'That's why I'll follow you, Prince. Wherever it takes us.'

For the moment it took us to fishing brothers out of the mud. We got Maical first, even though Rike howled and cursed us. As the rain thinned, I could see the grey and the head-cart off in the distance. The grey had the sense to keep to the road, even when Maical didn't. If Maical had led the grey

into the mire I'd have left him to sink.

We pulled Rike out next. When we reached him the mud had almost found his mouth. Nothing but his white face showed above the pool, but that didn't stop him shouting his foulnesses all the way. We found most of them on the road, but six got sucked down too quick, lost forever; probably getting ready to haunt the next band of travellers.

'I'm going back for old Gomsty,' I said.

We'd come a way down the road and the light had pretty much gone. Looking back you couldn't see the gibbets, just grey veils of rain. Out in the marsh the dead waited. I felt their cold thoughts crawling on my skin.

I didn't ask any of them to go with me. I knew none of them would, and it don't do for a leader to ask and be told no.

'What do you want with that old priest, Brother Jorg?' Makin said. He was asking me not to go; only he couldn't come out and say it.

'You still want to burn him up?' Even the mud couldn't hide Rike's sudden cheer.

'I do,' I said. 'But that's not why I'm getting him.' And I set off back along the Lichway.

The rain and the darkness wrapped me. I lost the brothers, waiting on the road behind. Gomst and the gibbets lay ahead. I walked in a cocoon of silence, with nothing but the soft words of the rain, and the sound of my boots on the Lichway.

I'll tell you now. That silence almost beat me. It's the silence that scares me. It's the blank page on which I can write my own fears. The spirits of the dead have nothing on it. The dead one tried to show me hell, but it was a pale imitation of the horror I can paint on the darkness in a quiet moment.

And there he hung, Father Gomst, priest to the House of Ancrath.

'Father,' I said, and I sketched him a bow. In truth though, I was in no mood for play. I had me a hollow ache behind my eyes. The kind that gets people killed.

He looked at me wide-eyed, as if I was a bog-spirit crawled out of the mire.

I went to the chain that held his cage up. 'Brace yourself, Father.'

The sword I drew had slit old Bovid Tor not twenty-four hours before. Now I swung it to free a priest. The chain gave beneath its edge. They'd put some magic, or some devilry, in that blade. Father told me the Ancraths wielded it for four generations, and took it from the House of Or. So the steel



was old before we Ancraths first lay hands upon it. Old before I stole it.

The birdcage fell to the path, hard and heavy. Father Gomst cried out, and his head hit the bars, leaving a livid cross-work across his forehead. They'd bound the cage-door with wire. It gave before the edge of our ancestral sword, twice stolen. I thought of Father for a moment, imaged his face twist in outrage at the use of so high a blade for such lowly work. I've a good imagination, but putting any emotion on the rock of Father's face came hard.

Gomst crawled out, stiff and weak. As the old should be. I liked that he had the grace to feel the years on his shoulders. Some the years just toughened.

'Father Gomst,' I said. 'Best hurry now, or the marsh dead may come out to scare us with their wailing and a-moaning.'

He looked at me then, drawing back as if he'd seen a ghost, then softening.

'Jorg,' he said, all full of compassion. Brimming with it, spilling it from his eyes as if it wasn't just the rain. 'What has happened to you?'

I won't lie to you. Half of me wanted to stick the knife into him there and then, just as with red-faced Gemt. More than half. My hand itched with the need to pull that knife. My head ached with it, as if a vice were tightening against my temples.

I've been known to be contrary. When something pushes me, I shove back. Even if the one doing the pushing is me. It would have been easy to gut him then and there. Satisfying. But the need was too urgent. I felt pushed.

I smiled and said, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.'

And old Gomsty, though he was stiff from the cage, and sore in every limb, bowed his head to hear my confession.

I spoke into the rain, low and quiet. Loud enough for Father Gomst though, and loud enough for the dead who haunted the marsh about us. I told of the things I'd done. I told of the things I would do. In a soft voice I told my plans to all with ears to hear. The dead left us then.

'You're the devil!' Father Gomst took a step back, and clutched the cross at his neck.

'If that's what it takes.' I didn't dispute him. 'But I've confessed, and you must forgive me.'

'Abomination ...' The word escaped him in a slow breath.

'And more besides,' I agreed. 'Now forgive me.'

Father Gomst found his wits at last, but still he held back. 'What do you want with me, Lucifer?'

A fair question. 'I want to win,' I said.

He shook his head at that, so I explained.

'Some men I can bind with who I am. Some I can bind with where I'm going. Others need to know who walks with me. I've given you my confession. I repent. Now God walks with me, and you're the priest who will tell the faithful that I am His warrior, His instrument, the Sword of the Almighty.'

A silence stood between us, measured in heartbeats.

'*Ego te absolvo.*' Father Gomst got the words past trembling lips.

We walked back along the path then, and reached the others by and by. Makin had them lined up and ready. Waiting in the dark, with a single torch, and the hooded lantern hung up on the head-cart.

'Captain Bortha,' I said to Makin, 'time we set off. We've got a ways before us till we reach the Horse Coast.'

'And the priest?' he asked.

'Perhaps we'll detour past the Tall Castle, and drop him off.'

My headache bit, hard.

Maybe it was something to do with having an old ghost haunt its way through to the very marrow of my bones, but today my headaches felt more like somebody prodding me with a stick, herding me along, and it was really beginning to fuck me off.

'I think we *will* call in at the Tall Castle.' I ground my teeth together against the daggers in my head. 'Hand old Gomsty here over in person. I'm sure my father has been worried about me.'

Rike and Maical gave me stupid stares. Fat Burlow and Red Kent swapped glances. The Nuban rolled his eyes and made his wards.

I looked at Makin, tall, broad in the shoulder, black hair plastered down by the rain. *He's my knight*, I thought. *Gomst is my bishop, the Tall Castle my rook*. Then I thought of Father. I needed a king. You can't play the game without a king. I thought of Father, and it felt good. After the dead one, I'd begun to wonder. The dead one showed me his hell, and I had laughed at it. But now I thought of Father, and it felt good to know I could still feel fear.

## 7

We rode through the night and the Lichway brought us from the marsh. Dawn found us at Norwood, drear and grey. The town lay in ruin. Its ashes still held the acrid ghost of smoke that lingers when the fire is gone.

‘The Count of Renar,’ said Makin at my side. ‘He grows bold to attack Ancrath protectorates so openly.’ He shed the roadspeak like a cloak.

‘How can we know who wrought such wickedness?’ Father Gomst asked, his face as grey as his beard. ‘Perhaps Baron Kennick’s men raided down the Lichway. It was Kennick’s men who caged me on the gibbet.’

The brothers spread out among the ruins. Rike elbowed Fat Burlow aside, and vanished into the first building, which was nothing but a roofless shell of stone.

‘Shit-poor bog-farmers! Just like fecking Mabberton.’ The violence of his search drowned out any further complaint.

I remembered Norwood on fete day, hung with ribbons. Mother walked with the burgermeister. William and I had treacle-apples.

‘But these were *my* shit-poor bog-farmers,’ I said. I turned to look at old Gomsty. ‘There are no bodies. This is Count Renar’s work.’

Makin nodded. ‘We’ll find the pyre in the fields to the west. Renar burns them all together. The living and the dead.’

Gomst crossed himself and muttered a prayer.

War is a thing of beauty, as I’ve said before, and those who say otherwise are losing. I put a smile on, though it didn’t fit me. ‘Brother Makin, it seems the Count has made a move. It behoves us, as fellow soldiers, to appreciate his artistry. Have yourself a ride around. I want to know how he played his game.’

Renar. First Father Gomst, now Renar. As though the spirit in the mire had turned a key, and the ghosts of my past were marching through, one by one.

Makin gave a nod and cantered off. Not into town but out along the stream, following it up to the thickets beyond the market field.

‘Father Gomst,’ I said in my most polite court-voice. ‘Pray tell, where were you when Baron Kennick’s men found you?’ It made no sense that our family priest should be taken on a raid.

‘The hamlet of Jessop, my prince,’ Gomst replied, wary and looking anywhere but at me. ‘Should we not ride on? We’ll be safe in the homelands. The raids won’t reach past Hanton.’

*True, I thought, so why would you come out into danger?* ‘The hamlet of Jessop? Can’t say I’ve even heard of it, Father Gomst,’ I said, still nice as nice. ‘Which means it won’t be much more than three huts and a pig.’

Rike stormed out of the house, blacker than the Nuban with all the ash on him, and spitting mad. He made for the next doorway. ‘Burlow, you fat bastard! You set me up!’ If Little Rikey couldn’t find himself some loot then somebody else would pay. Always.

Gomst looked glad of the diversion, but I drew his attention back. ‘Father Gomst, you were telling me about Jessop.’ I took the reins from his hands.

‘A bog-town, my prince. A nothing. A place where they cut peat for the protectorate. Seventeen huts and perhaps a few more pigs.’ He tried a laugh, but it came out too sharp and nervy.

‘So you journeyed there to offer absolution to the poor?’ I held his eye.

‘Well ...’

‘Out past Hanton, out to the edge of the marsh, out into danger,’ I said. ‘You’re a very holy man, Father.’

He bowed his head at that.

Jessop. The name rang a bell. A bell with a deep voice, slow and solemn. *Send not to ask for whom the bell tolls ...*

‘Jessop is where the marsh-tide takes the dead,’ I said. I saw the words on the mouth of old Tutor Lundist as I spoke them. I saw the map behind him, pinned to the study wall, currents marked in black ink. ‘It’s a slow current but sure. The marsh keeps her secrets, but not forever, and Jessop is where she tells them.’

‘That big man, Rike, he’s strangling the fat one.’ Father Gomst nodded toward the town.

‘My father sent you to look at the dead.’ I didn’t let Gomst divert me with small talk. ‘Because you’d recognize me.’

Gomst’s mouth framed a ‘no’, but every other muscle in him said ‘yes’. You’d think priests would be better liars, what with their job and all.

‘He’s still looking for me? After four years!’ Four weeks would have

surprised me.

Gomst edged back in his saddle. He spread his hands helplessly. 'The Queen is heavy with child. Sageous tells the King it will be a boy. I had to confirm the succession.'

Ah! The 'succession'. That sounded more like the father I knew. And the Queen? Now that put an edge on the day.

'Sageous?' I asked.

'A heathen bone-picker, newly come to court.' Gomst spat the words as if they tasted sour.

The pause grew into a silence.

'Rike!' I said. Not a shout, but loud enough to reach him. 'Put Fat Burlow down, or I'll have to kill you.'

Rike let go, and Burlow hit the ground like the three hundred pound lump of lard that he was. I guess that of the two, Burlow looked slightly more purple in the face, but only a little. Rike came toward us with his hands out before him, twisting as though he already had them around my neck. 'You!'

No sign of Makin, and Father Gomst would be as useful as a fart in the wind against Little Rikey with a rage on him.

'You! Where's the fecking gold you promised us?' A score of heads popped out of windows and doors at that. Even Fat Burlow looked up, sucking in a breath as if it came through a straw.

I let my hand slip from the pommel of my sword. It doesn't do to sacrifice too many pawns. Rike had only a dozen yards to go. I swung off Gerrod's saddle and patted his nose, my back to the town.

'There's more than one kind of gold in Norwood,' I said. Loud enough but not too loud. Then I turned and walked past Rike. I didn't look at him. Give a man like Rike a moment, and he'll take it.

'Don't you be telling me about no farmers' daughters this time, you little bastard!' He followed me roaring, but I'd let the heat out of him. He just had wind and noise now. 'That fecker of a count staked them all out to burn already.'

I made for Midway Street, leading up to the burgermeister's house from the market field. As we passed him, Brother Gains looked up from the cook-fire he'd started. He clambered to his feet to follow and watch the fun.

The grain-store tower had never looked like much. It looked less impressive now, all scorched, the stones split in the heat. Before they burned them all away, the grain sacks would have hidden the trapdoor. I found it

with a little prodding. Rike huffed and puffed behind me all the time.

‘Open it up.’ I pointed to the ring set in the stone slab.

Rike didn’t need telling twice. He got down and heaved the slab up as if it weighed nothing. And there they were, barrel after barrel, all huddled up in the dusty dark.

‘The old burgermeister kept the festival beer under the grain-tower. Every local knows that. A little stream runs down there to keep it all nice and cool-like. Looks like, what, twenty? Twenty barrels of golden festival beer.’ I smiled.

Rike didn’t smile back. He stayed on his hands and knees, and let his eye wander up the blade of my sword. I imagined how it must tickle against his throat.

‘See now, Jorg, Brother Jorg, I didn’t mean ...’ he started. Even with my sword at his neck he had a mean look to him.

Makin clattered up and came to stand at my shoulder. I kept the blade at Rike’s throat.

‘I may be little, Little Rikey, but I ain’t a bastard,’ I said, soft, in my killing voice. ‘Isn’t that right, Father Gomst? If I was a bastard you wouldn’t have to risk life and limb to search the dead for me, now would you?’

‘Prince Jorg, let Captain Bortha kill this savage.’ Gomst must have found his composure somewhere. ‘We’ll ride on to the Tall Castle and your father —’

‘My father can damn well wait!’ I shouted. I bit back the rest, angry at being angry.

Rike forgot about the sword for a moment. ‘What the feck is all this “prince” shit? What the feck is all this “Captain Bortha” shit? And when do I get to drink the fecking beer?’

We had ourselves as full an audience then as we’d get, all the brothers about us in a circle.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘Since you ask so nice, Brother Rike, I’ll tell you.’

Makin raised his brows at me and he took a grip on his sword. I waved him down.

‘The Captain Bortha shit is Makin being Captain Makin Bortha of the Ancrath Imperial Guard. The prince shit is me being the beloved son and heir of King Olidan of the House of Ancrath. And we can drink the beer now, because today is my fourteenth birthday, and how else would you toast my health?’



*Every brotherhood has a pecking order. With brothers like mine you don't want to be at the bottom of that order. You're liable to get pecked to death. Brother Jobe had just the right mix of whipped cur and rabies to stay alive there.*



## 8

So we sat on the tumbled stones of the burgermeister's house and drank beer. The brothers drank deep and called out my name. Some had it 'Brother Jorg', some had it 'Prince Jorg', but all of them saw me with new eyes. Rike watched me, beer-foam in his stubbled beard, the line of my sword across his neck. I could see him weighing the odds, a slow ballet of possibilities working their way across his low forehead. I didn't wait for the word 'ransom' to bubble to the surface.

'He wants me dead, Little Rikey,' I said. 'He sent Gomsty out to find proof I was dead, not to find me. He's got a new queen now.'

Rike gave a grin that had more scowl than grin in it, then belched mightily. 'You ran from a castle with gold and women, to ride with us? What idiot would do that?'

I sipped my beer. It tasted sour, but that seemed right somehow. 'An idiot who knows he won't win the war with the King's guard at his side,' I said.

'What war, Jorg?' The Nuban sat close by, not drinking. He always spoke slow and serious. 'You want to beat the Count? Baron Kennick?'

'The War,' I said. 'All of it.'

Red Kent came over from the barrels, his helm brimming with ale. 'Never happen,' he said. He lifted the helm and half-drained it in four swallows. 'So you're Prince of Ancrath? A copper-crown kingdom. Must be dozens with as good a claim on the high throne. Each of them with their own army.'

'More like fifty,' Rike growled.

'Closer to a hundred,' I said. 'I've counted.'

A hundred fragments of empire grinding away at each other in a never-ending cycle of little wars, feuds, skirmishes, kingdoms waxing, waning, waxing again, lifetimes spent in conflict and nothing changing. Mine to change, to end, to win.

I finished my beer and got up to find Makin.

I didn't have to look far. I found him with the horses, checking his stallion,

Firejump.

‘What did you find?’ I asked him.

Makin pursed his lips. ‘I found the pyre. About two hundred, all dead. They didn’t light it though – probably scared off.’ He waved toward the west. ‘They came in on foot, up the marsh road, and over the ridge yonder. Had about twenty archers in the thicket by the stream, to pick off folks that tried to run.’

‘How many men altogether?’ I asked.

‘Probably a hundred. Foot soldiers most of them.’ He yawned and ran a hand from forehead to chin. ‘Two days gone now. We’re safe enough.’

I felt invisible thorns scratching at me, sharp hooks in my skin. ‘Come with me,’ I told him.

Makin followed me back to the steps and fallen pillars at the burgermeister’s doors. The brothers had Maical staving in a second barrel.

‘What ho, Captain!’ Burlow called out at Makin, his voice still hoarse from Rike’s strangling. A laugh went up at that, and I let it run its course. I felt the thorns again, sharp and deep. Sharpening me up for something. Two hundred bodies in a heap. All dead.

‘Cap’n Makin tells me we’re going to have company,’ I said.

Makin’s brows rose at that but I ignored him. ‘Twenty swords, rough men, bandits of the lowest order. Not the sort you’d like to meet,’ I told them.

‘Idling along in our direction, weighed down with loot.’

Rike got to his feet all sudden like, his flail rattling at his hip. ‘Loot?’

‘Slugs, I tell you. Growing rich off the destruction of others.’ I showed them my smile. ‘Well, my brothers, we’re going to have to show them the error of their ways. I want them dead. Every last one. And we’ll do it without a scratch. I want trip-pits in the main street. I want brothers hidden in the grain-tower and the Blue Boar tavern. I want Kent, Row, Liar and the Nuban here, behind these walls to shoot them down when they come between tower and tavern.’

The Nuban hefted his crossbow, a monstrous feat of engineering, worked in the old metal and embellished with the faces of strange gods. Kent tossed the dregs from his helm and set it on his head, ready with his longbow.

‘Now they might come over the ridge instead, so Rike’s going to take Maical and six others to hide in the tannery ruins. Anyone comes that way, let them past you, then gut them. Makin will be our scout to give us warning. The good father here and you five there, you’re going to stand with me to

tempt them in.'

The brothers needed no telling. Well, Jobe did, but Rike hauled him out of the beer quick enough and he wasn't gentle about it.

'Loot!' Rike shouted the words in his face. 'Get digging trip-pits, shit-brains.'

They knew how to set up an ambush those lads. No mistake there. No one knew better how to fight in the ruins. Half the time they'd make the ruins themselves, half the time they'd fight in somebody else's.

'Burlow, Makin,' I called them to me as the others set about their tasks. 'I don't need you to scout, Makin,' I said, keeping my voice low. 'I want you two to go to the thicket by the stream. I want you to hide yourselves. Hide so a bastard could sit on you and still not know you were there. You hide down there and wait. You'll know what to do.'

'Prince— Brother Jorg,' Makin said. He had a big frown on, and his eyes kept straying down the street to old Gomsty praying before the burned-out church. 'What's this all about?'

'You said you'd follow wherever I led, Makin,' I answered. 'This is where it starts. When they write the legend, this will be the first page. Some old monk will go blind illuminating this page, Makin. This is where it all starts.' I didn't say how short the book might be though.

Makin did that bow of his that's half a nod, and off he went, Fat Burlow hurrying behind.

So, the brothers dug their traps, laid out their arrows, and hid themselves in what little of Norwood remained. I watched them, cursing their slowness, but holding my peace. And by and by only Father Gomst, my five picked men, and I remained on show. All the rest, a touch over two dozen, lay lost in the ruins.

Father Gomst came to my side, still praying. I wondered how hard he'd pray if he knew what was really coming.

I had an ache in my head now, like a hook inserted behind both eyes, tugging at me. The same ache that started up when the sight of old Gomst made me think of going home. A familiar pain, one I'd felt at many a turn on the road. Oft times I'd let that pain lead me. But I felt tired of being a fish on a line. I bit back.

I saw the first scout on the marsh road an hour later. Others came soon enough, riding up to join him. I made sure they'd seen the seven of us standing on the burgermeister's steps.

‘Company,’ I said, and pointed the riders out.

‘Shitdarn!’ Brother Elban spat on his boots. I’d chosen Elban because he didn’t look like much, a grizzled old streak in his rusty chainmail. He had no hair and no teeth, but he had a bite on him. ‘They’s no brigands, look at them ponies.’ He lisped the words a bit, having no teeth and all.

‘You know Elban, you might be right,’ I said, and I gave him a smile. ‘I’d say they looked more like house-troops.’

‘Lord have mercy,’ I heard old Gomsty murmur behind me.

The scouts pulled back. Elban picked up his gear and started for the market field where the horses stood grazing.

‘You don’t want to do that, old man,’ I said, softly.

He turned and I could see the fear in his eyes. ‘You ain’t gonna cut me down is you, Jorth?’ He couldn’t say Jorg without any teeth; I suppose it’s a name you’ve got to put an edge on.

‘I won’t cut you down,’ I said. I almost liked Elban; I wouldn’t kill him without a good reason. ‘Where you going to run to, Elban?’

He pointed over the ridge. ‘That’s the only clear way. Get snarled up elsewhere, or worse, back in the marsh.’

‘You don’t want to go over that ridge, Elban,’ I said. ‘Trust me.’

And he did. Though maybe he trusted me because he didn’t trust me, if you get my meaning.

We stood and waited. We sighted the main column on the marsh road first, then moments later, the soldiers showed over the ridge. Two dozen of them, house-troops, carrying spears and shields, and above them the colours of Count Renar. The main column had maybe three score soldiers, and following on behind in a ragged line, well over a hundred prisoners, yoked neck to neck. Half a dozen carts brought up the rear. The covered ones would be loaded with provisions, the others held bodies, stacked like cord-wood.

‘House Renar doesn’t leave the dead unburned. They don’t take prisoners,’ I said.

‘I don’t understand,’ Father Gomst said. He’d gone past scared, into stupid.

I pointed to the trees. ‘Fuel. We’re on the edge of a swamp. There’s no trees for miles in this peat bog. They want a good blaze, so they’re bringing everyone back here to have a nice big bonfire.’

I had an explanation for Renar’s actions but as to my own, like Father Gomst, I wasn’t sure I understood either. Whatever strength I had on the road, it came to me through a willingness to sacrifice. It came on the day I set

aside my vengeance on Count Renar as a thing without profit. And yet here I was, in the ruins of Norwood, with a thirst that couldn't be quenched by any amount of festival beer. Waiting for that self-same count. Waiting with too few men, and with every instinct telling me to run. Every instinct, except for that one to hold or break, but never bend.

I could see individual figures at the head of the column quite clearly now. Six riders, chain-armoured, and a knight in heavy plate. The device on his shield came into view as he turned to signal his command. A black crow on a red field, a field of fire, Count Osson Renar wouldn't lead a hundred men into an Ancrath protectorate, so this would be one of his boys. Marclos or Jarco.

'The brothers won't fight this lot,' Elban said. He put a hand on my shoulder-plate. 'We might fight a path out through the trees if we get to the horses, Jorth.'

Already twenty of the Renar men hastened toward the tree line, holding their longbows before them so they wouldn't snag.

'No.' I let out a long sigh. 'I'd best surrender.'

I held out my hand. 'White flag if you please.'

The house-troops had deployed by the time I made my way down toward the main column. My 'flag' should properly be described as grey. An unwholesome grey at that, torn from Father Gomst's hassock.

'Noble born!' I shouted. 'Noble born under flag of truce!'

That surprised them. The house-troops, fanned out behind our horses, let me cross the market field unhindered. They looked to be a sorry lot, the metal scales falling from their leathers, rust on their swords. Homebodies they were, too long on the road and not hardened to it.

'The lad wants to be first on the fire,' one of them said. A skinny bastard with a boil on each cheek. He got a laugh with that.

'Noble born!' I called out. 'Flag o' truce.' I didn't expect to get this far with my sword.

I caught the stink of the column and could hear the weeping. The prisoners turned blank eyes upon me.

Two of Renar's riders came forward to intercept me. 'Where'd you steal the armour, boy?'

'Go fuck yourself,' I said. I kept it pleasant. 'Who've you got leading this show then? Marclos?'

They exchanged a look at that. A wandering hedge-knight probably

wouldn't know one son of the House Renar from the next.

'It doesn't do to kill a noble prisoner without orders,' I said. 'Best let the Count-ling decide.'

Both riders dismounted. Tall men, veterans by the look of them. They took my sword. The older one, dark bearded with a white scar under both eyes, found my knife. The cut had taken the top of his nose too.

'You're a bit of an ugly mess aren't you?' I asked.

He found the knife in my boot as well.

I had no plan. The pain in my head hadn't left any room for one. I'd ignored the wordless voice that had led me for so long. Ignored it for the joy of being stubborn. And here I was unarmed amongst too many foes, stupid and alone.

I wondered if my brother William was watching me. I hoped my mother wasn't.

I wondered if I was going to die. If they'd burn me, or leave me as a maimed thing for Father Gomst to cart back to the Tall Castle.

'Everyone has doubts,' I said as Scar-face finished his search. 'Even Jesu had his moment, and I ain't him.'

The man looked at me as if I were mad. Maybe I was, but I'd found my peace. The pain left me and I saw things clear once again.

They led me to where Marclos sat on his horse, a monstrous stallion, twenty hands if it was one. He lifted his visor then and showed a pleasant face, a bit fat in the cheeks, quite jolly really. Looks, of course, can be deceiving.

'Who the hell are you?' he asked.

He had a nice bit of plate on, acid etched with a silver inlay and burnished so it shone even in the dreariest of light.

'I said who the hell are you?' He got some red in his cheeks then. Not so jolly. 'You'll sing on the fire, boy, so you may as well tell me now.'

I leaned forward as if to hear him. The bodyguards reached for me but I did the old shake and twist. Even with me in armour they were too slow. I used Marclos's foot as a step, where it stuck out from the stirrup, and got up alongside him in no time at all. He had a nice stiletto in a sheath set handy in the saddle, so I had that out and stuck it in his eye. Then we were off. The pair of us galloping out across the market field. How to steal a horse is the first thing you learn on the road.

We bounced along, with him howling and shaking behind me. A couple of

the house-troops tried to bar the way but I rode them down. They weren't going to get up again either; that stallion was fearsome big. The archers might have taken a shot or three, but they couldn't make sense of it from that distance, and we were headed into town.

I could hear the bodyguard thundering along behind. It sounded as if they knocked a few men down themselves. They came close, but we'd taken them by surprise, me and Marclos, and got a start on them. And as we reached the outskirts of Norwood they drew up short.

At the first building I wheeled sharply, and Marclos obliged by falling off. He hit the ground face first. Another one that wouldn't be getting up again. It felt good, I won't lie about that. I imagined the Count getting the news as he broke his fast. I wondered how he'd like the taste of it. Would he finish his eggs?

'Men of Renar!' I shouted it hard enough to hurt my lungs. 'This town stands under the Prince of Ancrath's protection. It will not be surrendered.'

I turned the horse again and rode on. A few arrows clattered behind me. At the steps I drew up and dismounted.

'You came back ...' Father Gomst looked confused.

'I did,' I said. I turned to face Elban. 'No fighting a retreat now eh, brother?'

'You're insane.' The words escaped in a whisper. For some reason he didn't lisp when he whispered.

The riders, Marclos's personal guard, led the charge. Now that they had fifty foot soldiers around them, they had found their courage. Up on the ridge the two dozen house-troops took their cue and began to run with the slope. The archers started to emerge from the thicket for better aim.

'These bastards will burn you alive if they take you that way,' I said to the five brothers I had with me. Then I paused and I looked them in the eye, each one. 'But they don't want to die. They won't want to go back to the Count either way. Would you take old bonfire-Renar his dead son back, and smooth it over with an "oh yes, but we killed scavengers ... there was this boy ... and an old man with no teeth ..."?''

'So mark me now. You fight these tame soldiers, and you show them hell. Show them enough of it and the bastards'll break and run.' I paused and caught Brother Roddat's eye, for he was a weasel and like to run, sense or no sense. 'You stick with me, Brother Roddat.'

I looked to the thicket, over the heads of the men surging up from the

market field and saw an archer fall among the trees. Then another. An armoured figure emerged from the undergrowth. The archers in front of him still had their eyes on the advance. He took the head from the first one with a clean swing. *Thank you, Makin*, I thought. Fat Burlow came out at a run then, barrelling his armoured bulk into the bowmen.

The troops from the ridge passed by Rike's position and his lads set to gutting them from behind. Not the sort of odds Little Rikey favoured, but the word 'loot' always did have an uncanny effect on him.

*ChooOm!* The Nuban's crossbow shot its load. He couldn't really miss with so many targets, but by rights he shouldn't be able to pick his man with that thing. Even so, both bolts hit the lead rider in the chest and lifted him out of his saddle. Kent and the other two rose from behind the burgermeister's walls. They did a double-take when they saw what was coming, but choices were in short supply and they had plenty of arrows.

The Renar troops hit our trip-pits at full tilt. I swear I heard the first ankle snap. After that it was all yelling as man went over man. Kent and Liar and Row took the opportunity to send a dozen more arrows into the main mass of the attack. The Nuban loaded his monster again and this time nearly took the head off a horse. The rider went over the top, and the beast fell onto him, brains spilling on the ground.

Some of those soldier boys didn't like the road so much any more and took to finding a way through the ruins. Of course they found more than a way, they found the brothers who were waiting there.

The archers broke first. There isn't much a man in a padded tunic, with a knife at his hip, can do against a decent swordsman in plate armour. And even Burlow was more than decent.

Three of the riders reached us. We didn't stay on the street to meet them. We fell back into the skeleton of what used to be Decker's Smithy. So they rode in, slowly, ash crunching under hoof. Elban leapt the first one from an alcove over the furnaces. Took that rider down sweet as sweet he did, his sharp little knife hitting home over and over. If you recall, I said Elban had a bite to him.

Two brothers pulled the second rider down, feinting in and out until they got an opening. He had no room to move his horse around. Should have got off.

That left me and Scar-face. He had a bit more to him, and had dismounted before he followed us. He came at me slow and easy, the tip of his sword



waving before him. He wasn't in a hurry: there's no rush when the best part of fifty men are hard on your heels.

'Flag o' truce?' I said, trying to goad him.

He didn't speak. His lips pressed together in a tight line and he stepped forward, real slow. That's when Brother Roddat stepped up behind him and stuck a sword through the back of his neck.

'Should have taken your moment, Scar-face,' I said.

I got back onto the street just in time to meet some huge red-faced bastard of a house-trooper who'd run his way up the hill. He pretty much exploded as the Nuban's bolts hit him. Then they were on us. The Nuban picked up his mattock and Red Kent grabbed his axe. Roddat came past me with his spear and found a man to pin with it.

They came in two waves. There were the dozen or so who'd kept up with Marclos's bodyguard and then behind them, another twenty coming at a slower pace. The rest lay strewn along the main street or dead in the ruins.

I ran past Roddat and the man he'd skewered. Past a couple of swordsmen who didn't want me bad enough, and I was through the first wave. I could see that skinny bastard with the boils on his cheeks, there in the second wave, the one who'd joked about me on the fire.

Me charging the second wave, howling for Boil-cheeks's blood. That's what broke them. And the men from the ridge? They never reached us. Little Rikey thought they might be carrying loot.

I reckon more than half of the Count's men ran. But they weren't the Count's men any more. They couldn't go back.

Makin came up the hill, blood all over him. He looked like Red Kent the day we found him! Burlow came with him, but he stopped to loot the dead, and of course that involves turning the injured into the dead.

'Why?' Makin wanted to know. 'I mean, superb victory, my prince ... but why in the name of all the hells run such a risk?'

I held my sword up. The brothers around me took a step back, but to his credit, Makin didn't flinch. 'See this sword?' I said. 'Not a drop of blood on it.' I showed it around then waved it at the ridge. 'And out there there's fifty men who'll never fight for the Count of Renar again. They work for me now. They're carrying a story about a prince who killed the Count's son. A prince who would not retreat. A prince who never retreats. A prince who didn't have to blood his sword to beat a hundred men with thirty.

'Think about it, Makin. I made Roddat here fight like a madman because I

told him if they think you're not going to give up, they'll break. Now I've got fifty enemies who're out there telling everyone who'll listen, "That Prince of Ancrath, he's not going to break". It's a simple sum. If they think we won't break, they give up.'

All true. It wasn't the reason, but it was all true.

## *Four years earlier*

The baton struck my wrist with a loud crack. My other hand caught hold as it rose. I tried to twist it free, but Lundist held tight. Even so, I could see his surprise.

‘I see you were paying attention after all, Prince Jorg.’

In truth I had been somewhere else, somewhere bloody, but my body has a habit of keeping watch for me at such times.

‘Perhaps you can summarize my points thus far?’ he said.

‘We are defined by our enemies. This holds true for men, and by extension, their countries,’ I said. I’d recognized the book Lundist brought to the lesson. That our enemies shape us was its central thesis.

‘Good.’ Lundist pulled his baton free and pointed to the table-map. ‘Gelleth, Renar, and the Ken Marshes. Ancrath is a product of her environs; these are the wolves at her door.’

‘The Renar highlands are all I care about,’ I said. ‘The rest can go hang.’ I rocked my chair onto the back two legs. ‘When Father orders the Gate against Count Renar, I’m going too. I’ll kill him myself if they let me.’

Lundist shot me a look, a sharp one, to see if I meant it. There’s something wrong about such blue eyes in an old man, but wrong or not he could see to the heart with them.

‘Boys of ten are better occupied with Euclid and Plato. When we visit war, Sun Tzu will be our guide. Strategy and tactics, these are of the mind, these are the tools of prince and king.’

I did mean it. I had a hunger in me, an aching for the Count’s death. The tight lines around Lundist’s mouth told me that he knew how deep the hunger

ran.

I looked to the high window where sunlight fingered into the schoolroom and turned the dust to dancing motes of gold. 'I will kill him,' I said. Then, with a sudden need to shock, 'Maybe with a poker, like I killed that ape Inch.' It galled me to have killed a man and have no memory of it, not even a trace of whatever rage drove me to it.

I wanted some new truth from Lundist. Explain me, to me. Whatever the words, that was my question, youth to old age. But even tutors have their limits.

I rocked forward, set my hands upon the map, and looked to Lundist once more. I saw the pity in him. A part of me wanted to take it, wanted to tell him how I'd struggled against those hooks, how I'd watched William die. A part of me longed to lay it all down, that weight I carried, the acid pain of memory, the corrosion of hate.

Lundist leaned across the table. His hair fell around his face, long in the fashion of Orient, so white as to be almost silver. 'We are defined by our enemies – but also we can choose them. Make an enemy of hatred, Jorg. Do that and you could be a great man, but more importantly, maybe a happy one.'

There's something brittle in me that will break before it bends. Something sharp that puts an edge on all the soft words I once owned. I don't think the Count of Renar put it there that day they killed my mother, he just drew the razor from its sheath. Part of me longed for a surrender, to take the gift Lundist held before me.

I cut away that portion of my soul. For good or ill, it died that day.

'When will the Gate march?' I left nothing in my voice to say I'd heard his words.

'The Army of the Gate won't march,' Lundist said. His shoulders held a slump, tiredness or defeat.

That hit me in the gut, a surprise shot passing my guard. I jumped up toppling the chair. 'They will!' How could they not?

Lundist turned toward the door. His robes made a dry sound as he moved, like a sigh. Disbelief pinned me to the spot, my limbs strangers to me. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks. 'How could they not?' I shouted at his back, angry for feeling like a child.

'Ancrath is defined by her enemies,' he said, walking still. 'The Army of the Gate must guard the homeland, and no other army would reach the Count

in his halls.'

'A queen has died.' Mother's throat opened again and coloured my vision red. The hooks burned in my flesh once more. 'A prince of the realm, slain.' Broken like a toy.

'And there is a price to pay.' Lundist paused, one hand against the door, leaning as if for support.

'The price of blood and iron!'

'Rights to the Cathun River, three thousand ducats, and five Araby stallions.' Lundist wouldn't look at me.

'What?'

'River trade, gold, horses.' Those blue eyes found me over his shoulder. An old hand took the door-ring.

The words made sense one at a time, not together.

'The army ...' I started.

'Will not move.' Lundist opened the door. The day streamed in, bright, hot, laced with the distant laughter of squires at play.

'I'll go alone. That man will die screaming, by my hand.' Cold fury crawled across my skin.

I needed a sword, a good knife at least. A horse, a map – I snatched the one before me, old hide, musty, the borders tattooed in Indus ink. I needed ... an explanation.

'How? How can their deaths be purchased?'

'Your father forged his alliance with the Horse Coast kingdoms through marriage. The strength of that alliance threatened Count Renar. The Count struck early, before the links grew too strong, hoping to remove both the wife, and the heirs.' Lundist stepped into the light, and his hair became golden, a halo in the breeze. 'Your father hasn't the strength to destroy Renar and keep the wolves from Ancrath's doors. Your grandfather on the Horse Coast will not accept that, so the alliance is dead, Renar is safe. Now Renar seeks a truce so he may turn his strength to other borders. Your father has sold him such a truce.'

Inside I was falling, pitching, tumbling. Falling into an endless void.

'Come, Prince.' Lundist held out a hand. 'Let's walk in the sunshine. It's not a day for desk-learning.'

I bunched the map in my fist, and somewhere in me I found a smile, sharp, bitter, but with a chill to it that held me to my purpose. 'Of course, dear tutor. Let us walk in the sun. It's not a day for wasting – oh no.'

And we went out into the day, and all the heat of it couldn't touch the ice  
in me.

*Knife-work is a dirty business, yet Brother Grumlow is always clean.*

## 10

We had ourselves a prisoner. One of Marclos's riders proved less dead than expected. Bad news for him all in all. Makin had Burlow and Rike bring the man to me on the burgermeister's steps.

'Says his name is Renton. "Sir" Renton, if you please,' Makin said.

I looked the fellow up and down. A nice black bruise wrapped itself halfway round his forehead, and an overhasty embrace with Mother Earth had left his nose somewhat flatter than he might have liked. His moustache and beard could have been neatly trimmed, but caked in all that blood they looked a mess.

'Fell off your horse did you, Renton?' I asked.

'You stabbed Count Renar's son under a flag of truce,' he said. He sounded a little comical on the 'stabbed' and 'son'. A broken nose will do that for you.

'I did,' I said. 'I can't think of anything I wouldn't have stabbed him under.' I held Renton's gaze; he had squinty little eyes. He wouldn't have been much to look at in court finery. On the steps, covered in mud and blood, he looked like a rat's leavings. 'If I were you, I'd be more worried about my own fate than whether Marclos was stabbed in accordance with the right social niceties.'

That of course was a lie. If I were in his place, I'd have been looking for an opportunity to stick a knife in me. But I knew enough to know that most men didn't share my priorities. As Makin said, something in me had got broken, but not so broken I didn't remember what it was.

'My family is rich, they'll ransom me,' Renton said. He spoke quickly, nervous now, as if he'd just realized his situation.

I yawned. 'No they're not. If they were rich you wouldn't be riding in chain armour as one of Marclos's guards.' I yawned again, stretching my mouth until my jaw cracked. 'Maical, get me a cup of that festival beer, will you?'



‘Maical’s dead,’ Rike said, from behind Sir Renton.

‘Never?’ I said. ‘Idiot Maical? I thought God had blessed him with the same luck that looks after drunkards and madmen.’

‘Well he’s near enough dead,’ Rike said. ‘Got him a gut-full of rusty iron from one of Renar’s boys. We laid him out in the shade.’

‘Touching,’ I said. ‘Now get my beer.’

Rike grumbled and slapped Jobe into taking the errand. I turned back to Sir Renton. He didn’t look happy, but he didn’t look as sad as you might expect a man in such a bad place to look. His eyes kept sliding over to Father Gomst. Here’s a man with faith in a higher source, I thought.

‘So, Sir Renton,’ I said. ‘What brings young Marclos to Ancrath’s protectorates? What does the Count think he’s up to?’

Some of the brothers had gathered around the steps for the show, but most were still looting the dead. A man’s coin is nice and portable, but the brothers wouldn’t stop there. I expected the head-cart to be heaped with arms and armour when we left. Boots too; there’s three coppers in a well-made pair of boots.

Renton coughed and wiped at his nose, spreading black gore across his face. ‘I don’t know the Count’s plans. I’m not privy to his private council.’ He looked up at Father Gomst. ‘As God is my witness.’

I leaned in close to him. He smelled sour, like cheese in the sun. ‘God is your witness, Renton, he’s going to watch you die.’

I let that sink in. I gave old Gomsty a smile. ‘You can look after this knight’s soul, Father. The sins of the flesh though – they’re all mine.’

Rike handed me my cup of beer, and I had a sip. ‘The day you’re tired of looting, Little Rikey, is the day you’re tired of life,’ I said. It got a chuckle from the brothers on the steps. ‘Why’re you still here when you could be cutting up the dead in search of a golden liver?’

‘Come to see you put the hurt on Rat-face,’ Rike said.

‘You’re going to be disappointed then,’ I said. ‘Sir Rat-face is going to tell me everything I want to know, and I’m not even going to have to raise my voice. When I’m done, I’m going to hand him over to the new burgermeister of Norwood. The peasants will probably burn him alive, and he’ll count it the easy way out.’ I kept it conversational. I find it’s the coldest threats that reach the deepest.

Out in the marshes I’d made a dead man run in terror, with nothing more than what I keep inside. It occurred to me that what scared the dead might

worry the living a piece too.

Sir Renton didn't sound too scared yet though. 'You stabbed the better man today, boy, and there's a better man before you. You're nothing more than shit on my shoe.' I'd hurt his pride. He was a knight after all, and here was a beardless lad making mock. Besides, the best I'd offered was an 'easy' burning. Nobody considers that the soft option.

'When I was nine, the Count of Renar tried to have me killed,' I said. I kept my voice calm. It wasn't hard. I was calm. Anger carries less horror with it, men understand anger. It promises resolution; maybe bloody resolution, but swift. 'The Count failed, but I watched my mother and my little brother killed.'

'All men die,' Renton said. He spat a dark and bloody mess onto the steps. 'What makes you so special?'

He had a good point. What made my loss, my pain, any more important than everyone else's?

'That's a good question,' I said. 'A damn good question.'

It was. There weren't but a handful of the prisoners we'd taken from Marclos's train who hadn't seen a son, or a husband, a mother or a lover, killed. And killed in the past week. And this was my soft option, the mercies of these peasants compared to the attention of a young man whose hurt stood four years old.

'Consider me a spokesman,' I said. 'When it comes to stage-acting, some men are more eloquent than others. It's given to particular men to have a gift with the bow.' I nodded to the Nuban. 'Some men can knock the eye out of a bull at a thousand paces. They don't aim any better for wanting it, they don't shoot straighter because they're justified. They just shoot straighter. Now me, I just ... avenge myself better than most. Consider it a gift.'

Renton laughed at that and spat again. This time I saw part of a tooth in the mess. 'You think you're worse than the fire, boy?' he asked. 'I've seen men burn. A lot of men.'

He had a point. 'You've a lot of good points, Sir Renton,' I said.

I looked around at the ruins. Tumbled walls in the most, and blackened timber skeletons where roofs had kept a lid on folk's lives for year after year. 'It's going to take a lot of rebuilding,' I said. 'A lot of hammers and a lot of nails.' I sipped my beer. 'A strange thing – nails will hold a building together, but there's nothing better for taking a man apart.' I held Sir Renton's rat-like eyes, dark and beady. 'I don't enjoy torturing people, Sir Renton, but I'm

good at it. Not world-class you understand. Cowards make the best torturers. Cowards understand fear and they can use it. Heroes on the other hand, they make terrible torturers. They don't see what motivates a normal man. They misunderstand everything. They can't think of anything worse than besmirching your honour. A coward on the other hand; he'll tie you to a chair and light a slow fire under you. I'm not a hero or a coward, but I work with what I've got.'

Renton had the sense to pale at that. He reached out a muddy hand to Father Gomst. 'Father, I've done nothing but serve my master.'

'Father Gomst will pray for your soul,' I said. 'And forgive me the sins I incur in detaching it from your body.'

Makin pursed those thick lips of his. 'Prince, you've spoken about how you'd break the cycle of revenge. You could start here. You could let Sir Renton go.'

Rike gave him a look as if he'd gone mad. Fat Burlow covered a chuckle.

'I have spoken about that, Makin,' I said. 'I will break the cycle.' I drew my sword and laid it across my knees. 'You know how to break the cycle of hatred?' I asked.

'Love,' said Gomst, all quiet-like.

'The way to break the cycle is to kill every single one of the bastards that fucked you over,' I said. 'Every last one of them. Kill them all. Kill their mothers, kill their brothers, kill their children, kill their dog.' I ran my thumb along the blade of my sword and watched the blood bead crimson on the wound. 'People think I hate the Count, but in truth I'm a great advocate of his methods. He has only two failings. Firstly he goes far, but not far enough. Secondly he isn't me. He taught me valuable lessons though. And when we meet, I will thank him for it, with a quick death.'

Old Gomsty started at that. 'Count Renar did you wrong, Prince Jorg. Forgive him, but don't thank him. He'll burn in Hell for what he did. His immortal soul will suffer for eternity.'

I had to laugh out loud at that. 'Churchmen, eh? Love one minute, forgiveness the next, and then it's eternity on fire. Well rest at ease, Sir Renton, I've no designs on your immortal soul. Whatever happens between us, it will all be over in a day or two. Three at most. I'm not the most patient of men, so it will end when you tell me what I want to know, or I get bored.'

I got up from my step and went to crouch by Sir Renton. I patted his head. They'd tied his hands behind him, and I had my chainmail gauntlets on, so if

he had a mind to bite, it'd do him no good.

'I swore to Count Renar,' he said. He tried to pull away, and he craned his neck to look at old Gomsty. 'Tell him, Father, I swore before God. If I break my vow I'll burn in Hell.'

Gomst came to lay his hand on Renton's shoulder. 'Prince Jorg, this knight has made a holy vow. There are few oaths more sacred than that of a knight to his liege lord. You should not ask him to break it. Nor should any threat against the flesh compel a man to betray a covenant and forever place his soul in the fires of the Devil.'

'Here's a test of faith for you, Sir Renton,' I said. 'I'll tell you my tale and we'll see whether you want to tell me the Count's plans when I'm done.' I settled down on the step beside him and swigged my beer. 'When I first took to the road I was, oh, ten years of age. I'd a lot of anger in me then, and a need to know how the world worked. You see, I'd watched the Count's men kill my brother, William, and slit Mother open. So I knew that the way I'd thought things were supposed to work was wrong. And of course, I fell in with bad sorts – didn't I Rikey?'

Rike gave that laugh of his: '*hur hur hur*'. I think he just made the sound when he thought we expected a laugh. It didn't have any joy in it.

'I tried my hand at torture then. I wondered if I was supposed to be evil. I thought maybe I'd had a message from God to take up the Devil's work.'

I heard Gomst muttering at that one, prayers or condemnation. It was true too. For the longest time I looked for a message in it all, to work out what I was supposed to be doing.

I laid my hand on Renton's shoulder. He sat there with my hand on his left shoulder, and Gomst's hand on his right. We could have been the Devil and the angel from those old scrolls, whispering in his ears.

'We caught Bishop Murillo down by Jedmire Hill,' I said. 'I'm sure you heard about the loss of his mission? Anyhow, the brothers let me have the bishop. I was something of a mascot to them back then.'

The Nuban stood and walked off down the hill. I let him go. The Nuban didn't have the stomach for this kind of thing. That made me feel – I don't know – dirty? I liked the Nuban, though I didn't let it show.

'Now, Bishop Murillo was full of harsh words and judgement. He had plenty to tell me about hellfire and damnation. We sat a while and discussed the business of souls. Then I hammered a nail into his skull. Just here.' I reached out and touched the spot on Renton's greasy head. He flinched back

like he'd been stung. 'The bishop changed his tune a bit after that,' I said. 'In fact every time I knocked a new nail into him, he changed his tune. After a while he was a very different man. Did you know you can break a man into his parts like that? One nail will bring back memories of childhood. Another will make him rage, or sob, or laugh. In the end it seems we're just toys, easy to break and hard to mend.'

'I hear that the nuns at Saint Alstis still have Bishop Murillo in their care. He's a very different person now. He clutches at their habits and slurs awful things at them, so they say. Where the soul of that proud and pious man we took from the papal caravan is – well, I can't tell you.'

With that, I 'magicked' a nail into my fingers. A rusty spike, three inches long. The man wet himself. There on the steps. Burlow gave an oath and kicked him, hard. When Renton got his breath back, he told me everything he knew. It took almost an hour. Then we gave him to the peasants and they burned him.

I watched the good folk of Norwood dance around their fire. I watched the flames lick above their heads. There's a pattern in fire, as if something's written there, and there's folk who say they can read it too. Not me, though. It would have been nice to find some answers in the flames. I had questions: it was a thirst for the Count's blood that had set me on the road. But somehow I'd given it up. Somehow I set it aside and told myself it was a sacrifice to strength.

I sipped my beer. Four years on the road. Always going somewhere, always doing something, but now, with my feet pointed towards home, it felt like I'd been lost all that time. Lost or led.

I tried to remember when I'd given up on the Count, and why. Nothing came to me, just the glimpse of my hand on a door, and the sensation of falling into space.

'I'm going home,' I said.

The dull ache between my eyes became a rusty nail, driven deep. I finished my beer, but it did nothing for me. I had an older kind of thirst.

## *Four years earlier*

I followed Lundist out into the day.

‘Wait.’ He held his baton to my chest. ‘It never pays to walk blind. Especially not in your own castle where familiarity hides so much – even when we have the eyes to see.’

We stood for a moment on the steps, blinking away the sunlight, letting the heat soak in. Release from the gloom of the schoolroom held no great surprise. Four days in seven my studies kept me at Lundist’s side, sometimes in the schoolroom, the observatory, or library, but as often as not the hours would pass in a hunt for wonders. Whether it was the mechanics of the siege machinery held in the Arnheim Hall, or the mystery of the Builder-light that shone without flame in the salt cellar, every part of the Tall Castle held a lesson that Lundist could tease out.

‘Listen,’ he said.

I knew this game. Lundist held that a man who can observe is a man apart. Such a man can see opportunities where others see only the obstacles on the surface of each situation.

‘I hear wood on wood. Training swords. The squires at play,’ I said.

‘Some might not call it play. Deeper! What else?’

‘I hear birdsong. Skylarks.’ There it was, a silver chain of sound, dropped from on high, so sweet and light I’d missed it at first.

‘Deeper.’

I closed my eyes. What else? Green fought red on the back of my eyelids. The clack of swords, the grunts, panting, muted scuffle of shoe on stone, the song of skylarks. What else?

‘Fluttering.’ On the edge of hearing – I was probably imagining it.

‘Good,’ Lundist said. ‘What is it?’

‘Not wings. It’s deeper than that. Something in the wind,’ I said.

‘There’s no wind in the courtyard,’ Lundist said.

‘Up high then.’ I had it. ‘A flag!’

‘Which flag? Don’t look. Just tell me.’ Lundist pressed the baton harder.

‘Not the festival flag. Not the King’s flag, that’s flown from the north wall. Not the colours, we’re not at war.’ No, not the colours. Any curiosity in me died at that reminder of Count Renar’s purchase. I wondered, if they’d slain me also, would the price of a pardon have been higher? An extra horse?

‘Well?’ Lundist asked.

‘The execution flag, black on scarlet,’ I said.

It’s always been that way with me. Answers come when I stop trying to think it through and just speak. The best plan I’ll come up with is the one that happens when I act.

‘Good.’

I opened my eyes. The light no longer pained me. High above the courtyard the execution flag streamed in a westerly breeze.

‘Your father has ordered the dungeons cleared,’ Lundist said. ‘There will be quite a crowd come Saint Crispin’s Day.’

I knew that to be understatement. ‘Hangings, beheadings, impalement, oh my!’

I wondered if Lundist would seek to shield me from the proceedings. The corner of my mouth twitched, hooked on the notion that he might imagine I’d not seen worse already. For the mass executions of the previous year, Mother had taken us to visit Lord Nossar at his estates in Elm. William and I had the fort of Elm almost to ourselves. Later I learned that most of Ancrath had converged on the Tall Castle to watch the sport.

‘Terror and entertainment are weapons of statehood, Jorg.’ Lundist kept his tone neutral, his face inscrutable save for a tightness in the lips suggesting that the words carried a bad taste. ‘Execution combines both elements.’ He gazed at the flag. ‘Before I journeyed and fell slave to your mother’s people, I dwelt in Ling. In the Utter East pain is an artform. Rulers make their reputations, and that of their land, on extravagances of torture. They compete at it.’

We watched the squires spar. A tall knight gave instruction, sometimes with his fist.

For several minutes I said nothing. I imagined Count Renar at the mercy of a Ling torture-master.

No – I wanted his blood and his death. I wanted him to die knowing why he died, knowing who held the sword. But his pain? Let him do his burning in Hell.

‘Remind me not to go to Ling, Tutor,’ I said.

Lundist smiled, and led off across the courtyard. ‘It’s not on your father’s maps.’

We passed close by the duelling square, and I recognized the knight by his armour, a dazzling set of field plate with silver inlaid into acid-etched scrollwork across the breastplate.

‘Sir Makin of Trent,’ I said. I turned to face him. Lundist walked on for a few paces before realizing I’d left his side.

‘Prince Honourous.’ Sir Makin offered me a curt bow. ‘Keep that guard up, Cheeves!’ A barked instruction to one of the older boys.

‘Call me Jorg,’ I said. ‘I hear my father has made you Captain of the Guard.’

‘He found fault with my predecessor,’ Sir Makin said. ‘I hope to fulfil my duties more to the King’s pleasing.’

I’d not seen Sir Grehem since the attack on our coach. I suspected that the incident cost the former Captain of the Guard rather more than it cost Count Renar.

‘Let us hope so,’ I said.

Makin ran a hand through his hair, dark and beaded with sweat from the heat of the day. He had a slightly fleshy face, expressive, but you wouldn’t mistake him for someone without mettle.

‘Won’t you join us, Prince Jorg? A good right feint will serve you better in times of trouble than any amount of book learning.’ He grinned. ‘If your wounds are recovered sufficiently, of course.’

Lundist settled a hand on my shoulder. ‘The Prince is still troubled by his injuries.’ He fixed those too-blue eyes of his on Sir Makin. ‘You might consider reading Proximus’s thesis on the defence of royals. If you wish to avoid Sir Grehem’s fate, that is. It’s in the library.’ He moved to steer me away. I resisted on nothing more than principle.

‘I think the Prince knows his own mind, Tutor.’ Sir Makin flashed Lundist a broad smile. ‘Your Proximus can keep his advice. A knight trusts in his own judgement, and the weight of his sword.’



Sir Makin took a wooden sword from the cart on his left, and offered it to me, hilt first. 'Come, my prince. Let's see what you've got. Care to spar against young Stod here?' He pointed out the smallest of the squires, a slight lad maybe a year my senior.

'Him.' I pointed to the biggest of them, a hulking lout of fifteen with a shock of ginger hair. I took the sword.

Sir Makin raised an eyebrow, and grinned all the wider. 'Robart? You'll fight Robart, will you now?'

He strode to the boy's side and clapped a hand to the back of his neck. 'This here is Robart Hool, third son of the House of Arn. Of all this sorry lot, he's the one who might have a chance to earn his spurs one day. Got himself a way with the blade has our Master Hool.' He shook his head. 'Try Stod.'

'Try none of them, Prince Jorg.' Lundist kept the irritation from his voice, almost. 'This is foolishness. You are not yet recovered.' He shot a look at the grinning guard captain. 'King Olidan will not take kindly to a relapse in his only heir.'

Sir Makin frowned at that, but I could see it had gone too far for his pride to let him take instruction. 'Go easy on him, Robart. Really easy.'

'If this ginger oaf doesn't do his level best, I'll make sure the closest he gets to being a knight is clearing the horse dung after the joust,' I said.

I advanced on the squire, my head craned to look him in the face. Sir Makin stepped between us, a training sword in his left hand. 'A quick test first, my prince. I've got to know you've enough of the basics not to get yourself hurt.'

The point of his blade clacked against mine, and slipped away, angled for my face. I slapped it aside, and made a half-lunge. The knight tamed my thrust easily enough; I tried to slide to his guard but he cut to my legs and I barely held him.

'Not bad. Not bad.' He inclined his head. 'You've had decent instruction.' He pursed his lips. 'You're what, twelve?'

'Ten.' I watched him return the trainer to the cart. He was right-handed.

'All right.' Sir Makin motioned the squires into a circle around us. 'Let's have us a duel. Robart, show the Prince no mercies. He's good enough to lose without serious injury to anything but his pride.'

Robart squared up to me, all freckles and confidence. The moment seemed to come into focus. I felt the sun on my skin, the grit between the soles of my shoes and the flagstones.

Sir Makin held his hand up. 'Wait for it.'

I heard the silver voices of the skylarks, invisible against the blue vaults above us. I heard the flapping of the execution flag.

'Fight!' The hand dropped.

Robart came in fast, swinging low. I let my sword fall to the ground. His blow caught me on the right side, just below the ribs. I'd have been cut in two ... if it hadn't been made of wood. But it was. I hit him in the throat, with the edge of my hand, an eastern move that Lundist had showed me. Robart went down as if a wall had dropped on him.

I watched him writhe, and for an instant I saw Inch in the Healing Hall on his hands and knees with the fire all around us and the blood pulsing from his back. I felt the poison in my veins, the hooks in my flesh, the simple need to kill – as pure an emotion as I have ever known.

'No.' I found Lundist's hand on my wrist, stopping me as I reached for the boy. 'It's enough.'

*It's never enough.* Words in my head, spoken by a voice not my own, a voice remembered from the briar and the fever-bed.

For several moments we watched the lad choke on the floor, and turn crimson.

The strangeness left me. I picked up my sword and returned it to Sir Makin.

'Actually, Proximus is yours, Captain, not Lundist's,' I said. 'Proximus was a Borthan scholar, seventh century. One of your ancestors. Perhaps you should read him after all. I'd hate to have nothing but Robart here, and his judgement, between me and my enemies.'

'But ...' Sir Makin chewed his lip. He seemed to have run out of objections after 'but'.

'He cheated.' Young Stod found the words for all of them.

Lundist had already started walking. I turned to follow him, then looked back.

'It's not a game, Sir Makin. You teach these boys to play by the rules, and they're going to lose. It's not a game.'

And when we make a mistake, we can't buy our way out of it. Not with horses, not with gold.

We reached the Red Gate on the far side of the courtyard.

'That boy could die,' Lundist said.

'I know,' I said. 'Take me to see these prisoners that Father's to have

killed.'

### *Four years earlier*

More of the Tall Castle lies below the ground than above. It should be called the Deep Castle, really. It took us a while to reach the dungeons. We heard the shrieks from a level up, through walls of Builder-stone.

‘This visit is, perhaps, a bad idea,’ Lundist said, pausing before an iron door.

‘It’s my idea, Tutor,’ I said. ‘I thought you wanted me to learn by my mistakes?’

Another scream reached us, guttural with a hoarse edge to it, an animal sound.

‘Your father wouldn’t approve of this visit,’ Lundist said. He pressed his lips in a tight line, troubled.

‘That’s the first time you’ve called on Father’s wisdom to resolve an issue. Shame on you, Tutor Lundist.’ Nothing would turn me back now.

‘There are things that children—’

‘Too late, that horse already bolted. Stable burned.’ I brushed past him and rapped on the door with the hilt of my dagger. ‘Open up.’

A rattle of keys, and the door slid inward on oiled hinges. The wave of stench that hit me nearly took my breath. A warty old fellow in warder’s leathers leaned into view and opened his mouth to speak.

‘Don’t,’ I said, holding the business end of my dagger toward his tongue.

I walked on, Lundist at my heels.

‘You always told me to look and make my own judgement, Lundist,’ I said. I respected him for that. ‘No time to get squeamish.’

‘Jorg ...’ He was torn, I could hear it in his voice, wracked between

emotions I couldn't understand, and logic that I could. 'Prince—'

The cry rang out again, much louder now. I'd heard the sound before. It pushed at me, trying to force me away. The first time I heard that kind of pain, my mother's pain, something held me back. I'll tell you it was the hook-briar which held me fast. I'll show you the scars. But in the night, before the dreams come, a voice whispers to me that it was fear that held me back, terror that rooted me in the briar, safe while I watched them die.

Another scream, more terrible and more desperate than any before. I felt the hooks in my flesh.

'Jorg!'

I shook Lundist's hands from me, and ran toward the sound.

I didn't have far to run. I pulled up short at the entrance to a wide room, torch-lit, with cell doors lining three sides. At the centre, two men stood on opposite sides of a table, to which a third man had been secured with chains. The larger of the two warders held an iron poker, one end in a basket of glowing coals.

None of the three noted my arrival, nor did any of the faces pressed to the barred windows in the cell doors turn my way. I walked in. I heard Lundist arrive at the entrance and stop to take in the scene, as I had.

I drew close and the warder without the iron glanced my way. He jumped as if stung. 'What in the—' He shook his head to clear his vision. 'Who? I mean ...'

I'd imagined the torturers would be terrifying men with cruel faces, thin lips, hooked noses, the eyes of soulless demons. I think I found their ordinariness more of a shock. The shorter of the two looked a touch simple, but in a friendly way. Mild I'd call him.

'Who're you?' This one had a more brutish cast to him, but I could picture him at ale, laughing, or teaching his son pitch-ball.

I hadn't any of my court weeds on, just a simple tunic for the schoolroom. There was no reason for warders to recognize me. They would enter the vaults through the Villains' Gate and had probably never walked in the castle above.

'I'm Jorg,' I said, in a servant's accent. 'My uncle paid old Wart-face at the door to let me see the prisoners.' I pointed toward Lundist. 'We're going to the executions tomorrow. I wanted to see criminals close up first.'

I wasn't looking at the warders now. The man on the table held my gaze. I'd seen only one black skin before, a slave to some noble visiting Father's

court from the south. But that man was brown. The fellow on the table had skin blacker than ink. He turned his head to face my way, slow as if it weighed like lead. The whites of his eyes seemed to shine in all that blackness.

‘Wart-face? Heh, I like that.’ The big warder relaxed and took up his iron again. ‘If there’s two ducats in it for me and Grebbin here, then I reckon you can stay and watch this fellow squeal.’

‘Berrec, it don’t seem right.’ Grebbin furrowed his broad forehead. ‘He’s a young-un an’ all.’

Berrec pulled the poker from the coals and held it toward Grebbin. ‘You don’t want to stand between me and a ducat, my friend.’

The black man’s naked chest glistened below the glowing point. Ugly burns marked his ribs, red flesh erupting like new-ploughed furrows. I could smell the sweet stench of roasted meat.

‘He’s very black,’ I said.

‘He’s a Nuban is what he is,’ Berrec said, scowling. He gave the poker a critical look and returned it to the fire.

‘Why are you burning him?’ I asked. I didn’t feel easy under the Nuban’s scrutiny.

The question puzzled them for a moment. Grebbin’s frown deepened.

‘He’s got the devil in him,’ Berrec said at last. ‘All them Nubans have. Heathens, the lot of them. I heard that Father Gomst, him as leads the King himself in prayer, says to burn the heathen.’ Berrec laid a hand on the Nuban’s stomach, a disturbingly tender touch. ‘So we’re just crisping this one up a bit, before the King comes to watch him killed on the morrow.’

‘Executed.’ Grebbin pronounced the word with the precision of one who has practised it many times.

‘Executed, killed, what’s the difference? They all end up for the worms.’ Berrec spat into the coals.

The Nuban kept his eyes on me, a quiet study. I felt something I couldn’t name. I felt somehow wrong for being there. I ground my teeth together and met his gaze.

‘What did he do?’ I asked.

‘Do?’ Grebbin snorted. ‘He’s a prisoner.’

‘His crime?’ I asked.

Berrec shrugged. ‘Getting caught.’

Lundist spoke from the doorway. ‘I believe ... Jorg, that all of the

prisoners for execution are bandits, captured by the Army of the March. The King ordered the action to prevent raids across the Lichway into Norwood and other protectorates.'

I broke my gaze from the Nuban's, and let it slide across the marks of his torture. Where the skin remained unburned, patterns of raised scars picked out symbols, simple in design but arresting to the eye. A soiled loincloth hung across his hips. His wrists and ankles were bound with iron shackles secured with a basic pin-lock. Blood oozed along the short chains anchoring them to the table.

'Is he dangerous?' I asked. I moved close. I could taste the burned meat.

'Yes.' The Nuban smiled as he said it, his teeth bloody.

'You shut your heathen hole, you.' Berrec yanked the iron from the coals. A shower of sparks flew up as he lifted the white-hot poker to eye-level. The glow made something ugly of his face. It reminded me of a wild night when the lightning lit the faces of Count Renar's men.

I turned to the Nuban. If he'd been watching the iron I'd have left him to it.

'Are you dangerous?' I asked him.

'Yes.'

I pulled the pin from the manacle on his right wrist.

'Show me.'

## *Four years earlier*

The Nuban moved fast, but it wasn't his speed that impressed, it was his lack of hesitation. He reached for Berrec's wrist. A sudden heave brought the warder sprawling across him. The poker in Berrec's outstretched hand skewered Grebbin through the ribs, deep enough so that Berrec lost his grip on it as Grebbin twisted away.

Without pause, the Nuban lifted himself halfway to sitting, as close to upright as his manacled wrist would let him. Berrec slid down the Nuban's chest, sliding on sweat and blood, into his lap. He started to raise himself. The Nuban's descending elbow put an end to the escape attempt. It caught Berrec on the back of the neck, and bones crunched.

Grebbin screamed of course, but screams were common enough in the dungeon. He tried to run, but somehow lost his sense of direction and slammed into a cell door, with enough force to drive the point of the poker out below his shoulder blade. The impact knocked him over and he didn't get up again. He twisted for a moment, mouthing something, with only wisps of smoke or steam escaping his lips.

A cheer went up from those cells containing occupants too stupid to know when to stay silent.

Lundist could have run. He had plenty of time. I expected him to go for help, but he was halfway to me by the time Grebbin hit the ground. The Nuban pushed Berrec clear, and freed his other wrist.

'Run!' I shouted at Lundist in case it hadn't occurred to him.

Actually, he was running, only in the wrong direction. I knew the years lay less heavy on him than an old man had a right to expect, but I didn't think he



could sprint.

I moved to put the table, and the Nuban, between Lundist and me.

The Nuban unpinned both ankles as Lundist reached him. 'Take the boy, old man, and go.' He had the deepest voice I'd ever heard.

Lundist fixed the Nuban with those disconcerting blue eyes of his. His robes settled, forgetting the rush from the doorway. He held hands to his chest, one atop the other. 'If you go now, man of Nuba, I will not stop you.'

That brought a scatter of laughter from the cells.

The Nuban watched Lundist with the same intensity I'd seen earlier. He had a few inches on my tutor, but it was the difference in bulk that made it seem a contest between David and Goliath. Where Lundist stood slender as a spear, the Nuban had as much weight again, and more, corded into thick slabs of muscle over heavy bone.

The Nuban didn't laugh at Lundist. Perhaps he saw more than the prisoners did. 'I'll take my brothers with me.'

Lundist chewed on that, then took a pace back. 'Jorg, here.' He kept his gaze on the Nuban.

'Brothers?' I asked. I couldn't see any black faces at the bars.

The Nuban gave a broad smile. 'Once I had hut-brothers. Now they are far away, maybe dead.' He spread his arms, the smile becoming half grimace as he felt his burns. 'But the gods have given me new brothers, road-brothers.'

'Road-brothers.' I rolled the words across my tongue. An image of Will flickered in my mind, blood and curls. There was power here. I felt it.

'Kill them both, and let me out.' A door to my left rattled as if a bull were worrying at it. If the speaker matched his voice, there was an ogre in there.

'You owe me your life, Nuban,' I said.

'Yes.' He jerked the keys from Berrec's belt and stepped toward the cell on my left. I stepped with him, keeping him between Lundist and myself.

'You'll give me a life in return,' I said.

He paused, glancing at Lundist. 'Go with your uncle, boy.'

'You'll give me a life, brother, or I'll take yours as forfeit,' I said.

More laughter from the cells, and this time the Nuban joined in. 'Who do you want killed, Little Brother?' He set the key in the lock.

'I'll tell you when we see him,' I said. To specify Count Renar now would raise too many questions. 'I'm coming with you.'

Lundist rushed forward at that. He pivoted past the Nuban, delivering a kick to the back of his knee. I heard a loud click as the black man went down.

The Nuban twisted as he fell, and lunged for Lundist. Somehow the old man evaded him, and when the Nuban sprawled at his feet, Lundist kicked him in the neck, a blow that cut off his oath and left him limp on the stone floor.

I almost skipped free, but Lundist's fingers knotted in my hair as it streamed behind me. 'Jorg! This is not the way!'

I fought to escape, snarling. 'It's exactly the way.' And I knew it to be true. The wildness in the Nuban, the bonds between these men, the focus on what will make the difference – no matter what the situation – all of it echoed in me.

From the corner of my eye I caught sight of the cell door opening. The click had been the key turning.

Lundist held my shoulders and made me face him. 'You've no place with these men, Jorg. You can't imagine the life they lead. They don't have the answers you want.' He had such intensity to him, I could almost believe he cared.

A figure emerged from the cell, stooping to come through the doorway. I'd never seen a man so big, not Sir Gerrant of the Table Guard, not Shem the stablehand, nor the wrestlers from The Slavs.

The man came up behind Lundist, quick, a rolling storm.

'Jorg, you think I don't understand—' The sweep of a massive arm cut off Lundist's words and sent him to the stone floor with such force I'd have winced even if he hadn't taken a handful of my hair with him.

The man towered over me, an ugly giant in stinking rags, with his hair hanging down in matted curtains. The scale of him mesmerized me. He reached for me, and I moved too slow. The hand that caught me could almost close around my waist. He lifted me level with his face, and his filthy mane parted as he looked up.

'Jesu, but you're one hideous offence to the eye.' I could tell he was going to kill me, so no point in being tactful. 'I can see why the King wants to execute you.'

Even from the anonymity of the cells the laughter was hesitant. Not a man to mock, then. Nothing soft in his face, just brute lines, scar, and the jut of bone beneath coarse skin. He lifted me, as if to dash me on the stone, like throwing down an egg.

'No!'

I could see under the giant's arm, an old man and a red-haired youth had

followed him out and were now helping the Nuban to his feet.

‘No,’ the Nuban said again. ‘I owe him a life, Brother Price. And besides, without him, you’d still be in that cell waiting on the pleasures of the morrow.’

Brother Price gave me a look of impersonal malice, and let me fall as though I’d ceased to exist. ‘Let them all out.’ He growled the words.

The Nuban gave the keys to the old man. ‘Brother Elban.’ Then he came across to where I’d landed. Lundist lay close by, face to the floor, blood pooling around his forehead.

‘The gods sent you, boy, to loose me from that table.’ The Nuban glanced at the torture rack, then at Lundist. ‘You come with the brothers now. If we find the man you want dead; I kill him, maybe.’

I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t like that ‘maybe’.

I looked to Lundist for a moment. I couldn’t tell if he were still breathing. I sensed a ghost of the guilt I should perhaps have felt, the itch from an amputated limb, still niggling though the flesh has long since gone.

I stood beside the Nuban, with Lundist at my feet, and watched as the outlaws released their comrades. I found myself staring into the orange heat of the coals, remembering.

I remembered a time when I lived in the lie. I lived in a world of soft things, mutable truths, gentle touches, laughter for its own sake. The hand that pulled me from the carriage that night, from the warmth of my mother’s side, into a night of rain and screaming, that hand pulled me out by a doorway that I can’t go back through. We all of us pass through that door, but we tend to exit of our own volition, and by degrees, sniffing the air, torn and tentative.

In the days following my escape and illness, I saw my old dreams grow small and wither. I saw my child’s life yellow on the tree and fall, as if a harsh winter had come to haunt the spring. It was a shock to see how little my life had meant. How mean the dens and forts in which William and I had played with such fierce belief, how foolish our toys without the intensity of an innocent imagination to animate their existence.

Every waking hour I felt an ache, a pain that grew each time I turned the memory over in my hand. And I returned to it, time and again, like a tongue to the socket of a missing tooth, drawn by the absence.

I knew it would kill me.

The pain became my enemy. More than the Count Renar, more than my

father's bartering with lives he should have held more precious than crown, or glory, or Jesu on the cross. And, because in some hard core of me, in some stubborn trench of selfish refusal, I could not, even at ten years of age, surrender to anything or anyone, I fought that pain. I analysed its offensive, and found its lines of attack. It festered, like the corruption in a wound turned sour, drawing strength from me. I knew enough to know the remedy. Hot iron for infection, cauterize, burn, make it pure. I cut from myself all the weakness of care. The love for my dead, I put aside, secure in a casket, an object of study, a dry exhibit, no longer bleeding, cut loose, set free. The capacity for new love, I burned out. I watered it with acid until the ground lay barren and nothing there would sprout, no flower take root.

'Come.'

I looked up. The Nuban was speaking to me. 'Come. We're ready.'

The brothers were gathered around us in ragged and ill-smelling array. Price had one of the warders' swords. The other gleamed in the hand of a second giant of a man, just a shade shorter, a shade lighter, a shade younger, and so similar in form that he could only have been squeezed from the same womb as Price.

'We're going to cut a way out of here.' Price tested the edge of his sword against the short beard along his jawline. 'Burlow, up front with Rike and me. Gemt and Elban, take the rear. If the boy slows us down, kill him.'

Price threw a look around the chamber, spat, and made for the corridor.

The Nuban put a hand on my shoulder. 'You should stay.' He nodded to Lundist. 'But if you come, don't fall behind.'

I looked down at Lundist. I could hear the voices telling me to stay, familiar voices, but distant. I knew the old man would walk through fire to save me, not because he feared my father's wrath, but just ... because. I could feel the chains that bound me to him. The hooks. I felt the weakness again. I felt the pain seeping through cracks I'd thought sealed.

I looked up at the Nuban. 'I won't fall behind,' I said.

The Nuban pursed his lips, shrugged, and set off after the others. I stepped over Lundist, and followed.

*Assassination is just murder with a touch more precision. Brother Sim is precise.*

## 14

So we rode out from Norwood. The peasants watched us, all sullen and dazed, and Rike cursed them. As if it had been his idea to keep them from a Renar bonfire and now they owed him a cheer as he left. We left them the ruins of their town, decorated with the corpses of the men that ruined it. Poor compensation, especially after Rike and the brothers had stripped the dead of anything of worth. I reckoned we could make Crath City by nightfall, riding hard, and be banging on the gates of the Tall Castle before the moon rose.

I shouldn't have been turning for home, picking up my old ways, and thinking once more about vengeance upon the Count of Renar. That's what instinct told me. But today instinct spoke with an old and dry voice and I no longer trusted it. I wanted to go home, perhaps because it felt as though something else required that I did not. I wanted to go home and if Hell rose up to stop me, it would make me desire it the more. We took the Castle Road, up through the garden lands of Ancrath. Our path ran alongside gentle streams, between small woods and quiet farms. I'd forgotten how green it was. I'd grown used to a world of churned mud, burnt fields, smoke-grey skies, and the dead rotting on the ground. The sun found us, pushing its way through high cloud. In the warmth our column slowed until the clatter of hooves broke into lazy thuds. Gerrod paused where a three-bar gate led through the hedgerow. Beyond it, a field, golden with wheat, rolled out before us. He tore at the long grass around the gatepost. It felt as if God had poured honey over the land, sweet and slow, holding everything at peace. Norwood lay fifteen miles, and a thousand years, behind us.

'Good to be back eh, Jorg?' Makin pulled up beside me. He leaned forward in his stirrups and drank in the air. 'Smells of home.'

And it did. The scent of warm earth took me back, back to times when my world was small, and safe.

'I hate this place,' I said. He looked shocked at that, and Makin was never an easy man to shock. 'It's a poison men take willingly, knowing it will make

them weak.'

I gave Gerrod my heels and let him hurry up the road. Makin caught me up and cantered alongside. We passed Rike and Burlow at the crossroads, throwing rocks at a scarecrow.

'Men fight for their homeland, Prince,' Makin said. 'It's the land they defend. The King and the land.'

I turned to holler at the stragglers. 'Close the line!'

Makin kept pace, waiting for an answer. 'Let the soldiers die for their land,' I said to him. 'If the time comes to sacrifice these fields in the cause of victory, I'll let them burn in a heartbeat. Anything that you cannot sacrifice pins you. Makes you predictable, makes you weak.'

We rode on at a trot, west, trying to catch the sun.

Soon enough we found the garrison at Chelny Ford. Or rather they found us. The watchtower must have seen us on the trail, and fifty men came out along the Castle Road to block our way.

I pulled up a few yards short of the pikemen, strung across the road in a bristling hedge, double-ranked. The rest of the squad waited behind the pike-wall, with drawn swords, save for a dozen archers arrayed amongst the corn in the field to our right. A score of heifers, in the field opposite, saw our approach and idled over to investigate.

'Men of Chelny Ford,' I called out. 'Well met. Who leads here?'

Makin came up behind me, the rest of the brothers trailing in after him, easy in their saddles.

A tall man stepped forward between two pikemen, but not too far forward, no idiot this one. He wore the Ancrath colours over a long chain shirt, and an iron pot-helm low on his brow. To my right a dozen sets of white knuckles strained on bowstrings. To my left the heifers watched from behind the hedge, complacent and chewing on the cud.

'I'm Captain Coddin.' He had to raise his voice as one of the cows let out a low moo. 'The King signs mercenaries at Relston Fayre. Armed bands are not permitted to roam into Ancrath. State your business.' He kept his eyes on Makin, looking for his answer there.

I didn't care for being dismissed as a child, but there's a time and place for taking offence. Besides, old Coddin seemed to know his stuff. Putting Brother Gemt out of his misery was one thing, but wasting one of Father's captains quite another.

I had my visor up already, so I used it to pull my helm off. 'Father Gomst!'

I called for the priest, and the brothers shuffled their horses aside with a few mutters to let the old fellow past. He wasn't much to look at. He'd hacked off that beard he grew in the gibbet-cage, but grey tufts still decorated his face in random clusters, and his priestly robes seemed more mud than cloth.

'Captain Coddin,' I said. 'Do you know this priest, Father Gomst?'

Coddin raised an eyebrow at that. He had a pale face, and now it went paler. His mouth took on a hard edge, like a man who knows he's the butt of a joke that he hasn't worked out yet. 'Aye,' he said. 'The King's priest.' He snapped his heels together and inclined his head, as if he were in court. It seemed funny out there in the road, with the birds tweeting overhead and the stink of the cows washing over us.

'Father Gomst,' I said. 'Pray tell Captain Coddin who I am.'

The old fellow puffed himself up a bit. He'd been listless and grey since Norwood, but now he tried to find a crumb or two of authority.

'Prince Honourous Jorg Ancrath sits before you, Captain. Lost and now returned, he is bound for his royal father's court, and you would do well to see that he gets there with proper escort ...' He glanced at me, screwing up what courage he had behind the foolish remnants of his beard. 'And a bath.'

A little snigger went up at that, on both sides of our standoff. It doesn't pay to underestimate a cleric. They know the power of words and they'll use them to their own ends. My palm ached for the hilt of my sword. I saw old Gomst's head falling from his shoulders, bouncing once, twice, and rolling to a halt by the hooves of a black-and-white heifer. I pushed the vision away.

'No bath. It's about time for a little road-stink at court. Soft words and rose-water may please the gentry, but those that fight the war live dirty. I return to my father as a man who has shared the soldier's lot. Let him know the truth of it.' I let my words carry on the still air, and kept my eyes on Gomsty. He had the wit to look away.

My speech earned no rousing cheer, but Coddin bowed his head and we had no further mention of baths. A shame, truth be told, because I'd been looking forward to a hot tub ever since I decided to turn for home.

So Coddin left his second to command the garrison, and rode with us. His escort of two dozen riders swelled our numbers to nearly sixty. Makin carried a lance from the Ford armoury now, flying the Ancrath colours and royal crest. The garrison riders spread word through the villages as we passed. 'Prince Jorg, Prince Jorg returned from the dead.' The news stole ahead of us, until each town presented a larger and better prepared reception. Captain



Coddin sent a rider to the King before we left Chelny Ford, but even without his message, they would know of us in the Tall Castle well before we got there.

At Bains Town the bunting stretched across Main Street, six minstrels, sporting lute and clavichord, played 'The King's Sword' with more gusto than skill, jugglers exchanged twirling fire-brands and a bear danced before the mill pond. And the crowds! People packed in so tight we'd no hope of riding through. A fat woman in a tent of a dress which was striped like a tourney pavilion, saw me amid the van. She pointed and gave a shriek that drowned the minstrels out, 'Prince Jorg! The Stolen Prince!' The whole place went mad at that, cheering and crying. They surged forward like mad things. Coddin had his men in quick, though. I forgave him his earlier slight for that. If peasants had reached Rike we'd have had red slaughter.

On the Lich Road the brothers were more scared, but that's the only time I've seen more fear in them than there at Bains Town. They none of them knew what to make of it. Grumlow's left hand never left his dagger. Red Kent grinned like a maniac, terror in his eyes. Still, they'd learn fast enough. When they figured out the welcome that lay ahead. When they'd seen the taverns and the whores. Well, there'd be no dragging them out of Bains Town in a week.

One of the minstrels found a horn, and a harsh note cut through the tumult. Guards, red-robed with black chain beneath, cleared a path, and no less a man than Lord Nossar of Elm emerged before us. I recognized the man from court. He looked slightly fatter in his gilded show-plate and velvets, rather more grey in the beard spilling down over his breastplate, but pretty much the same jolly old Nossar who rode me on his shoulders once upon a time.

'Prince Jorg!' The old man's voice broke for a moment. I could see tears shining in his eyes. It caught at me, that did. I felt it hook something in my chest. I didn't like it.

'Lord Nossar,' I gave back, and let a smile curl my lip. The same smile I gave Gemt before I let him have my knife. I saw a flicker in Nossar's eyes then. Just a moment of doubt.

He rallied himself. 'Prince Jorg! Beyond all hope, you've returned to us. I cursed the messenger for a liar, but here you are.' He had the deepest voice, rich and golden. Old Nossar spoke and you knew it was truth, you knew he liked you, it wrapped you up all warm and safe, that voice did. 'Will you honour my house, Prince Jorg, and stay a night?'

I could see the brothers exchanging glances, eyeing women in the crowd. The mill pond burned crimson with the dying sun. North, above the dark line of Rennat Forest, the smoke of Crath City stained a darkening sky.

‘My Lord, it’s a gracious invitation, but I mean to sleep in the Tall Castle tonight. I’ve been away too long,’ I said.

I could see the worry on him. It hung on every crag of the man’s face. He wanted to say more, but not here. I wondered if Father set him to detain me.

‘Prince ...’ He lifted a hand, his eyes seeking mine.

I felt that hook in my chest again. He would set me down in his high hall and talk of old times in that golden voice. He’d speak of William, and Mother. If there was a man who could disarm me, Nossar was that man.

‘I thank you for the welcome, Lord Nossar.’ I gave him court formality, curt and final.

I had to haul on the reins to turn Gerrod. I think even horses liked Nossar. I led the brothers around by the river trail, trampling over some farmer’s autumn turnips. The peasants cheered on, not sure what was happening, but cheering all the same.

We came to the Tall Castle by the cliff path, avoiding the sprawl of Crath City. The lights lay below us. Streets beaded with torch-light, the glow of fire and lamp rising from windows not yet shuttered against the cool of the night. The watchmen’s lanterns picked out the Old City wall, a skewed semi-circle, tapering down to the river where the houses spilled out beyond the walls, into the valley, reaching out along the river. We came to the West Gate, the one place we could reach the High City without trailing up through the narrow streets of the Old City. The guards raised the portcullises for us, first one, then the next, then the next. Ten minutes of creaking windlass and clanking chain. I wondered why the three gates were down. Did our foes truly press so close we must triple-gate the High Wall?

The gate captain came out whilst his men sweated to raise the last portcullis. Archers watched from the battlements high above. No bunting here. I recognized the man vaguely, as old as Gomst, salt-and-pepper hair. It was his sour expression I recalled best, pinched around the mouth as if he’d just that moment sucked a lemon.

‘Prince Jorg, we are told?’ He peered up at me, raising his torch almost to my face. Evidently I had enough of the King’s look about me to satisfy his curiosity. He lowered the torch fast enough and took a step back. I’m told I have my father’s eyes. Maybe I do, though mine are darker. We could both

give a stare that made men think again. I've always thought I look too girlish. My mouth too much the rosebud, my cheekbones too high and fine. It's of no great consequence. I've learned to wear my face as a mask, and generally I can write what I choose on it.

The captain nodded to Captain Coddin. He passed his gaze over Makin without a flicker, missed Father Gomst in the crowd, and lingered instead on the Nuban, before casting a dubious eye over Rike.

'I can find accommodation for your men in the Low City, Prince Jorg,' he said. By the Low City he meant the sprawl beyond the walls of Old City.

'My companions can board with me at the castle,' I said.

'King Olidan requires only your presence, Prince Jorg,' the gate captain said. 'And that of Father Gomst, and Captain Bortha if he is with you?'

Makin raised a mailed hand. Both the gate captain's eyebrows vanished up beneath his helm at that. 'Makin Bortha? No ...?'

'One and the same,' Makin said. He gave the man a broad grin, showing altogether too many teeth. 'Been a while, Relkin, you old bastard.'

King Olidan requires ... no room for manoeuvre there. A polite little 'get your road-scum down to the slums'. At least Relkin made it clear enough from the start, rather than letting me lose face by arguing the odds before overruling me with King Olidan requires.

'Elban, take the brothers down to the river and find some rooms. There's a tavern, The Falling Angel, should be big enough for you all,' I said.

Elban looked surprised at having been chosen, surprised but pleased. He smacked his lips over his toothless gums and glared back at the rest of them. 'You heard Jorth! Prince Jorth I mean. Move it out!'

'Killing peasants is a hanging offence,' I said as they turned their horses. 'Hear me, Little Rikey? Even one. So no killing, no pillage, and no raping. You want a woman, let the Count of Renar buy you one with his coin. Hell, let him buy you three.'

All three gates stood open. 'Captain Coddin, a pleasure. Enjoy your ride back to the Ford,' I said.

Coddin bowed in the saddle and led his troops off. That left just me, Gomst and Makin. 'Lead on,' I said. And Gate Captain Relkin led us through the West Gate into the High City.

We had no crowds to contend with. The hour was well past midnight and the moon rode high now. The wide streets of the High City lay deserted save for the occasional servant scurrying from one great house to the next. Maybe

a merchant's daughter or two watched us from behind the shutters, but in the main the noble houses slept sound and showed no interest in a returning prince.

Gerrod's hooves sounded too loud on the flagstones leading up to Tall Castle. Four years ago I left in velvet slippers, quieter than any mouse. The clatter of iron shoes on stone hurt my ears. Inside, a small voice still whispered that I'd wake Father. Be quiet, be quiet, don't breathe, don't even let your heart beat.

Tall Castle is of course anything but tall. In four years on the road I had seen taller castles, even bigger castles, but never anything quite like Tall Castle. The place seemed at once familiar and strange. I remembered it as bigger. The castle may have shrunk from the unending vastness I'd carried with me in memory, but it still seemed huge. Tutor Lundist told me the whole place once served as foundations for a castle so tall it would scrape the sky. He said that when men first built this, all we see now lay under the ground. The Road-men didn't build Tall Castle, but those who did had artifice almost to equal that of the Road-men. The walls weren't quarry-hewn, but seemingly crushed rock that had once poured like water. Some magic set metal bars through the stone of the wall, twisted bars of a metal tougher even than the black iron from the East. So Tall Castle brooded squat and ancient, and the King sat within its metal-veined walls, watching over the High City, the Old City, the Low City. Watching over the city of Crath and all the dominions of his line. My line. My city. My castle.

## *Four years earlier*

We left the Tall Castle by the Brown Gate, a small door on the lower slopes of the mount, out past the High Wall. I came last, with the ache of all those steps in my legs.

Faint red footprints marked the top stair. The owners of that blood were probably still bleeding, far behind us.

For a moment I saw Lundist, lying as I'd left him.

We'd climbed from the very bowels of the castle vaults, to the least ostentatious of all the castle's exits. Dung men came this way a dozen times a day, carrying off the treasures of the privy. And I'll tell you, royal shit stinks no less than any other.

The brother ahead of me turned at the archway, and showed me his teeth by way of a grin. 'Fresh air! Take a breath o' that, Castle Boy.'

I'd heard the Nuban call this one Row, a wire of a man, gristle and bone, old scars and a mean eye. 'I'll lick a leper's neck before I take a lung-full o' your stench, Brother Row.' I pushed past him. It'd take more than talking like a road-brother to earn a place with these men, and giving an inch wasn't the way to start.

Ancrath stretched out on our right. To the left, the smoke and spires of Crath City rose behind the Old Wall. A storm light covered it all. The kind that falls when thunderclouds gather in the day. A flat light that makes a stranger of even the most familiar landscape. It felt appropriate.

'We travel fast and we travel hard,' Price said.

Price and Rike, the only true brothers among us, stood shoulder to shoulder at the head of the column, Rike beetling his brow while Price told us how it

would be. 'We put as many miles between us and this shit-hole as it takes. The storm will hide our tracks. We'll find horses as we go, roust a village or two if need be.'

'You think the King's hunters can't track two dozen men through a bit of rain?' I wished my voice didn't ring so pure and high as I said it.

They all turned round at that. The Nuban flashed me a look, eyes wide, and patted down at the air as if to shut me up.

I pointed to the sprawl of roofs edging toward the river where Father's loving citizens had built beyond the safety of the city walls in their passion to be near him.

'By ones and twos a brother could find his way to a warm hearth, bit of roast beef, and an ale maybe,' I said. 'I hear there's a tavern or three to be found down there. A brother could be toasting by a fire before the rain even got to washing his trail away.'

'The King's men would be riding back and forth on those fine horses of theirs, getting wet, looking for the kind of rut that twenty men put in a road or across a field, looking for the kind of trouble a band of brothers stir up. And we'd be sitting comfortable in the shadow of the Tall Castle, waiting for the weather to clear.'

'You think there's a man we left behind who could tell the Criers what we look like? You think the good folk of Crath City will notice a score added to their thousands?'

I could see I'd won them. I could see the light of that warm hearth reflecting in their eyes.

'And how the feck are we to pay for roast beef and a roof to hide under?' Price shoved through the brothers, setting the redhead, Gemt, on his rear. 'Start robbing in the shadow of the Tall Castle?'

'Yeah, how we a-gonna pay, Castle Boy?' Gemt scrambled to his feet, finding me a better target than Price for his anger. 'How we gonna?'

I brought up two ducats from my purse, and rubbed them together.

'I'll take that!' A sharp-faced man to my left lunged for the purse, still fat with coin.

I flipped the dagger from my belt and stuck it through his outstretched hand.

'Liar,' I said. I shoved a little more, until the hilt slapped up against his palm, the blade glistening red behind.

'Out the way, Liar.' Price grabbed him by the neck and tossed him down

the slope.

Price loomed over me. Any full-grown man loomed over me, but Price added a new dimension to it. He took a handful of my jerkin and hauled me up, eye to eye, careless of the bloody knife I still had hold of.

‘You’re not scared of me, are you, boy?’ The stink of him was something awful. Dead dog comes close.

I thought about stabbing him, but I knew there wasn’t a wound that would stop him breaking me in two before he died.

‘Are you scared of me?’ I asked him.

We had us a moment of understanding then. Price didn’t so much as twitch, but I saw it in him, and he saw it in me. He let me fall.

‘We’ll stay a day in the city,’ Price said. ‘The drinks are on Brother Jorg. Any of you whoresons start trouble before we leave, and I’ll hurt you, bad.’

He held a hand out to me where I lay. I half-reached for it, before understanding. I tossed the purse to him.

‘I’ll go with the Nuban,’ I said.

Price nodded. A black face lost from the dungeons would be remembered. A black face found in a Crath tavern would be remarked on.

The Nuban shrugged, and set off, east toward the open fields. I followed.

It wasn’t until we’d lost ourselves in the maze of tracks and hedgerows that the Nuban spoke again.

‘You should be afraid of Price, boy.’

The first breath of storm wind set the hawthorn rustling to either side. I could smell the electricity, mixed in with the richness of the earth.

‘Why?’ I wondered if he thought I lacked the imagination for fear. Some men are too dull to feel what might happen. Others torture themselves with maybes and populate their dreams with horrors more terrible than their worst enemy could inflict upon them.

‘Why would the gods care what happens to a child who doesn’t care about himself?’ the Nuban asked.

He paused before a turn in the road and moved close to the hedge. The wind shook again and white petals fell among the thorns. He looked back along the way we’d come.

‘Maybe I’m not afraid of the gods either,’ I said.

Fat drops of rain began to land around us.

The Nuban shook his head. Raindrops sparkled in the tight curls of his hair. ‘You’re a fool to make a fist at the gods, boy.’ He flashed me a grin, and

edged to the corner. 'Who knows what they might send you?'

Rain appeared to be the answer. It seemed to fall faster than normal, as if the sheer weight of water waiting to fall hurried the raindrops down. I moved in beside the Nuban. The hedge offered no shelter. The rain came through my tunic, cold enough to steal my breath. I thought then of the comforts I'd left behind, and wondered if perhaps I should have taken Lundist's counsel after all.

'Why are we waiting?' I asked. I had to raise my voice above the roar of the rain.

The Nuban shrugged. 'The road feels wrong.'

'Feels more like a river – but why are we waiting?'

He shrugged again. 'Maybe I need a rest.' He touched a hand to his burns, and a wince showed me his teeth, very white where most of the brothers had a mouthful of grey rot.

Five minutes passed and I kept my peace. We couldn't get wetter if we'd fallen down a well.

'How did you all get taken?' I asked. I thought of Price and Rike, and the notion of them surrendering to the King's guard seemed somehow comical.

The Nuban shook his head.

'How?' I asked again, louder, above the rain.

The Nuban glanced back along the road, then bent in close. 'A dream-witch.'

'A witch?' I made a face at him and spat water to the side.

'A dream-witch.' The Nuban nodded. 'The witch came in our sleep and kept us tied in dreams while the King's men took us.'

'Why?' I asked. If I took the witch seriously, and I didn't, I knew for certain that my father didn't employ any.

'I think he was seeking to please the King,' the Nuban said.

He stood without announcement and set off through the mud. I followed, but I held my tongue. I'd seen children tag after grown men throwing question after question, but I had put childhood aside. My questions could wait, at least until the rain stopped.

We splashed along at a good pace for the best part of an hour before he stopped again. The rain had graduated from deluge to a steady soak that fell with the promise of lasting the night and through the next morning. This time our pause in the hedgerow proved well judged. Ten horsemen thundered by, kicking up mud left and right.



‘Your king wants us back in his dungeons, Jorg.’

‘He’s not my king any more,’ I said. I made to stand, but the Nuban caught my shoulder.

‘You left a rich life in the King’s own castle, and now you’re hiding in the rain.’ He kept a close watch on me. He read too much with his eyes and I didn’t like it. ‘Your uncle sacrificed himself to keep you safe. A good man I think. Old, strong, wise. But you came.’ He shook a clot of mud from his free hand. A silence stretched between us, the kind that invites you to fill it with confession.

‘There’s a man I want dead.’

The Nuban frowned. ‘Children shouldn’t be this way.’ The rain ran in trickles over the furrows on his brow. ‘Men shouldn’t be this way.’

I shook loose and set off. The Nuban fell in beside me and we covered another ten miles before the light failed entirely.

Our path took us by farmhouses and the occasional mill, but as night came we saw a cluster of lights below a wooded ridge a little south of us. From memory of Lundist’s maps I guessed it to be the village of Pineacre, until now nothing more to me than a small green dot on old parchment.

‘A bit of dry would be nice.’ I could smell the wood-smoke. All of a sudden I understood how easily I’d sold the brothers my plan on the strength of warmth and food.

‘We should spend the night up there.’ The Nuban pointed to the ridge.

The rain fell soft now. It wrapped us in a cold blanket that leached my strength away. I cursed my weakness. A day on the road had left me dead on my feet.

‘We could sneak into one of those barns,’ I said. Two stood isolated, just below the treeline.

The Nuban started to shake his head. In the east thunder rumbled, low but sustained. The Nuban shrugged. ‘We could.’ The gods loved me!

We made our way through fields turned half to swamp, stumbling in the darkness, me tripping over my exhaustion.

The door to the barn groaned a protest then squealed open as the Nuban heaved on it. A dog barked somewhere in the distance, but I doubted any farmer would dare the rain on the strength of a hound’s opinion. We reeled in and fell into the hay. Each limb felt leaden, I would have sobbed with the tiredness if I’d let it have its way.

‘You’re not worried the dream-witch will come after you again?’ I asked.

‘She’s hardly going to be pleased if her present to the King has escaped.’ I stifled a yawn.

‘He,’ said the Nuban. ‘I think it’s a he.’

I pursed my lips. In my dreams the witches were always women. They’d hide in a dark room I’d never noticed before. A room whose open doorway stood off the corridor I had to follow. I’d pass the entrance and the skin on my back would crawl, invisible worms would tingle their way across the backs of my arms. I’d see her, sketched by shadows, her pale hands like spiders writhing from black sleeves. In that moment, when I tried to run, I’d become mired, as if I ran through molasses. I’d struggle, trying to shout, vomiting silence, a fly in the web, and she would advance, slow, inevitable, her face inching into the light. I’d see her eyes ... and wake screaming.

‘So you’re not worried he’ll come after you again?’ I asked.

Thunder came in a sudden clap, shaking the barn.

‘He has to be close,’ the Nuban said. ‘He has to know where you are.’

I let go of a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been keeping.

‘He’ll send his hunter after us instead,’ the Nuban said. I heard the rustle as he pulled the hay down on himself.

‘That’s a pity,’ I said. It had been a long time since I’d dreamed of my own dream-witch. I rather liked the idea that she might be chasing us here, to this barn, in the jaws of the storm. I settled back into the prickle of the hay. ‘I’ll see if I can dream a witch tonight, yours or mine, I don’t care. And if I do, this time I’m not running anywhere. I’m going to turn around and gut the bitch.’

### *Four years earlier*

Thunder again. It held me for a moment. I felt it in my chest. Then the lightning, spelling out the world in harsh new shapes. I saw visions in the afterimages. A baby shaken until the blood came from its eyes. Children dancing in a fire. Another rumble rattled the boards, and the darkness returned.

I sat in the confusion between sleep and the waking world, surrounded by the creak of wood, the shake and rattle of the wind. Lightning stabbed again and I saw the interior of the carriage, mother opposite, William beside her, curled upon the bench-seat, his knees to his chest.

‘The storm!’ I twisted and caught the window. The slats resisted me, spitting rain as the wind whistled outside.

‘Shush, Jorg,’ Mother said. ‘Go back to sleep.’

I couldn’t see her in the dark, but the carriage held her scent. Roses and lemon-grass.

‘The storm.’ I knew I’d forgotten something. That much I remembered.

‘Just rain and wind. Don’t let it frighten you, Jorg, love.’

Did it frighten me? I listened as the gusts ran their claws across the door.

‘We have to stay in the carriage,’ she said.

I let the roll and rock of the carriage take me, hunting for that memory, trying to jog it loose.

‘Sleep, Jorg.’ It was more of a command than a recommendation.

*How does she know I’m not asleep?*

Lightning struck so close I could hear the sizzle. The light crossed her face in three bars, making something feral of her eyes.

‘We have to stop the carriage. We have to get off. We have to—’

‘Go to sleep!’ Her voice carried an edge.

I tried to stand, and found myself weighed down, as if I were wading in the thickest mud ... or molasses.

‘You’re not my mother.’

‘Stay in the carriage,’ she said, her voice a whisper.

The tang of cloves cut the darkness, a breath of myrrh beneath it, the perfume of the grave. The stink of it smothered all sound. Except the slow rasp of her breath.

I hunted the door handle with blind fingers. Instead of cold metal I found corruption, the softness of flesh turned sour in death. A scream broke from me, but it couldn’t pierce the silence. I saw her in the next flash of the storm, skin peeled from the bone, raw pits for eyes.

Fear took my strength. I felt it running down my leg in a hot flood.

‘Come to mother.’ Fingers like twigs closed around my arm and drew me forward in the blackness.

No thoughts would form in the terror that held me. Words trembled on my lips but I had no mind to know what they would be.

‘You’re ... not her,’ I said.

One more flash, revealing her face an inch before mine. One more flash, and in it I saw my mother dying, bleeding in the rain of a wild night, and me hung on the briar, helpless in a grip made of more than thorns. Held by fear.

A cold rage rose in me. From the gut. I drove my forehead into the ruin of the monster’s face, and took the door handle with a surety that needed no sight.

‘No!’

And I leapt into the storm.

The thunder rolled loud enough to wake even the deepest buried. I jerked into a sitting position, confused by the stink of hay and the prickle of straw all around me. The barn! I remembered the barn.

A single point of illumination broke the night. A lantern’s glow. It hung from a beam close by the barn door. A figure, a man, a tall one, stood in the fringes of the light. The Nuban lay at his feet, caught in a troubled sleep.

I made to cry out, then bit my cheek hard enough to stop myself. The copper tang of the blood sharpened away the remnants of my dream.

The man held the biggest crossbow I’d ever seen. With one hand he began to wind back the cable. He took his time. When you’re hunting on behalf of a

dream-witch I guess you're never in a rush. Unless one of your victims escapes whatever dreams have been sent to keep them sleeping ...

I reached for my knife, and found nothing. I guessed it lost along whatever path my nightmare had led me through the hay. The lantern struck a gleam from something metal by my feet. A bailing hook. Three more turns on that crank and he'd be done. I took the hook.

The storm howl covered my approach. I didn't sneak. I walked across slow enough to be sure of my footing, fast enough to give ill fortune no time to act against me.

I'd thought to reach around and cut the bastard's throat, but he was tall, too tall for a ten-year-old's reach.

He lifted the crossbow to sight down at the Nuban.

Wait when waiting is called for. That's what Lundist used to tell me. But never hesitate.

I hooked the hunter between the legs and yanked up as hard as I could.

Where the crash of thunder and the roar of the wind had failed, the hunter's scream succeeded. The Nuban woke up. And to his credit there was no wondering where he was or what was happening. He surged to his feet and had a foot of steel through the man's chest in two heartbeats.

We stood with the hunter lying between us, each with our weapon blooded.

The Nuban wiped his blade on the hunter's cloak.

'That's a big old crossbow!' I toed it across the floor and marvelled at the weight of it.

The Nuban lifted the bow. He ran his fingers over the metalwork inlaid on the wood. 'My people made this.' He traced the symbols and the faces of fierce gods. 'And now I owe you another life.' He hefted the crossbow and smiled, his teeth a white line in the lantern glow.

'One will be enough.' I paused. 'It's Count Renar that has to die.'

And the smile left him.

## 17

The old corridors enfolded me and four years became a dream. Familiar turns, the same vases, the same suits of armour, the same paintings, even the same guards. Four years and everything was the same, except me.

In the niches small silver lamps burned oil squeezed from whales in distant seas. I walked from one pool of light to the next, behind a guard whose armour beggared my own. Makin and Gomst had been led to separate destinations, and I went alone to whatever reception awaited. The place still made me feel small. Doors built for giants, ceilings soaring so high that a man with a lance could scarcely touch them. We came to the west wing, the royal quarters. Would Father meet me here? Man to man in the arboretum? Souls bared beneath the planetarium dome? I had imagined him seated in the black claw of his throne, brooding above the court, and me led toward him between the men of the Imperial Guard.

I followed the single guard, feeling vaguely cheated. Did I want to be surrounded by armed men? Had I grown so dangerous? To be heaped with chains? Did I want him to fear me? Fourteen years old, and the King of Ancrath quaking behind his bodyguard?

I felt foolish for a moment. I brushed a hand over the hilt of my sword. They'd cast the blade from the metal that ran through the castle walls. A true heirloom, with a heritage at the Tall Castle predating mine by a thousand years at least. I ached for a confrontation then. Voices rose at the back of my mind, clamouring, fighting one against the other. The skin on my back tingled, the muscle beneath twitched for action.

'A bath, Prince Jorg?'

It was the guardsman. I nearly drew on him.

'No,' I said. I forced myself to calmness. 'I'll see the King now.'

'King Olidan has retired, Prince,' the guard said. Was he smirking at me? His eyes held an intelligence I didn't associate with the palace guard.

'Asleep?' I would have given a year of my life to take the surprise from

those words. I felt like Captain Coddin must have: the butt of a joke I had yet to comprehend.

‘Sageous awaits you in the library, my prince,’ the man said. He turned to go, but I had him by the throat.

Asleep? They were playing with me, Father and this pet magician of his.

‘This game,’ I said. ‘I expect it will provide amusement to somebody, but, if you ... worry me ... one more time, I will kill you. Think on it. You’re a piece in somebody else’s game, and all you’ll earn from it is a sword through the stomach, unless you redeem yourself in the next twenty seconds.’

It was a defeat, resorting to crude threats in a game of subtlety, but sometimes one must sacrifice a battle to win the war.

‘Prince, I ... Sageous is waiting for you ...’ I could see I’d turned his smug superiority into terror. I’d stepped outside the rules of play. I squeezed his throat a little. ‘Why would I want to speak to this ... Sageous? What’s he to me?’

‘He-he holds the King’s favour. Pl-please, Prince Jorg.’

He got the words out past my fingers. It takes no great strength to throttle a man if you know where to grip.

I let him go and he fell, gasping. ‘In the library you say? What’s your name, man?’

‘Yes, my prince, in the library.’ He rubbed at his neck. ‘Robart. My name is Robart Hool.’

I strode out across the Hall of Spears, angling for the leathered door to the library. I paused before it, turning back to Robart. ‘There are turning points, Robart. Forks in the path we follow through our lives. Times that we look back to and say, “If only”. This is one of those times. It’s not often we get them pointed out to us. At this point you’ll either decide to hate me, or to serve me. Consider the choice carefully.’ I threw the library door open. It slammed back into the wall and I walked through.

In my mind the library walls stretched to the very heavens, thick with books, pregnant with the written word. I learned to read at three years of age. I was talking with Socrates at seven, learning form and thing from Aristotle. For the longest time I had lived in this library. Memory dwarfed reality: the place looked small now, small and dusty.

‘I’ve burned more books than this!’ I said.

Sageous stepped out from the aisle given over to ancient philosophy. He was younger than I expected, forty at the most, wearing just a white cloth,

like the Roman togara. His skin held the dusky hue of the middle-lands, maybe Indus or Persia, but I could see it only in the rare spots the tattooist's needle hadn't found. He wore the text of a small book on his living hide, cut there in the flowing script of the mathmagicians. His eyes – well I know we're supposed to cower beneath the gaze of potent men, but his eyes were mild. They reminded me of the cows on the Castle Road, brown and placid. His scrutiny was the thing that cut. Somehow those mild eyes dug in. Perhaps the script beneath them bore the power. All I can say is that, for a time uncounted, I could see nothing but the heathen's eyes, hear nothing but his breath, stir no muscle but my heart.

He let me go, like a fish thrown back into the river, too small for the pot. We stood face to face, inches apart, and I'd no memory of closing the gap. But I'd come to him. We stood among the books. Among the wise words of ten thousand years. Plato to my left, copied, copied and copied again. The 'moderns' to my right, Russell, Popper, Xiang, and the rest. A small voice inside me, deep inside, called for blood. But the heathen had taken the fire from me.

'Father must depend upon you, Sageous,' I said. I twisted my fingers, wanting to want my sword. 'To have a pagan at court must vex the priests. If the pope dared leave Roma these days, she'd be here to curse your soul to eternal hellfire!' I had nothing but dogma with which to beat him.

Sageous smiled, a friendly smile, like I'd just run an errand for him. 'Prince Jorg, welcome home.' He had no real accent, but he ran his words out fluid and musical, like a Saracen or a Moor.

He stood no taller than me, in fact I probably had an inch on him. He was lean too, so I could have taken him to the floor there and then, and choked the life out of him. One murderous thought bubbled up after another, and leaked away.

'There's a lot of your father in you,' he said.

'Have you got him tamed too?' I asked.

'One doesn't tame a man like Olidan Ancrath.' His friendly smile took an edge of amusement. I wanted to know the joke. He could manage me but not my father? Or he could manipulate the King and chose to cover the fact with a smirk?

I imagined the heathen's tattooed head shorn from his shoulders, his smile frozen and blood pumping from the stump of his neck. In that instant I reached for my sword and threw all my will behind the action. The pommel



felt cold beneath my touch. I curled my fingers around the hilt, but before I could squeeze them tight, my hand fell away like a dead thing.

Sageous raised a brow at that. He'd had them shaved like his head, and drawn back in. He took a step backward.

'You're an interesting young man, Prince Jorg.' His eyes hardened. Mild one moment, and in the next, dead as flint. 'We shall have to find out what makes you tick, yes? I'll have Robart escort you to your chamber, you must be tired.' All the time he spoke, the fingers of his right hand traced words in the flowing script across his left arm, brushing over one symbol jumping higher to a black crescent moon, underlining a phrase, underlining it again. I did feel tired. I felt lead in every limb, pulling me down.

'Robart!' he called out loud enough for the corridor.

He looked back to me, mild again. 'I expect you'll have dreams, Prince, after so long away.' His fingers moved over new lines, left hand, right arm. He traced words blacker than night across the veins in his wrist. 'Dreams tell a man who he is.'

I struggled to keep my eyes open. On Sageous's neck, just to the left of his Adam's apple, amid all the tight-packed scrawl, was a letter, bigger than the rest, curled and recurled so it looked like a flower.

*Touch the flower, I thought. Touch the pretty flower.* And as if by magic, my treacherous hand moved. It took him by surprise, my fingers at his throat. I heard the door open behind me.

*He's skinny, I thought. So skinny.* I wonder if I could close my hand around his neck. I admitted no hint of violence, just curiosity. And there it was, my hand around his neck. I heard Robart's sudden intake of breath. Sageous stood frozen, his mouth half open, as if he couldn't believe it.

I could barely stand, I could hardly keep the yawning from my voice, but I held his eye and let him think that the pressure I put on him was a threat, and not to keep me from falling.

'My dreams are my own, heathen,' I said. 'Pray you're not in them.'

I turned then, before I fell, and strode past Robart. He caught up in the Hall of Spears.

'I've never seen anyone lay hand on Sageous, my prince.'

My prince. That was better. There was admiration in his voice, maybe genuine, maybe not, I was too tired to care.

'He's a dangerous man, his enemies die in their sleep. That or they're broken. Lord Jale left the court two days after disagreeing with the pagan in

front of your father. They say he can't feed himself now, and spends his days singing an old nursery rhyme over and over.'

I reached the West Stair, Robart prattling beside me. He broke off all of a sudden. 'Your chamber is off the Red Corridor, my prince.' He stopped and studied his boots. 'The Princess has your former chamber.'

Princess? I didn't care. Tomorrow, tomorrow I would find out. I let him lead me to my room. One of the guest rooms off the Red Corridor. The chamber could have housed many a tavern I'd slept in, but it was a studied insult none the less. A room for a country baron or distant cousin visiting from the protectorates.

I stopped at the door, reeling with exhaustion. Sageous's spell bit deeper and my strength left me like blood from sliced veins.

'I told you it was time to choose, Robart,' I said. I forced the words out one by one. 'Get Makin Bortha here. Let him guard my door this night. Time to choose.'

I didn't wait for a reply. If I had, he'd have had to carry me to bed. I pushed the door and half-staggered, half-fell, into the chamber. I collapsed back against the door, closing it, and slid to the floor. It felt like I kept on sliding, deeper and deeper, into an endless well.

## 18

I woke up with that sudden convulsion you get when every muscle you own suddenly realizes it's dropped off on duty. Next came the shock of realizing how deeply I'd been asleep. You don't sleep like that on the road, not if you want to wake up again. For a moment the darkness would yield nothing to my confusion. I reached for my sword and found only soft sheets. The Tall Castle! It came back to me. I remembered the pagan and his spell.

I rolled to the right. I always left my gear on my right side. Nothing but more mattress, soft and deep. I might have been blind for all the help my eyes gave. I guessed the shutters were shut tight, for not the slightest whisper of starlight reached me. It was quiet too. I reached out for the edge of the bed, and didn't find it. *A wide bed*, I thought, trying to find some humour in the situation.

I let go the breath I'd been holding, the one I sucked in so fast when I woke. What was it that made me start? What dragged me out of the pagan's spell in this oh so comfortable bed? I pulled my hand back, drew my knees to my chest. Somebody had put me to bed and taken my clothes. Not Makin, he'd not leave me naked against the night. That somebody and I would be having a discussion soon enough. But it could wait until morning. I just wanted to sleep, to let the day come.

Only sleep had kicked me out, and it wasn't about to let me back in. So I lay there, naked in the strange bed, and wondered where my sword was.

The noise came so quiet at first I could believe I imagined it. I stared blind into the darkness and let my ears suck in the silence. It came again, soft as the whisper of flesh on stone. I could hear the ghost of a sound, a breath being drawn. Or maybe just a night breeze fingering its way through the shutters.

Ice ran up my spine, tingling on my shoulders. I sat up, biting back the urge to speak, to show bravado to the unseen terrors. *I'm not six years old*, I told myself. *I've made the dead run*. I threw the sheets back and stood up. If the pagan's horror was waiting in the darkness then sheets would be no

shield. With my hands held up before me, I walked forward, finding first the elusive edge of the bed, and then the wall. I turned and followed it, fingers trailing the stonework. Something went tumbling and broke with an expensive crash. I barked my shins on an unseen obstacle, nearly groined myself on a sideboard of some kind, then found the shutter slats.

I fumbled with the shutter catch. It defied me maddeningly, as though my fingers were frost-clumsy. The skin on my back crawled. I heard footsteps drawing closer. I hauled on the shutters with all my strength. Every move I made seemed slow and feeble, as though I moved through molasses, like in those dreams where the witch chases you and you can't run.

The shutters gave without warning. They flew back and I found that I was standing high above the execution yard, drenched in moonlight. I spun around. Slow, too slow. And found nothing. Just a room of silver and shadows.

The window threw the moonlight on the wall to my right. My shadow reached forward in the arch of the window and fell at the feet of a tall portrait. A full length picture of a woman. I went numb: my face felt like a mask. I knew the picture. Mother. Mother in the great hall. Mother in a white dress, tall and icy in her perfection. She said she never liked that picture, that the artist had made her too distant, too much the queen. Only William softened it, she said. If she'd not had William hugging to her skirts she would have given the picture away, she said. But she couldn't throw little William away.

I pulled my eyes from her face, pale in the silver light. She loomed above me, tall in life, taller in the portrait. Her dress fell in cascades of lace-froth: the artist had caught it well. He made it look real.

The open shutters let in a chill and I felt a cold beyond any autumn frost. My skin rose in tiny bumps. She couldn't throw William away. Only William wasn't there any more ... I took a step back toward the open window.

'Sweet Jesu ...' I blinked away tears.

Mother's eyes followed me.

'Jesu wasn't there, Jorg,' she said. 'Nobody came to save us. You watched us, Jorg. You watched, but you didn't come to help.'

'No.' I felt the window sill cold against the back of my knees. 'The thorns ... the thorns held me.'

She looked at me, eyes silver with the moon. She smiled and I thought for a moment she would forgive me. Then she screamed. She didn't scream the

screams she'd made when the Count's men raped her. I could have stood that. Maybe. She screamed the screams she made when they killed William. Ugly, hoarse, animal screams, torn from her perfect painted face.

I howled back. The words burst from me. 'The thorns! I tried, Mother. I tried.'

He rose up from behind the bed then. William, sweet William with the side of his head caved in. The blood clotted black on his golden hair. The eye that side was gone, but the other held me.

'You let me die, Jorg,' he said. He spoke it past a bubbling in his throat.

'Will.' I couldn't say any more.

He lifted a hand to me, white with the trickles of blood darkest crimson.

The window yawned behind me and I made to throw myself back through it, but as I did something jolted me forward. I staggered and righted myself. Will stood there, silent now.

'Jorg! Jorg!' A shout reached me, distant but somehow familiar.

I looked back toward the window and the dizzying fall.

'Jump,' said William.

'Jump!' Mother said.

But Mother didn't sound like Mother any more.

'Jorg! Prince Jorg!' The shout came louder now, and a more violent jolt threw me to the floor.

'Get out of the fucking way, boy.' I recognized Makin's voice. He stood framed in the doorway, lamplight behind. And somehow I lay on the floor at his feet. Not by the window. Not naked, but in my armour still.

'You were jammed up against the door, Jorg,' Makin said. 'This Robart fellow told me to come running, and here you are screaming behind the door.' He glanced around, looking for the danger. 'I ran from the South Wing for your blasted nightmare did I?' He shoved the door open wider and added a belated, 'Prince.'

I got to my feet, feeling as if I'd been rolled on by Fat Burlow. There was no painting on the wall, no Mother, no Will behind the bed.

I drew my sword. I needed to kill Sageous. I wanted it so badly I could taste it, like blood, hot and salt in my mouth.

'Jorg?' Makin asked. He looked worried, as if he was wondering if I'd gone mad.

I moved toward the open door. Makin stepped to block me. 'You can't go out there with a drawn sword, Jorg, the guard would have to stop you.'

He didn't stand as tall or as wide as Rike, but Makin was a big man, broad in the shoulder and stronger than a man should be. I didn't think I could take him down without killing him.

'It's all about sacrifice, Makin,' I said. I let my sword drop.

'Prince?' He frowned.

'I'm going to let that tattooed bastard live,' I said. 'I need him.' I glimpsed my mother again, fading. 'I need to understand what game is being played out here. Who exactly the pieces are and who the players are.'

Makin's frown deepened. 'You get some sleep, Jorg. In the bed this time.' He glanced back into the corridor. 'Do you want some light in there?'

I smiled at that. 'No,' I said. 'I'm not afraid of the dark.'

## 19

I woke early. A grey light through the shutters showed me the room for the first time: big, well-furnished, hunting tapestries on the walls. I uncoiled my fingers from my sword hilt, stretched and yawned. It didn't feel right, this bed. It was too soft, too clean. When I threw the covers back they knocked the servant-bell from the bedside table. It hit the flagstones with a pretty tinkling then bounced onto a rug and lost its voice. Nobody came. That suited me fine: I'd dressed myself for four years. Hell, I'd rarely undressed! And what rags I had would be put to shame by the meanest of servant smocks. Even so. Nobody came.

I wore my armour over the grey tatters of my shirt. A looking-glass lay on the sideboard. I let it lie there face down. A quick run of fingers through hair in search of any louse fat enough to be found, and I was ready to break my fast.

First I threw the shutters open. No fumbling with the catch this time. I looked out over the execution yard, a square bounded by the blank walls of the Tall Castle. Kitchen-boys and maids hastened across the bleak courtyard, going about their various quests, blind to the pale wash of the sky so high above them.

I turned from the window and set off on my own little quest. Every prince knows the kitchens better than any other quarter of his castle. Where else can so much adventure be found? Where else is the truth spoken so plain? William and I learned a hundred times more in the kitchens of the Tall Castle than from our books on Latin and strategy. We'd steal ink-handed from Lundist's study and sprint through long corridors, leaping down the stairs too many at a time, to reach the refuge of the kitchens.

I walked those same corridors now, ill at ease in the confined space. I'd spent too long under wide skies, living bloody. We learned about death in the kitchens too. We watched the cook turn live chickens to dead meat with a twist of his hands. We watched Ethel the Bread pluck the fat hens, leaving

them naked in death, ready for gutting. You soon learn there's no elegance or dignity in death if you spend time in the castle kitchens. You learn how ugly it is, and how good it tastes.

I turned the corner at the end of the Red Corridor, too full of memories to pay attention. All I saw was a figure bearing down on me. Instincts learned on the road took over. Before I had time to register the long hair and silks, I had her against the wall, a hand across her mouth and my knife to her throat. We were face by face and my captive held my stare, eyes an unreal green like stained glass. I let my snarl relax into a smile and unclenched my teeth. I stepped back, letting her off the wall.

'Your pardon, my lady,' I said, and sketched her a shallow bow. She was tall, nearly my height, and surely not many years my senior.

She gave me a fierce grin and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. It came away bloody, from a bitten tongue. Gods but she was good to look at. She had a strong face, sharp in the nose and cheekbones but rich in the lips, all framed by the darkest red hair.

'Lord how you stink, boy,' she said. She stepped around me, as if she was checking a horse at market. 'You're lucky Sir Galen isn't with me, or a skivvy would be picking your head off the ground about now.'

'Sir Galen?' I asked. 'I'll be sure to watch out for him.' She had diamonds around her neck on a complex web of gold. Spanard work: none on the Horse Coast could make a thing like that. 'It wouldn't do for the King's guests to go about killing one another.' I took her for the daughter of a merchant come atobadying to the King. A very rich merchant, or maybe the daughter of some count or earl from the east: there was a eastern burr to her voice.

'You're a guest?' She raised a brow at that, and very pretty it looked too. 'I think not. You look to have stolen in. By the privy chute to judge by the smell. I don't think you could have climbed the walls, not in that clunky old armour.'

I clicked my heels together, like the table knights, and offered her an arm. 'I was on my way to break fast in the kitchens. They know me there. Perhaps you'd like to accompany me and check my credentials, lady?'

She nodded, ignoring my arm. 'I can send a kitchen-boy for the guards and have you arrested, if we don't meet any on the way.'

So we walked side by side through the corridors and down one flight of stairs after another.

'My brothers call me Jorg,' I said. 'How are you called, lady?' I found the



court-speak awkward on the tongue, especially with my mouth so unaccountably dry. She smelled like flowers.

‘You can call me “my lady”,’ she said, and wrinkled her nose again. We passed two of the house guards in their fire-bronze plate and plumes. Both of them studied me as if I was a turd escaped from the privy, but she said nothing and they let us pass.

We passed the storerooms where the salt beef and pickled pork lay in barrels, stacked to the ceiling. ‘My lady’ seemed to know the way. She shot me a glance with those emerald eyes of hers.

‘So did you come here to steal, or for murder with that dagger of yours?’ she asked.

‘Perhaps a bit of both.’ I smiled.

A good question though. I couldn’t say why I’d come, other than I felt somebody didn’t want me to. Ever since that moment when I found Father Gomst in his cage, ever since that ghost ran its course through me and my thoughts turned to the Tall Castle, it felt as though someone were steering me away. And I don’t take direction.

We passed Short Bridge, little more than three mahogany planks over the great iron valves that could seal the lower levels from the castle main. The doors, steel and three feet thick, would slide up from the gaping slot in the corridor floor, so Tutor Lundist told me. Lifted on old magic. I’d never seen them close. Torches burned here, no silver lamps for the servant levels. The stink of tar-smoke made me more at home than anything yet.

‘Perhaps I’ll stay,’ I said.

The kitchen arch lay just ahead of us. I could see Drane, the assistant cook, wrestling half a hog through the doors.

‘Wouldn’t your brothers miss you?’ she asked, playful now. She touched her fingers to the corner of her mouth, where the red pattern of my fingers had started to rise. Something in her gesture made me rise too.

I shrugged, then paused as I worked the straps of the vambrace over my left forearm. ‘There are plenty of brothers on the road,’ I said. ‘Let me show you the kind of brothers I meant ...’

‘Here,’ she said, impatient.

The torch-light burned in the red of her hair. She undid the clasps with deft fingers. The girl knew armour. Perhaps Sir Galen was for more than just beheading ill-mannered louts?

‘What then?’ she asked. ‘I’ve seen arms before, though maybe not one so

dirty.'

I grinned at that and turned my arm over so she could see the Brotherhood brand across my wrist. Three ugly bands of burn-scar. A look of distaste furrowed her brow. 'You're a sell-sword? You take your pride in that?'

'More pride in that than in what true family I have left.' I felt a bite of anger. I felt like sending this distracting merchant's daughter on her way, making her run.

'What are these?' She reached out to run her fingers from the brand up to the small of my elbow where the armour stopped her. 'Jesu! There's more scar than boy under this dirt!'

At her touch a thrill ran through me, and I pulled away. 'I fell in a thorn bush when ... when I was a child,' I said, my voice too sharp.

'Some thorn bush!' she said.

I shrugged. 'A hook-briar.'

She twisted her mouth into an 'ouch'. 'You've got to lie still in one of those,' she said, her eyes still on my arm. 'Everyone knows that. Looks as if it tore you to the bone.'

'I know that. *Now.*' I set off for the kitchen doors, walking fast.

She ran to catch me, silks swirling. 'Why did you struggle? Why didn't you stop?'

'I was stupid,' I said. 'I wouldn't struggle now.' I wanted the silly bitch to leave. I didn't even feel hungry any more.

My arm burned with the memory of her fingers. She was right, the thorns had cut me deep. Every few weeks for more than a year the poison would flare in the wounds and run through my blood. When the poison ran in me I'd done things that scared even the brothers.

Drane lumbered out through the doors just as I reached them. He pulled up short, and wiped his hands on the soiled white apron stretched over his belly. 'Wh—' He looked past me and his eyes widened. 'Princess!' He seemed suddenly terrified, quivering like a blob of jelly. 'Princess! Wh-what are you doing in the kitchens? It's no place for a lady in silks and all.'

'Princess?' I turned to stare at her. I'd left my mouth open, so I closed it.

She gave me a smile that left me wondering if I wanted to slap it off her, or kiss it. Before I could decide, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder, and Drane turned me round. 'And what's a ruffian like you doing leading her highness astray ...' The question died in his throat. His fat face crinkled up and he tried to speak again, but the words wouldn't come. He let me go and

found his voice. ‘Jorg? Little Jorg?’ Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Will and I had watched the man throttle a few chickens and bake a few pies: there was no call for him to start blubbing over me. I let him off the embarrassment though, he’d given me the chance to see her royal highness look surprised. I grinned at her and gave a court bow.

‘Princess, eh? So I guess that means the road-trash you wanted to have the palace guards arrest is in fact your step-brother.’

She recovered her composure quickly. I’ll give her that.

‘Actually, that would make you my nephew,’ she said. ‘Your father married my older sister two months ago. I’m your Aunt Katherine.’

## 20

We sat at the long trestle where the kitchen skivvies ate their meals, Aunt Katherine and I. The servants cleared the low vault and brought in more light, candles of every length and girth in clay holders. They watched from the doorways at either end, a shabby crowd grinning and bobbing as though it was a holy day or a high day, and we were the mummers to entertain them. Drane hove into view and crested through the skivvies like a barge through water. He brought fresh bread, honey in a bowl, golden butter, and silver knives.

‘This is the place to eat,’ I said. I kept my eyes on Katherine. She didn’t seem to mind. ‘Bread hot from the oven.’ It steamed when I tore it open. Heaven must smell like fresh bread. ‘I knew I missed you for a reason, Drane.’ I called the words over my shoulder. I knew the fat cook would bask in that for a year. I hadn’t missed him. I hadn’t spared him but one thought for every hundred times I dreamed of his pies. In fact I’d struggled to remember his name when I saw him in the doorway. But something about the girl made me want to be the kind of man who would remember.

The first bite woke my hunger and I tore at the loaf as though it were a haunch of venison and me huddled on the road with the brothers. Katherine paused to watch, her knife suspended above the honey bowl, her lips twitching with a smile.

‘Mmmfflg.’ I chewed and swallowed. ‘What?’ I demanded.

‘She’s probably wondering if you’ll go under the table when the bread’s gone and wrestle the dogs for bones.’ Makin had come up behind me unnoticed.

‘Damn but you’d make a good footpad, Sir Makin.’ I swung round to find him standing over me, his armour gleaming. ‘A man in plate-mail should have the decency to clank.’

‘I clanked plenty, Prince,’ he said. He showed me an annoying smile. ‘You had your mind on more pressing matters maybe?’ He bowed toward

Katherine. 'My lady. I haven't had the honour?'

She extended a hand to him. 'Princess Katherine Ap Scorrón.'

Makin raised a brow at that. He took her hand and bowed again, much more deeply, lifting her fingers to his lips. He had thick lips, sensuous. He'd washed his face and his hair gleamed as much as his armour, coal-black and curled. He cleaned up well, and for the smallest moment I hated him without reservation.

'Take a seat,' I said. 'I'm sure the excellent Drane can find more bread.'

He let go of her hand. Too slowly for my liking. 'Sadly, my prince, duty rather than hunger brings me to the kitchens. I thought I might find you here. You're summoned to the throne-room. There must be a hundred squires hunting the halls for you. You also, Princess.' He favoured her with an appreciative stare. 'I met a fellow named Galen searching for you.' Something tight laced those last words. Makin didn't like Sir Galen any more than I did. And he'd met the man.

I took the bread with me. It was too good to leave.

We found our way back above ground. The Tall Castle appeared to have woken up during my trip to the kitchens. Squires and maids ran this way and that. Plumed guards passed by in twos and fives, bound for their duties. We skirted a lord in his furs and gold chain, girded by flunkies, leaving him with his astonishment, his bowing, and his 'Good morning, Princess!'

By corridor and hall we reached Torrent Vault, the antechamber before the throne-room where the tourney armour of past kings lined the walls like hollow knights standing silent vigil.

'Prince Honourous Jorg Ancrath, and the Princess Katherine,' Makin announced us to the guards before the doors. He placed me before the princess. A small matter on the road, but a touch that spoke volumes in the Torrent Vault. *Here is the heir to the throne, let him in.*

The crested guardsmen flanking the hallway stood as still as the armour on the stands behind them. They followed us only with their eyes, gauntleted hands kept folded on the pommels of their greatswords, set point to floor. The two table knights at the throne-room doors exchanged a glance. They paused for a moment to bow to Katherine, then set to work drawing the great doors open wide enough to admit us. I recognized one of them by the coat of arms on his breastplate, horns above an elm. Sir Reilly. He'd turned grey in the years I'd been gone. He struggled with his door, straining to move the oak in its bronze cladding. The doors parted. Our narrow view grew from a sliver of

warm light to a window on a world I once knew. The Court of the Ancrath kings.

‘Princess?’ I took her hand, holding it high, and we walked through.

The men that built the Tall Castle lacked nothing in skill, and everything in imagination. Their walls might remain for ten thousand years, but they would hold no artistry. The throne-room was a windowless box. A box one hundred feet on every side maybe, and with a twenty-foot ceiling to dwarf the courtiers, but a box none the less. Elaborate wooden galleries for the musicians muted the harsh corners, and the King’s dais added a certain splendour. I kept my eyes from the throne.

‘The Princess Katherine Ap Scorrón,’ the herald called.

No mention of poor Jorgy. No herald would dare such a slight without instruction.

We crossed the wide floor, our pace measured, watched by the guardsmen at the walls. Men with crossbows by the walls to left and right, swordsmen at the plinth and by the door.

I might have been nameless, but my arrival had certainly roused some interest. In addition to the guardsmen and despite the early hour, at least a hundred courtiers formed our audience. They waited attendance on the throne, milling around the lowest steps in their velvets. I let my eyes stray across the glittering crowd, pausing to linger on the finest jewels. I still had my road-habits and made mental tally of their worth. A new charger on that countess’s fat bosom alone. That lord’s chain of office could buy ten suits of scale armour. There was surely a fine longbow and a pony in each of his rings. I had to remind myself I played for new stakes now. Same old game, new stakes. Not higher, but different.

The gentle chatter of the court rose and fell as we approached. The soft hubbub of knife-edged comments, damaging sarcasm, honeyed insults. Here the sharp intake of breath at the Prince coming to court still wearing the road, there the mocking laughter half-hidden behind a silk handkerchief.

I let myself look at him then.

Four years had wrought no change in my father. He sat on the high-backed throne, hunched in a wolf-skin robe edged with silver. He’d worn the same robe on the day I left. The Ancrath crown rested on his brow: a warrior crown, an iron band set with rubies, confining black hair streaked with the same grey as the iron. To his left, in the consort chair, the new queen sat. She had Katherine’s looks, though softer, with a web of silver and moonstones to

tame her hair. Any sign of her pregnancy lay hid beneath the ivory froth of her gown.

Between the thrones grew a magnificent tree, wrought all of glass, its leaves the emerald of Katherine's eyes, wide and thin and many. It reached a slender nine feet in height, its twigs and branches gnarled and vitreous, brown as caramel. I'd never seen the like before. I wondered if it might be the Queen's dowry. Surely it had the worth.

Sageous stood beside the glass tree, in the dappled green light beneath its leaves. He'd abandoned the simple white he'd worn when first we met in favour of black robes, high in the collar, with a rope of obsidian plates about his neck. I met his eyes as we approached, and manufactured a smile for him.

The courtiers drew back before us, Makin to the fore, Katherine and me hand in hand. The perfumes of lords and ladies tickled at my nose: lavender and orange oil. On the road, shit has the decency to stink.

Only two steps down from the throne a tall knight stood in magnificent plate, the iron worked over with fire-bronze, twin dragons coiling on his breastplate in a crimson inferno.

'Sir Galen.' Makin hissed the words back at me.

I glanced at Katherine and found her smile unreadable. Galen watched us with hot blue eyes. I liked him a little better for wearing his hostility so plainly. He had the blonde hair of a Teuton, his features square and handsome. He was old though. As old as Makin. Thirty summers at the least.

Sir Galen made no move to let Makin past. We stopped five steps down.

'Father,' I said. In my head, I'd made my speech a hundred times but somehow the old bastard managed to steal the words from my tongue. The silence stretched between us. 'I hope—' I started again but he cut over me.

'Sir Makin,' Father said, not even looking at me. 'When I send the captain of the palace guard out to retrieve a ten-year-old child, I expect him to return by nightfall. Perhaps a day or three might suffice if the child proved particularly elusive.' Father raised his left hand from the arm of the throne, just by an inch or two but enough to cue his audience. A scattered tittering sounded among the ladies, cut off when his fingers returned to the iron-wood of the chair.

Makin bowed his head and said nothing.

'A week or two on such a task would signify incompetence. More than three years speaks of treason.'

Makin looked up at that. 'Never, my king! Never treason.'

‘We once had reason to consider you fit for high office, Sir Makin,’ Father said, his voice as cold as his eyes. ‘So, you may explain yourself.’

The sweat gleamed on Makin’s brow. He’d have gone through this speech as many times as I had mine. He’d probably lost it just as profoundly.

‘The Prince has all the resourcefulness one might hope for in the heir to the throne,’ Makin began. I saw the Queen frown at his turn of phrase. Even Father’s mouth tightened and he glanced at me, fleeting and unreadable. ‘When at last I found him we were in hostile lands ... Jaseth ... more than three hundred miles to the south.’

‘I know where Jaseth is, Sir Makin,’ Father said. ‘Do not presume to lecture me on geography.’

Makin inclined his head. ‘Your majesty has many enemies, as do all great men in these times of trouble. No single blade, even one as loyal as my own, could protect your heir in such lands as Jaseth. Prince Jorg’s best defence lay in anonymity.’

I glanced over the court. It seemed that Makin’s speech had not deserted him after all. His words had an impact.

Father ran a hand over his beard. ‘Then you should have ridden back to the castle with a nameless charge, Sir Makin. I wonder that this journey took four years.’

‘The Prince had taken up with a band of mercenaries, your majesty. By his own skill he won their allegiance. He told me plain that if I moved to take him they would kill me and that if I stole him away, he would announce himself to every passer by. And I believed him, for he has the will of an Ancrath.’

*Time to be heard*, I thought. ‘Four years on the road have given you a better captain,’ I said. ‘There’s more to learn about making war than can be discovered in this castle. We—’

‘You lack enterprise, Sir Makin,’ Father said. His eyes never flickered from Makin. I wondered if I’d spoken at all. Anger tinged his voice now. ‘Had I ridden out after the boy, I would have found a way to return with him from Jaseth within a month.’

Sir Makin bowed deeply. ‘That is why you deserve your throne, majesty, whilst I am merely captain of your palace guard.’

‘You are the captain of my guard no longer,’ Father said. ‘Sir Galen serves in that capacity now, as he served the House of Scorrion.’

Galen offered Makin the slightest of bows, a mocking smile on his lips.



‘Perhaps you would like to challenge Sir Galen for your old office?’ Father asked. Again he fingered his salt-and-pepper beard.

I sensed a trap here. Father didn’t want Makin back.

‘Your majesty has chosen his captain,’ Makin said. ‘I would not presume to over-write that decision with my sword.’ He sensed the trap too.

‘Indulge me.’ Father smiled then, for the first time since our entrance, and it was a cold thing. ‘The court has been quiet in your absence. You owe us some entertainment. Let us have a show.’ He paused. ‘Let us see what you have learned on the road.’ So he did hear me.

‘Father—’ I started. And again he cut me off. I couldn’t seem to rise above him.

‘Sageous, take the boy,’ he said.

And that was that. The heathen had his eyes on me and led me mild as a sheep to stand with him between the thrones. Katherine shot me a pale glance and hastened to her sister’s side.

Makin and Galen bowed to the King. They went out through the press of courtiers, breaking free and crossing to where an inlaid marble star, some ten feet across, marked the middle of the throne-room floor. They faced each other, bowed, and drew steel.

Makin bore the longsword Father gave him when he took captaincy of the palace guard. A good weapon, Indian steel woven dark and light, acid-etched with old runes of power. Our time on the road had left its history recorded in notches along the blade. I’d never seen a better swordsman than Makin. I didn’t want to see one here.

Sir Galen made no move. He held his longsword ready, but in a lazy grip. I could see no marking on the weapon, a simple blade, forged from the black iron of the Turkmen.

‘Never trust a Turkman sword ...’ I spoke in a whisper.

‘For Turkman iron sucks up spells like a sponge and holds a bitter edge.’ Sageous finished the old line for me.

I had a sharp reply for the heathen, but the clash of swords rang out over it. Makin advanced on the Teuton, feinting low then swinging high. Makin had an elemental way with a sword. The blade was part of him, a living thing from tip to hilt. In a wild fight he knew where every danger lay, and where his cover waited.

Sir Galen blocked and delivered a sharp riposte. Their swords flickered and the play of metal rang out high and sharp. I could barely follow the

exchange. Galen fought with technical precision. He fought like a man who rose at dawn every day to train and duel. He fought like a man who expected to win.

A hundred narrow escapes from death counted out the first minute of their duel. I found my right hand gripping the trunk of the glass tree, the crystal slick and cool under my fingers. By the end of that first minute I could tell Galen would win. This was his game. Makin had his brilliance but, like me, he fought in real fights. He fought in the mud. He fought through burning villages. He used the battlefield. But this dry little game, so narrow in its scope, this was all Galen lived for.

Makin swung at Galen's legs. A touch too tight in the curve, and Galen made him pay. The tip of the Turkman blade sketched a red line across Makin's forehead. A quarter of an inch more reach in Galen's arm and the blow would have shattered Makin's skull.

'So, you open your game by sacrificing your knight, Prince Jorg.' Sageous spoke close to my ear.

I startled. I'd forgotten about the man. My gaze wandered to the green canopy above us. 'I have no problems with sacrifice, heathen.' The tree trunk slipped glassy smooth under my fingers as my left hand moved up along the trunk. The clash of swords punctuated our conversation. 'But I sacrifice only when there is something to be gained.'

The tree was heavier than I had imagined and for a moment I didn't think I could topple it. I braced my legs and put my shoulder to the task. The thing fell without a sound, then exploded into a million pieces against the steps. I could have blinded half of Ancrath's aristocracy had their eyes been on the throne rather than the fight before them. As it was I peppered their backs with shards of glass. The costumed throng at the base of the royal dais turned into a screaming mass. Noble-born women ran their hands through hair confined by diamond tiaras, and brought them out sliced and bloody. Lords in thread-of-gold slippers, coiled in the latest fashions, hopped howling on a carpet of broken glass.

Sir Makin and Sir Galen lowered their swords and watched in amazement. When Father stood, everyone fell silent, cuts or no cuts.

Everyone except me. He opened his mouth to speak and I spoke first.

'The lessons Makin learned on the road did not include tourney games. Wars are not won with jousting or chivalry. The lessons Makin learned are the same lessons I learned. Unfortunately Sir Makin would rather die than

offend his king by demonstrating them.’ I didn’t raise my voice. That kept them quiet. ‘Father,’ I turned to face him direct. ‘I’ll show you what I’ve learned. I’ll fight your pet Teuton. If a man of my little experience can defeat your champion then you should be happy to reinstate Sir Makin, neh?’ I fell back into road-speak, hoping to stir his anger.

‘You’re not a man, boy, and your challenge is an insult to Sir Galen, not worthy of consideration.’ He spoke through clenched teeth. I’d never seen him so angry. In fact, I’d never seen him angry.

‘An insult? Maybe.’ I felt a smile bubbling up and let it show. ‘But I am a man. I came of age three days ago, Father. I’m fit for marriage now. A valuable commodity. And I claim this fight as my Year Gift. Or would you turn your back on three centuries of Ancrath tradition and deny me my coming of age boon?’

The veins in his neck stood proud and his hands flexed as if hungry for a sword. I didn’t think it safe to count on his good will.

‘If I die the succession will be clear,’ I said. ‘Your Scorrion whore will give you a new son, and you’ll be rid of me. Gone for good, like Mother and William. And you won’t have to send dear old Father Gomst trawling the mire to prove it.’ I took a moment to bow toward the Queen. ‘No offence, your majesty.’

‘Galen!’ Father’s voice was a roar. ‘Kill this devil, for he’s no son of mine!’

I ran then, crunching emerald leaves under hard leather. Sir Galen charged from the centre star, trailing his black sword behind him, shouting for my blood. He came fast enough, but the fight with Makin had taken some of his wind. I knocked an old woman from my path, she went down spitting teeth, pearls spilling from her broken necklace.

I won free of the courtiers and kept on running, angled away from Galen. He’d given up the shouting but I could hear him behind me, the thud of his boots and the rasp of his breath. He must have been a hand above six foot, but lighter armour and fresher wind made up for my shorter legs. As we ran, I pulled out my sword. There were charms enough in its edge to put a notch in that Turkman blade. I threw it away. I didn’t need the weight.

Little space remained to me. The left wall loomed just yards ahead, Galen moments behind.

I’d been aiming for one guardsman in particular, a younger fellow with fair sideburns and an open mouth. By the time he realized I wasn’t veering away,

it was too late. I hit him with the vambrace over my right forearm. The blow hammered his head back against the wall and he slid down it with no further interest in the proceedings. I caught the crossbow in my left hand, turned, and shot Galen through the bridge of the nose.

The bolt barely made it through his skull. It's one of the drawbacks in keeping them loaded, but still it should have been tightened only hours before. In any event, most of the Teuton's brain left by the back of his head and he fell down very dead.

The silence would have been utter but for the whimpering of the old woman on the floor back by the dais. I looked back over the crowd of nobles, cut and bloody, at Galen lying with his arms flung out, at the sparkling ruins of the glass tree reaching toward the throne-room doors.

'Was the show to your liking, Father?' I asked. 'I've heard that the court has been quiet in Sir Makin's absence.'

And for the first time in my life I heard my father laugh. A chuckle at first, then louder, then a howling gale such that he had to hold his throne to stand.

## 21

‘Get out.’ Father’s laughing fit left him without warning, snuffed like a candle. He spoke into the silence. ‘Get out. I’ll talk to the boy now.’ The boy, not ‘my son’. I didn’t miss that edge.

And they went. The high and the mighty, the lords and the ladies, the guards helping the injured, two of them dragging Galen’s corpse. Makin followed after Galen, crunch, crunch, crunch, across the broken glass, as if to make sure no life remained in him. Katherine let herself be led by a table knight. She stopped though, at the base of the dais, and gave me a look as if she’d just that moment seen me for what I was. I sketched her a mocking bow, a reflex, like reaching for a blade. It hurt to see the hatred on her face, pure and astonished, but sometimes a bit of pain’s just what we need: to cauterize the wound, burn out the infection. She saw me and I saw her, both of us stripped of pretence in that empty moment, newlyweds naked for their conjugals. I saw her for the same weakness I’d recognized when first we rode back into the green fields of Ancrath. That soft seduction of need and want, an equation of dependence that eases under the skin, so slow and sweet, only to lay a man open at the very time he most needs his strength. Oh, it hurt right enough, but I finished my bow and watched her back as they led her out.

The Queen went too, flanked by knights right and left, slightly awkward down the steps, a hint of a waddle. I could see the swell of her belly now, as she walked. My half-brother if Sageous’s prediction held true. Heir to the throne should I die. Just a swelling now, just a hint, but sometimes that’s all it takes. I recalled Brother Kane from the road, cut on the bicep when we took the village of Holt.

‘T’ain’t nothing, little Jorgy,’ he’d said when I offered to heat a knife. ‘Some farm boy with a rusty hoe. It don’t go deep.’

‘It’s swelling,’ I told him. ‘Needs hot iron.’ If it’s not too late already.

‘Fuck that, not for some farm boy with a hoe,’ Kane said.

He died hard, did Kane. Three days later and his arm lay as thick as my

waist, weeping pus greener than snot, and with a stench so bad we left him screaming to die alone. *It don't go deep* – but sometimes the shallow cut bites to the bone if you don't deal with it hard and fast.

Just a swelling. I watched the Queen go.

Sageous stayed. His eyes kept returning to the shattered ruin of the tree. You'd have thought he'd lost his lover.

'Pagan, see to the Queen,' Father said. 'She may need calming.'

A dismissal, plain and simple, but Sageous was too distracted to see it. He looked up from the glittering remains of the trunk I'd toppled. 'Sire, I...'

*You what, heathen? You want something? It's not your place to want.*

'I...'

This was new to Sageous, I could see that: he was used to control. 'You should not be left unattended, Sire. The b—'

*The boy? Say it man, spit it out.*

'It may not be safe.'

Wrong thing to say. I guessed the heathen had relied on his magics too long. If he'd truly learned my father's mind he'd know better than to suggest he needed protection from me.

'Out.'

Whatever else I might think of my dear father I always did admire his way with words.

The look Sageous gave me held more than hate. Where Katherine channelled a pure emotion the tattooed magician offered bewildering complexity. Oh there was hate there, sure enough, but admiration too, respect maybe, and other flavours, all mixed in those mild brown eyes.

'Sire.' He bowed and started toward the doors.

We watched him in silence, watched him pace across the sparkling carpet of debris, spotted here with a discarded fan, there with a powdered wig. The doors closed behind him with a dull clang of bronze on bronze. A scar on the wall behind the throne caught my attention. I threw a hammer once, hard, and missed my target. It hit there. It seemed to be a day for old scars, old feelings.

'I want Gelleth,' Father said.

I had to admire his ability to wrong-foot me. I stood there armed with accusations, burdened with all my yesterdays, and he'd turned away from me, to the future.

'Gelleth hinges on the Castle Red,' I said. It was a test. That was just how we spoke. Every conversation a game of poker, every line a bet or a raise, bluff or call.

‘Party tricks are well and good. You killed the Teuton. I didn’t think you had it in you. You scandalized my court – well we both know what they are, and what they’re worth. But can you do it when it counts? Can you give me Gelleth?’

I met his stare. I didn’t inherit his blue eyes, I followed Mother in that department. There was a whole winter in those eyes of his, and nothing else. Even in Sageous’s placid gaze I could dig deeper and find a subtext, but Father’s eyes held nothing but a cold season. I think that was where the fear lay, in the lack of curiosity. I’ve seen malice many a time and hate in all its colours. I’ve seen the gleam in the torturer’s eyes, the sick-light, but even there was the comfort of interest, the slightest touch of salvation in shared humanity. He might have the hot irons, but at least he was curious, at least he cared how much it hurt.

‘I can give you Gelleth,’ I said.

Could I? Probably not. Of all Ancrath’s neighbours, Gelleth stood unassailable above the rest. The Lord of Gelleth probably had better claim to the Empire Throne than Father did. In the Hundred, Merl Gellethar had few equals.

I found my hand on the hilt of my dagger. I itched to draw the tempered steel, to lay it across his neck, to scream at him, to bring some heat into those cold eyes. *You traded my mother’s death away, you bastard! Your own son’s blood. Sweet William dead and barely cold, and you traded them away. A pax for the rights to river trade.*

‘I’ll need an army,’ I said. ‘Castle Red won’t fall easy.’

‘You will have the Forest Watch.’ Father spread his hands over the throne’s armrests and leaned back, watching.

‘Two hundred men?’ I felt my fingers tighten on the pommel of my knife. Two hundred men against the Castle Red. Ten thousand might not be enough.

‘I’ll take my brothers too,’ I said. I watched his eyes. No flicker in the winter, no start at ‘brother’. The weakness in me wanted to speak of Will. ‘You’ll have Gelleth. I will give you the Castle Red. I’ll give you the head of the Lord Gellethar. Then you’ll give the heathen to me.’

*And you’ll call me ‘son’.*

## 22

So we sat, Makin and I, at a table in the Falling Angel tavern with a jug of ale between us, and the song of a cracked-voice bard struggling to be heard against the din. Around us the brothers mixed with the lowest of the Low Town, gaming, whoring, and gorging. Rike sat close at hand, his face buried in a roast chicken. He appeared to be attempting to inhale it.

‘Have you even seen the Castle Red, Jorg?’ Makin asked.

‘No.’

Makin looked at his ale. He hadn’t touched it. For a few moments we listened to the sound of Rike crunching chicken bones.

‘Have you?’ I asked.

He nodded slowly and leaned back in his chair, eyes on the lanterns above the street-door. ‘When I was a squire to Sir Reilly, we took a message to the Lord Gellethar. We stayed a week in the guest halls at the Castle Red before Merl Gellethar deigned to see us. His throne-room puts your father’s to shame.’

Brother Burlow staggered by, belly escaping over his sturdy belt, a haunch of meat in one hand and two flagons in the other, foaming over his knuckles.

‘What about the castle?’ I could care less about a pissing contest over throne-rooms.

Makin toyed with his ale, but didn’t drink. ‘It’s suicide, Jorg.’

‘That bad?’

‘Worse,’ he said.

A painted whore, hennaed hair, and red-mouthed, backed into Makin’s lap. ‘Where’s your smile, my handsome?’ She had good tits, full and high, pushed into an inviting sandwich in a bodice of lace and whalebone. ‘I’m sure I could find it.’ Her hands vanished into the froth of her skirts where they bunched around Makin’s waist. ‘Sally will make it all good. My handsome knight doesn’t need no boys to keep him warm.’ She flicked a jealous glance my way.



Makin pitched her to the floor.

‘It’s built into a mountain. What shows above the rock are walls so high it hurts your neck to look up at the battlements.’ Makin reached for his ale and fastened both hands around the flagon.

‘Ow!’ The whore picked herself up from the wet boards and wiped her hands on her dress. ‘You didn’t have to do that now!’

Makin didn’t spare her a glance. He turned his dark eyes on me. ‘The doors are iron, thick as a sword is long. And what’s above the ground isn’t but a tenth part of it. There’s provisions in those deep vaults to last years.’

Sally proved to be a true professional. She transferred her attentions to me, so smooth you’d think I’d been the object of her affection all along. ‘And who might you be, now?’ She came in close, running her fingers into my hair. ‘You’re too pretty for that grumpy sell-sword,’ she said. ‘You’re old enough to learn how it works with girls, and Sally will show you.’

She had her mouth close to my ear now, sending tickles down my neck. I could smell her cheap lemon-grass scent, cutting through the ale stink, and the dream-weed on her breath.

‘How many men would it take? To bring the place down around Lord Gellethar’s ears?’ I asked.

Makin’s eyes returned to the lanterns and his knuckles went white around his flagon. Somewhere behind us Rike gave a roar, quickly followed by the splintering sound of a body meeting a table at high speed.

‘If you had ten thousand men,’ Makin said, raising his voice above the crashing sounds. ‘Ten thousand men, well supplied, and with siege machines, lots of siege engines, then you might have him in a year. That’s if you could keep his allies off your back. With three thousand you might starve him out eventually.’

I caught hold of Sally’s hand as it slipped across my belly to the buckle of my belt. I twisted her wrist a little, and she came front and centre, sharpish, with a high-pitched gasp. She had green eyes, like Katherine’s but more narrow and not so clear. Under the paint she had fewer years on me than I first thought, she might be twenty, certainly no more.

‘And what if I found us a way in? What then, Brother Makin? How many men to take the Castle Red if I opened us a door?’ I spoke to Sally’s face, inches before mine.

‘The garrison stands at nine hundred. Veterans mostly. He sends his fresh meat to the borders and takes it back when it’s been seasoned.’ I heard

Makin's chair scrape back. 'Which son of a whore threw that?' he yelled.

I kept the whore's wrist turned. I took her throat in my other hand and drew her closer. 'Tonight we'll call you Katherine, and you can show me how it works with girls.'

Some of the dream-haze left her eyes, replaced by fear. That was all right with me. I had two hundred men and no secret door into the Castle Red. It seemed only right that somebody should be worried.

## 23

My book shifted again. I say 'my' book, but in truth it was stolen, filched from Father's library on the way out of the Tall Castle. The book lurched at me, threatening to snap shut on my nose.

'Lie still, damn you,' I said.

'Mmmgfl.' Sally gave a sleepy murmur and nestled her face in the pillow.

I settled the book back between her buttocks and nudged her legs slightly further apart with my elbows. Over the top of the page I could see the faint-knobbed ridge of Sally's spine tracing its path across her smooth back to be lost in the red curls around her neck. I wasn't convinced that the text before me was more interesting than what lay beneath it.

'It says here that there's a valley in Gelleth they call the Gorge of Leucrota,' I said. 'It's in the badlands down below the Castle Red.'

The morning light streamed through the open window. The air had a chill to it, but a good one, like the bite on ale.

'Mmmnn.' Sally's voice came from the pillow.

I'd tired her out. You can wear even whores out when you're that young. The combination of a woman and time on my hands wasn't one I'd tried before. I found the mix to my liking. There's a lot to be said for not being in a queue, or not having to finish up before the flames take hold of the building. And the willingness! That was new too, albeit paid for. In the dark I could imagine it was free.

'Now if I know my ancient Greek, and I do, a leucrota is a monster that speaks with a human voice to lure its prey.' I bent my neck to bite at the back of her thigh. 'And in my experience, any monster that talks in a human voice, is human. Or was.'

My feet hung over the end of the bed. I wiggled my toes. Sometimes that helps.

I reached for the oldest of the three books I'd stolen. A Builder text on plasteek sheets, wrinkled by some ancient fire. Scholars in the east would pay

a hundred in gold for Builder texts, but I hoped for more profit than that.

I'd been taught the Builder speech by Tutor Lundist. I learned it in a month and he'd gone bragging to anyone who'd listen, until Father shut his mouth with one of those dark looks he's famed for. Old Lundist said I knew the Builder speech as well as any in the Broken Empire, but I couldn't make sense of more than half the words in the little book I'd stolen.

I could read the 'Top Secret' at the head and foot of every page, but 'Neurotoxicology', 'Carcinogen', 'Mutagen'? Maybe they were old styles of hat. To this day I don't know. The words I did recognize were interesting enough though. 'Weapons', 'Stockpile', 'Mass Destruction'. The last but one page even had a shiny map, all contours and elevations. Tutor Lundist taught me a little geography as well. Enough to match that small map to the 'Views from Castle Red' painstakingly executed in the large but dull *A History of Gelleth* whose leather-bound spine nestled in the cleft of dear Sally's oh-so-biteable backside.

Even when I understood the Builder words, the sentences didn't make sense. 'Binary weapon leakage is now endemic. The lighter than air unary compounds show little toxic effect, though rosiosis is a common topological exposure symptom.'

Or, from the same page: 'Mutagenic effects are common downstream of binary spills.' I could stretch my Greek to guess the meaning, but it hardly seemed reasonable. Perhaps I'd stolen an old storybook?

'Jorg!' Makin hollered through the door. 'The escort's here to take you to the Forest Watch.'

Sally started up at that, but I pressed her down.

'Tell them to wait,' I called.

The Forest Watch weren't going to be much use to me. Not unless they had ten thousand friends that wanted to come along.

'Sweet Jesu I'm sore.' Sally tried to get up again. 'Oh! It's morning already. Sammeth will kill me.'

'I said still, damn it.' I found a coin from my purse on the table and tossed it up to her. 'That for your damn Sammeth.'

She slumped back with a comfortable protest.

'Binary weapon leakage ...' As if speaking the words would add meaning.

'You're going to the Castle Red then?' Sally said. She stifled a yawn.

I raised a hand to slap her into silence. Of course she didn't see it and *A History of Gelleth* blocked the best target.

‘Say hello to all those little red people for me,’ she said.

*Rosiosis.*

I lowered my hand to her hip. ‘Little red people?’

‘Uh huh.’

I felt her wiggle under my palm. I gripped harder. ‘Little red people?’

‘Yes.’ A whine of irritation tinged her voice. ‘Why do you think they call it the Castle Red?’

I pulled myself to a sitting position. ‘Makin! Get in here!’ I shouted it loud enough for the whole inn to hear. He came in sharp enough, one hand on his sword. A smile found its way to his lips when he saw Sally sprawled out naked, but he kept his hand where it was.

‘My prince?’

Sally really did try to get up at that. She almost made it to all fours and *A History* went flying.

‘Prince? Nobody said nothing about a prince! He ain’t no bleedin’ prince!’

I pushed her down again.

‘That conversation we had yesterday, Makin,’ I said.

‘Yes?’

‘Anything you’d like to add to the description? Anything about those nine hundred veterans?’ I asked.

For a moment he looked as blank as idiot Maical.

‘Something about the colour scheme?’ I gave him a prompt.

‘Oh.’ He grinned. ‘The Blushers? Yes. They’re red as a cooked lobster, every one of them. Something in the water they say. I thought everyone knew that.’

*Rosiosis.*

‘I never knew it,’ I said.

‘Sounds like your father should have hanged Tutor Lundist then,’ Makin said. ‘Everyone knows that.’

*Monsters down below.*

‘He’s never a prince!’ Sally sounded outraged.

‘You’ve been royally fucked.’ Makin gave her a little bow.

*Castle Red and all its red soldiers up above.*

I got off the bed.

*Weapons stockpile.*

*Leakage.*

‘So,’ Makin said. ‘Are we ready to go?’

I reached for my trews. Sally rolled over as I laced them up, which didn't help at all. I watched her nakedness, highlights courtesy of the morning sun. I wondered – should I gamble the Forest Watch and the brothers both on some wild conjectures and blind guesses at what obscure words meant ...

'Tell them an hour.' My fingers flipped from lacing to unlacing. 'I'll be ready in an hour.'

Sally lay back on the pillows and smiled. 'Prince, eh?'

Lying in seemed like a good idea all of a sudden.

## 24

‘What ho! Captain Coddin!’ I came down the stairs in remarkably good spirits shortly before noon.

The Captain gave me a stiff bow, his lips pressed into a tight line. In a far corner the younger brothers, Roddat, Jobe, and Sim nursed hangovers. I could see Burlow under a table, snoring.

‘I’d have thought you’d be back at Chelny Ford, Captain, protecting our borders from the predations of villains and rogues,’ I said, all cheery-like.

‘There was some dissatisfaction with my performance in the role. Certain voices at court maintained that I’d let a sight too many villains and rogues past my garrison of late. I’m assigned to escort duty in Crath City.’ He gestured to the street-door. ‘If Prince Jorg is ready?’

I decided I liked the man. That surprised me. I’m not given to liking people as a rule. I blamed it on my mood. Nothing like a night of whoring to turn a man soft.

So Coddin and his four soldiers led us out through the West Gate. I had Makin with me of course, and Elban because old though he was, there weren’t many among the brothers with more than half a brain. I brought the Nuban along too. Not sure why, but he’d been sat by the bar eating an apple, with that crossbow of his across his lap, and I thought I’d have him along.

We took the Old Road toward Rennat Forest, twelve miles or so as the crow flies, and of course the Old Road flies like a crow, following the line laid down by men of Rome an age upon an age ago.

Coddin rode at the fore, flanked by his boys, us behind enjoying the day. Makin nudged Firejump up alongside Gerrod and the two of them exchanged whatever threats pass between stallions.

‘You should have left me to Sir Galen, Jorg,’ Makin said.

‘You think you could have taken him?’ I asked.

‘No. He knew his swordwork, that Teuton,’ Makin said, and he wiped a hand across his mouth. ‘I’ve never crossed blades with a better man.’

‘He wasn’t the better man,’ I said.

A silence fell between us for a moment. Elban broke it.

‘Makin found a man he couldn’t beat? Sir Makin? I don’t believe it.’ His lisp made a wet ‘Thur’ of ‘Sir’.

Makin turned in the saddle to face Elban. ‘Believe it. The King’s champion had me cold. Jorg beat him, though.’ He nodded toward the Nuban. ‘With a crossbow. You’d have been proud.’

The Nuban ran a soot-black hand over the iron-work of his bow, touching the faces of his pagan gods. ‘There’s no pride in this, Makin.’

I could never read the Nuban. One moment he’d seem as simple as Maical, the next, deeper than a deep well. Sometimes both at once.

‘Maical,’ I said, remembering. ‘What happened to our pet idiot in the end? Did he die? I forgot to ask.’

‘We left him in Norwood, Jorth. He should have been dead, with that gut-wound, but he just hung on, moaning all the time,’ Elban said. He wiped the spittle from his chin.

‘Too stupid to die,’ Makin said. He grinned. ‘We had to drag him off to a house at the edge of town. Little Rikey was all for finishing him off, just to shut him up.’

We had us a chuckle over that.

‘Seriously though, Jorg, you should have left Galen to it,’ Makin said. ‘If you had, you’d be sitting pretty at court. You’re still heir to the throne. You’d have got that saucy princess in time. The Castle Red is a death sentence for smashing that stupid tree. That and calling his wife a Scorrion whore. Your father is not a forgiving man.’

‘You’d be right in all that, Makin,’ I said. ‘If my ambition were limited to “sitting pretty”, I’d have let the Teuton do his worst. Luckily for you, I want to win the Hundred War, reunite the Broken Empire, and be Emperor. And if I’m going to stand any chance of that, then taking the Castle Red with two hundred men will be a piece of cake.’

We had our lunch at a milestone on the margins of the forest. Mutton, swiped from the kitchens at The Falling Angel. We were still wiping the grease from our fingers when we rode in under the trees – big oaks and beeches in the main – blushing crimson with the kiss of autumn frost. Riding under those branches, with the crunch of hoof on leaves, and the breath of horses pluming before us, I felt it again, that sweet hook sinking beneath the skin. They say a man can travel a lifetime and not escape the spell of the



Ancrath valleys.

I yawned, cracking my jaw. It hadn't been a night for sleeping. Warm in my cloak I let Gerrod's gentle gait rock me.

I found myself thinking of smooth limbs and softness. My lips spoke her name as if to taste it.

'Katherine?' Makin asked. I jerked my head up to find him watching me, with an eyebrow raised in that irritating way of his.

I looked away. To our left a long sprawl of hook-briar writhed around the boles of three elms. I'd learned a hard lesson among the hook-briar one stormy night. It wasn't just the beauty of the land that had its hooks in me.

*Kill her.*

I turned round in the saddle, but Makin had fallen back to joke with the Nuban.

*Kill her, and you'll be free forever.*

It seemed that the voice came from the darkness beneath the briar's coils. It spoke under the crunching of hooves in the dry leaf-fall.

*Kill her.* An ancient voice, desiccated, untouched by mercy. For a moment I saw Katherine, blood welling over her white teeth, her eyes round with surprise. I could feel the knife in my hand, hilt against her stomach, hot blood running over my fingers.

*Poison would be quieter. A distant touch.*

That last voice – it could have been mine, or the briar, they started to sound the same.

*Strength requires sacrifice. All weakness carries its cost.* Now that was me. We'd left the briar behind and the day had grown cold.

The Forest Watch found us quick enough, I'd have been worried if they hadn't. A six-man patrol, all in blacks and greens, came out of the trees and bade us state our business on the King's road.

I didn't let Coddin introduce me. 'I've come to see the Watch Master,' I said.

The watchmen exchanged glances. I'm sure we seemed a ragged bunch, only Makin with any courtly touch about him, having polished up to see Father Dear. I had my old road plate on, and Elban and the Nuban, well their looks would earn them a bandit's noose without the tedium of a trial.

Coddin spoke up then. 'This is Jorg, Prince of Ancrath, heir to the throne.'

His words, hard to swallow as they might be, had the weight of a uniform behind them. The watchmen looked dumbfounded.

‘He’s come to see the Watch Master,’ Coddin said, by way of a prompt.

That got them moving and they led us into the deep forest along a series of deer-paths. We followed in single-file, riding until I got tired of being slapped in the face by every other branch, and dismounted. The watchmen kept up a stiff pace, showing little regard for royalty or heavy armour.

‘Who is the Watch Master anyhow?’ I asked, short of breath and clanking along loud enough to keep the bears from hibernation.

One of the watchmen glanced back, an old fellow, gnarled as the trees. ‘Lord Vincent de Gren.’ He spat into the bushes to show his regard for the man.

‘Your father appointed him this spring,’ Captain Coddin said from behind me. ‘I gather it was a punishment of some sort.’

The Forest Watch made its headquarters by Rulow’s Fall on the plain where the River Temus meandered before gathering its courage for the leap down a two-hundred-foot step in the bedrock. A dozen large cabins, wood-shingled and log-built, nestled among the trees. An abandoned mill house served as the Watch Master’s keep, fashioned from granite blocks and perched at the head of the fall.

A few dozen watchmen came out to watch our column wind up to the keep. Not much entertainment in these parts I guessed.

The old watchman went in to announce us while we tied our steeds. He didn’t hurry out, so we waited. A cold wind blew up, stirring the fallen leaves. The watchmen stood with us, black-green cloaks flapping. Most of the watch held shortbows. A longbow will get tangled in the trees and you’ll never need great range in the forest. No Robin of Hood here, the watchmen weren’t merry, and they were apt to kill you if you stepped out of line.

‘Prince Jorg.’ The keep door opened and a man clad in ermine stepped out, his fingers hooked in a belt of gold plates.

‘Lord Vincent de Gren, I’m guessing.’ I gave him my most insincere smile.

‘So you’re here to tell us we’re all going to die over some stupid promise a boy made to impress his father!’ he said, loud enough for the whole clearing to hear.

I had to hand it to Lord Vincent, he certainly cut straight to the chase. And I like that in a man, I really do, but I didn’t like the way he said it. He had a screwed-up sort of face did Lord Vincent, as if the world tasted sour in his mouth, which was odd, because he had the sort of butterball shape that takes some serious eating to acquire and a few dozen extra stoats to cover in

ermine. I took him to be about thirty, but it's hard to tell with fat people: they've no skin spare for wrinkles.

'News travels fast, I see.' I wondered if my father wanted me to fail even more than he wanted the Castle Red. In a way it would be a compliment, implying he felt I had a chance. But no, this had a woman's touch, maybe the touch of a woman still smarting over 'Scorron whore'. A woman used to teasing out post-coital secrets. A woman who might send riders to Rennat Forest. Even to Gelleth.

I strode across to the man. 'I wonder my Lord de Gren, would your men follow you to the death? I'm impressed that you've won their respect so rapidly. I hear that the Forest Watch are a hard lot, tougher than nails.' I put an arm around his shoulders. He didn't like it, but you can do things like that when you're a prince. 'Walk with me.'

I didn't give him a choice. I steered him downstream toward the glistening line where the River Temus vanished, replaced by a faint haze of mist. 'Follow on,' I shouted. 'This isn't a private meeting.'

So we came to stand on a shelf of wet stone, fifty yards down from the mill house, where the waters leapt white over the rocks, gathering for their plunge over Rulow's Fall.

'Prince Jorg, I don't ...' Lord Vincent began.

'You, come here!' I took my arm from de Gren and pointed to the old watchman who'd spat out the Watch Master's name earlier. I had to shout above the voice of the river.

The old fellow came to join us by the edge.

'And who's this proud example of the watch, Watch Master?' I asked.

Fat people's faces are wonderful for emotion. Or at least Lord Vincent's was. I could see his thoughts twitching across his brow, quivering in his jowls, twisting in the rolls around his neck. 'I...'

'There's two hundred of the buggers. You can't be expected to know them all,' I said, all sympathy. 'What's your name, watchman?'

'Keppen, yer highness,' he said. He looked as if he'd rather be somewhere else, had his eyes open, looking for the out.

'Order him to jump, Watch Master,' I said.

'W— what?' Lord Vincent went very pale very quickly.

'Jump,' I said. 'Order him to jump over the fall.'

'What?' Lord Vincent seemed to be having difficulty hearing over the roar. Keppen had his hand on his dagger-hilt. Sensible fellow.

‘If your men are all going to die over some stupid promise a boy made his father, well, it’s only sensible for the boy to make sure they’ll follow your orders when it means certain death,’ I said. ‘And if you say “what” again, I’m going to have to slice you open here and now.’

‘W— But, my prince ... Prince Jorg ...’ He tried to laugh.

‘Order him to jump, now!’ I barked it in de Gren’s face.

‘J-jump!’

‘Not like that! Put some conviction into it. He’s not going to jump if you make it a suggestion.’

‘Jump!’ Lord Vincent reached for some lordly command.

‘Better,’ I said. ‘Once more, with feeling.’

‘Jump!’ Lord Vincent screamed the word at old Keppen. The colour came back now, flushing him bright crimson. ‘JUMP! Jump, damn you!’

‘Buggered if I will!’ Keppen shouted back. He pulled his knife, a wicked bit of steel, and backed off, wary like.

I shrugged. ‘Not good enough, Lord Vincent. Just not good enough at all!’ And with a hearty shove he went over. Never a wail from him. Didn’t even hear a splash.

I moved quickly then. In two strides I had Keppen by the throat, with my other hand on his wrist, keeping that knife at bay. I took him by surprise and in another step I had him backed out over the edge, heels resting on air, and my grip on his neck all that kept him with us.

‘So, Keppen,’ I said. ‘Will you die for the new Watch Master?’ I gave him a smile, but I don’t think he noticed. ‘This is the bit where you say, “yes”. And you’d better mean it, because there are a lot worse things than dying easy when given an order.’

He got a ‘yes’ out past my fingers.

‘Coddin.’ I pointed him out. ‘You’re the new Watch Master.’

I pulled Keppen back and walked back toward the keep. They all followed me.

‘If I ask you to die for me, I expect you to ask when and where,’ I said. ‘But I’m not in any hurry to ask. It’d be a waste. The Forest Watch is the most dangerous two hundred soldiers Ancrath has, whether my father knows it or not.’

It wasn’t all flattery. In the forest they were the best we had. With a good Watch Master they were the sharpest sword in the armoury, and too clever to jump when told.

‘Watch Master Coddin here is taking you into Gelleth.’ I saw a few lips curl at that. Lord Vincent’s long jump or not, I was still a boy, and the Castle Red was still suicide. ‘You’ll get within twenty miles of the Castle Red, and no closer. You’re to spend two weeks in the Otton forests, cutting wood for siege engines and killing any patrols that come in after you. Watch Master Coddin will tell you the rest when the time comes.’

I turned from them and pushed open the door to the keep. ‘Coddin, Makin!’

They followed me in. The entrance hall gave onto a homely dining room where the table was set with cold goose, bread, and autumn apples. I took an apple.

‘My thanks, Prince Jorg.’ Coddin gave another of his stiff bows. ‘Saved from escort duty in Crath City, I can enjoy my winter running around the woods in Gelleth now.’ The faintest hint of a smile flickered at the corner of his mouth.

‘I’m coming with you. In disguise. It’s a closely guarded secret that you’re to ensure leaks out,’ I said.

‘And where will we be really?’ Makin asked.

‘The Gorge of Leucrota,’ I told him. ‘Talking to monsters.’

## 25

We returned to the Tall Castle through the Old Town Gate, with the noonday sun hot across our necks. I carried the family sword across my saddle and none sought to bar our way.

We left the horses in the West Yard.

‘See he’s well shod. We have a road ahead of us.’ I slapped Gerrod’s ribs and let the stable lad lead him away.

‘We’ve company.’ Makin laid a hand upon my shoulder. ‘Have a care.’ He nodded across the yard. Sageous was descending the stair from the main keep, a small figure in white robes.

‘I’m sure our little pagan can learn to love Prince Jorgy just like all the rest,’ I said. ‘He’s a handy man to have in your pocket.’

Makin frowned. ‘Better to put a scorpion in your pocket. I’ve been asking around. That glass tree you felled the other day. It wasn’t a trinket. He grew it.’

‘He’ll forgive me.’

‘He grew it from the stone, Jorg. From a green bead. It took two years. He watered it with blood.’

Behind us Rike sniggered, a childish sound, unsettling from such a giant.

‘His blood,’ Makin finished.

Another of the brothers snorted laughter at that. They’d all heard the story of Sir Galen and the glass tree.

Sageous stopped a yard in front of me and cast his gaze across the brothers, some still handing over their steeds, others pressed close at my side. His eyes flicked up to take in Rike’s height.

‘Why did you run, Jorg?’ he asked.

‘Prince. You’ll call him Prince, you pagan dog.’ Makin stepped forward, half-drawing. Sageous took him in with a mild look and Makin’s hand fell limp at his side, the argument gone from him.

‘Why did you run?’

'I don't run,' I said.

'Four years ago you ran from your father's house.' He kept his voice gentle, and the brothers watched him as though charmed by a spinning penny.

'I left for a reason,' I said. His line of attack unsettled me.

'What reason?'

'To kill someone.'

'Did you kill him?' Sageous asked.

'I killed a lot of people.'

'Did you kill him?'

'No.' The Count of Renar still lived and breathed.

'Why?'

Why hadn't I?

'Did you harm him? Did you hurt his interests?'

I hadn't. In fact if you looked at it, if you traced the random path of four years on the road, you might say I had furthered Renar's interests. The brothers and I had nipped at Baron Kennick's heels and kept him from his ambitions. In Mabberton we had torn the heart from what might have been rebellion ...

'I killed his son. I stuck a knife in Marclos, Renar's flesh and heir.'

Sageous allowed himself a small smile. 'As you came closer to home you came under my protection, Jorg. The hand that steered you fell away.'

Was it true? I couldn't see the lie in him. My eyes followed the scriptures written across his face, the complex scrolls of an alien tongue. An open book, but I couldn't read him.

'I can help you, Jorg. I can give you back your self. I can give you your will.'

He held out his hand, palm open.

'Free will has to be taken,' I said. When in doubt reach for the wisdom of others. Nietzsche in this case. Some arguments require a knife if you're to cut to the quick, others require the breaking of heads with a philosopher's stone.

I reached out and took his hand in mine, from below, his knuckles to my palm.

'My choices have been my own, pagan,' I said. 'If someone sought to steer me, I would know it.'

'Would you?'

'And if I knew it ... Oh if I knew it, I would teach such a lesson in pain that the Red Men of the East themselves would come to learn new tricks.'

Even as they left me the words rang hollow. Childish.

‘It is not I who has led you, Jorg,’ Sageous said.

‘Who then?’ I squeezed his hand until I heard the bones creak.

He shrugged. ‘Ask for your will and I shall give it to you.’

‘If there were a glamour on me I would find the one that placed it and I would kill them.’ I felt an echo of the old pain that plagued me on the roads, a pang from temple to temple, behind the eyes like a sliver of glass. ‘But there is none, and my will is my own,’ I said.

He shrugged again, and turned away. Looking down I saw that I held my left hand in my right, and blood ran between my fingers.



## 26

From my encounter with Sageous in the West Yard I went straight to mass. Meeting the pagan had left me wanting a touch of the church of Roma, a breath of incense, and a heavy dose of dogma. If heathens held such powers it seemed only right that the church should have a little magic of its own to bestow upon the worthy, and hopefully upon the unworthy who bothered to show up. Failing that, I had need of a priest in any case.

We marched into the chapel to find Father Gomst presiding. The choir song faltered before the clatter of boots on polished marble. Nuns shrank into the shadows beneath the brothers' leers, and, no doubt, the rankness of our company. Gains and Sim took off their helms and bowed their heads. Most of them just glanced around for something worth stealing.

'Forgive the intrusion, Father.' I set a hand in the font by the entrance and let the holy water lift the blood from my skin. It stung.

'Prince!' He set his book upon the lectern and looked up, white-faced. 'These men ... it is not proper.'

'Oh shush.' I walked the aisle, eyes on the painted marvel of the ceiling, turning slowly as I went, one hand raised and open, dripping. 'Aren't they all sons of God? Penitent children returned for forgiveness?'

I stopped before the altar and glanced back toward the brothers by the door. 'Put that back, Roddat, or you'll be leaving both thumbs in the alms box.'

Roddatt drew a silver candlestick from the grey rot of his travel cloak.

'That one at the least.' Father Gomst pointed at the Nuban, a tremble in his finger. 'That one is not of God's flock.'

'Not even a black sheep?' I came to stand by Gomst. He flinched. 'Well maybe you can convert him on our journey.'

'My prince?'

'You're to accompany me to Gelleth, Father Gomst. A diplomatic mission. I'm surprised the King didn't tell you.' I wasn't so surprised in truth, since it

was a lie. ‘We leave immediately.’

‘But—’

‘Come!’ I strode toward the door. A pause, and then he followed. I could hear the reluctance in his footsteps.

The brothers began to file out ahead of me, Rike trailing his hand along the walls, over reliquary and icon.

Having secured the priest I was keen to be off. I directed Makin to oversee a swift provisioning and led Gomst back to the West Yard.

‘We should not take this Nuba-man on a mission of diplomacy, Prince. Or any other,’ Gomst whispered as we walked. ‘They drink the blood of Christian priests to work their spells, you know.’

‘They do?’ I think it was the first interesting thing I ever heard Gomst say. ‘I could use a little magic myself.’

The priest paled behind his beard. ‘A superstition, my prince.’

A few more paces and, ‘Even so, were you to burn him, the Lord’s blessing would be upon us and our journey.’

Within the hour, saddlebags bulging, we rode back out into the Old Town. Sageous was waiting for us. He stood alone by the side of the cobbled path. I drew up before him, still uneasy in my mind. He had driven a wedge of doubt into me. I had told myself I’d set Count Renar aside as an act of strength, a sacrifice to the iron will I needed to win the game of thrones. But sometimes, now for instance, I didn’t quite believe it.

‘You should accept my protection, Prince,’ Sageous said.

‘I’ve survived long enough without it.’

‘But now you’re going to Gelleth, bound on a path to strengthen your father’s hand.’

‘I am.’ The brothers’ horses snorted around me.

‘If any had a mind that you might truly succeed, they would stop you,’ Sageous said. ‘The one who has played you these past years will seek to tighten the bonds you have loosened. Perhaps the priest will help you. His presence did before. He has value as a talisman, but past that he is empty robes.’

A horse pushed against Gerrod, the rider moving beside me.

I set my hand on my sword hilt. ‘I don’t like you, pagan.’

‘What do you think scared the marsh-dead, Jorg?’ No ripple in his calm watchfulness.

‘I—’ The boast sounded hollow before I spoke it.

‘An angry boy?’ Sageous shook his head. ‘The dead saw a darker hand upon your heart.’

‘I—’

‘Accept my protection. There are grander dreams you can dream.’

I felt the soft weight of sleep upon me, the saddle unsure beneath me.

‘Dream-witch.’ A dark voice spoke at my shoulder.

‘Dream-witch.’ The Nuban held out his crossbow, black fist curled around the stock, muscle strained against the load. ‘I carry your token, Dream-witch, your magics will not stain the boy.’

Sageous shrank back, the tattooed writings seeming to writhe across his face.

In an instant my eyes were wide. ‘You’re him.’ The clarity of it was blinding. ‘You set my brothers in Father’s dungeon. You sent your hunter to kill me.’

I set a hand upon the Nuban’s bow, remembering how he took it from the man I killed in a barn one stormy night. The dream-witch’s hunter.

‘You sent your hunter to kill me.’ The last tatters of Sageous’ charm left me. ‘And now it’s my hunter who holds it.’

Sageous turned and made for the castle gate, half running.

‘Pray I don’t find you here on my return, pagan.’ I said it quietly. If he heard it, he might follow my advice.

We left then, riding from the city without a backward look.

The rains first found us on the Ancrath Plains and dogged our passage north into the mountainous borders of Gelleth. I’ve been soaked on the road many a time, but the rains as we left my father’s lands were a cold misery that reached deeper than our bones. Burlow’s appetite remained undampened though, and Rike’s temper too. Burlow ate as if the rations were a challenge, and Rike growled at every raindrop.

At my instruction, Gomst took confession from the men. After hearing Red Kent speak of his crimes, and learning how he earned his name, Gomst asked to be excused his duties. After listening to Liar’s whispers, he begged.

Days passed. Long days and cold nights. I dreamed of Katherine, of her face and the fierceness of her eyes. Of an evening we ate Gains’s mystery stews and Fat Burlow tended the beasts, checking hooves and fetlocks. Burlow always looked to the horses. Perhaps he felt guilty about weighing so

heavy on them, but I put it down to a morbid fear of walking. We wound further up into the bleakness of the mountains. And at last the rains broke. We camped in a high pass and I sat with the Nuban to watch the sun fall. He held his bow, whispering old secrets to it in his home tongue.

For two days we walked the horses across slopes too steep and sharp with rock for any hooves save the mountain goats'.

A pillar marked the entrance to the Gorge of the Leucrota. It stood two yards wide and twice as tall, a stump shattered by some giant's whim. The remnants of the upper portion lay all around. Runes marked it, Latin I think, though so worn I could read almost nothing.

We rested at the pillar. I clambered up it to address the brothers from the top and take in the lie of the land.

I set the men to making camp. Gains set his fire and clanked his pots. The wind blew slight in the gorge, the oil-cloth tents barely flapping before it. The rain came again, but in a patter, soft and cold. Not enough to stir Rike lying on the rocks some five yards from the pillar, his snoring like a saw through wood.

I stood looking up at the cliff faces. There were caves up there. Many caves.

My hair swung behind me as I scanned the cliff. I'd let the Nuban weave it into a dozen long braids, a bronze charm at the end of each. He said it would ward off evil spirits. That just left me the good ones to worry about.

I stood with my hands on the Ancrath sword, resting its point before me. Waiting for something.

The men grew nervous, the animals too. I could tell it from their lack of complaint. They watched the slopes with me, toothless Elban as weatherbeaten as the rocks, young Roddat pale and pockmarked, Red Kent with his secrets, sly Row, Liar, Fat Burlow and the rest of my ragged bunch. The Nuban kept close by the pillar with Makin at his side. My band of brothers. All of them worried and not knowing why. Gomst looked set to run if he had a notion where to go. The brothers had a sense for trouble. I knew that well enough to understand that when they all worry together it's a bad thing coming. A very bad thing.

*Transcript from the trial of Sir Makin of Trent:*

**Cardinal Helot, papal prosecution:** *And do you deny razing the Cathedral of Wexten?*

**Sir Makin:** *I do not.*

**Cardinal Helot:** *Or the sack of Lower Merca?*

**Sir Makin:** *No, nor do I deny the sack of Upper Merca.*

**Cardinal Helot:** *Let the record show the accused finds amusement in the facts of his crime.*

**Court recorder:** *So noted.*

The monsters came when the light failed. Shadows swallowed the gorge and the silence thickened until the wind could barely stir it. Makin's hand fell on my shoulder. I flinched, edging the fear with momentary hatred, for my own weakness, and for Makin for showing it to me.

'Up there.' He nodded to my left.

One of the cave mouths had lit from within, a single eye watching us through the falling night.

'That's no fire,' I said. The light had nothing of warmth or flicker.

As we watched, the source of illumination moved, swinging harsh shadows out across the slopes.

'A lantern?' Fat Burlow stepped up beside me, puffing out his cheeks in consternation. The brothers gathered around us.

The strange lantern emerged onto the slope, and darkness erased the cave behind. It shone like a star, a cold light, reaching from the source in a thousand bright lines. A single figure cut a wedge of shadow into the illumination; the lantern bearer.

We watched the unhurried descent. The wind sought my flesh with icy fingers and tugged for attention at my cloak.

'*Ave Maria, gratia plena, dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus.*' Somewhere in the night old Gomsty muttered his Ave Marias.

A slow horror eased itself among us.

'Mother of God!' Makin spat the oath out as if to rid himself of the fear. We all felt it, crawling over the unseen rocks.

The brothers might have run, but where was there to go?

'Torches, damn you. Now!' I broke the paralysis, shocked that I'd stood hypnotized by the approach for so long.

'Now!' I drew my sword. They moved at that. Scurrying to the embers of the fire, stumbling over the rough ground.

'Nuban, Row, Burlow, see there's nothing coming up along the river.'

Even as I said it I knew we'd been flanked.

'There! There, behind that rise!' The Nuban motioned with his crossbow. He'd seen something, the Nuban wasn't one to spook at nothing. We'd watched the pretty light and they'd flanked us. Simple as a market play of kiss-and-dip. Distract your mark with a pretty face, and come up from behind to rob him blind.

The torches flared, men ran to their weapons.

The light drew closer and we saw it for what it was, a child whose very skin bled radiance. She walked an even pace, every inch a-glow, white like molten silver, making mere shadows of the rags she wore.

'*Ave Maria, gratia plena!*' Father Gomst's voice rose, lifting the prayer like a shield.

'Hail Mary,' I echoed him. 'Full of grace, indeed.'

The girl's eyes burned silver and the ghosts of flames chased across her skin. There was a fragile beauty to her that took my breath.

A monster walked behind her. In any other circumstance it would have been him that drew the eye. The monster had been built in parody of a man, sharing Adam's lines as a cow apes a horse. The light revealed the horror of his flesh, sparing no detail. The thing might have topped seven foot in height. It even had a few inches on Little Rikey.

Liar raised his bow, disgust on his pinched face. I took his arm as he sighted on the monster.

'No.' I wanted to hear them speak. Besides, it looked as if an arrow would just annoy our new friend.

Under a twisted red hide the monster's chest looked like a hundred-gallon barrel. A set of ribs pierced the flesh, reaching for each other above his heart.

The girl's light touched us with a cold kiss and I felt her in my mind. She spoke and her voice seemed to rise from the rocks. I heard her footsteps in the corridors of my memory.

There are places where children shouldn't wander. I met the girl's silver gaze, and for a moment shadows licked across her.

'Welcome to our camp,' I said.

I stepped forward to greet them, leaving the brothers and entering the brilliance of the child's aura. The monster smiled at me, a wide smile showing teeth stolen from the wolf. He'd the eyes of a cat, slitted against the light and throwing it back.

I passed beauty by and stood before the beast. We had us a moment of

judging. I ran an eye over the muscle heaped on his bones, crossed over with pulsing veins and hard ridges of scar tissue. I could have eaten dinner off one of his hands. He had three fingers and a thumb on each, thick as the girl's arm. He could have taken my head in one hand and crushed it.

I snapped my neck forward, sudden-like, and jumped at him with a shout, thrusting my face at his. He flinched backward and stumbled on the loose rock. The laughter escaped me. I couldn't stop it.

'Why?' The girl looked puzzled. She tilted her head and the shadows ran.

'Because.' I gasped for my breath as the monster righted himself.

Why? For a moment I didn't know.

'Because ... because, fuck him. Because he's such a big bastard.' I pushed the grin from my face. Because he had given me pause. Because he had made me feel small.

I looked down at her. 'I'm bigger than you. Are you going to let that scare you?'

'I do fear you,' the girl said. 'Not for your size, Jorg. For the threads that gather around you. For the lines that meet where I can't see them. For the weight, and the knife-edge on which it sits.' She spoke in a sing-song, high and sweet.

'You make a fine oracle, girl,' I said. 'You've got that mix of profound and empty just right.' I slammed my sword back into its sheath. 'So, you've my name. Shall we share? Do the leucrota have names?'

'Jane,' she said. 'And this is Gorgoth, a leader under the mountain.'

'Charmed.' I gave them a little bow. 'Perhaps your friends could come out from behind the rocks, and that way my brothers won't feel so tempted to shoot at shadows.'

Gorgoth set his cat's eyes on me, a narrow and feral stare.

'Up!' His voice rolled out even deeper than I'd imagined, and I'd imagined it pretty deep.

Other monsters rose around our camp, some of them shockingly close. Had every gargoyle and grotesque torn free from the great cathedrals and gathered to form an army, the leucrota would be that army made flesh. No two stood alike. All had been sketched on the frame of a man, but with a poor hand. None were as huge and hale as Gorgoth. Most leaked from sores, sported withered limbs, or laboured beneath growths of wart and tumour heaped in foul confusion.

'Jesu, Gorgoth! Your friends make Little Rikey look almost handsome,' I



said.

Makin came to join me, eyes screwed up against Jane's light. He shaded his face with a hand and looked Gorgoth up and down.

'And this will be Sir Makin,' I said. 'Knight of the court of King Olidan, terror of—'

'A man to trust.' Jane's high voice cut across me. 'If he gives you his word.'

She turned those silver orbs of hers on me and I felt my yesterdays crowding at my shoulder. 'You want to go to the heart of the mountain,' she said.

'Yes.' I couldn't deny that.

'You bring death, Prince of Ancrath,' she said.

Gorgoth growled at that. It sounded like rocks grinding together. The child put a glowing hand to his wrist. 'Death if we agree, death if we resist.' She kept her eyes on me. 'What have you to offer for passage?'

I had to admit she was good at her game. It wouldn't go well for them if my plan worked, and it wouldn't go well for them if they tried to stop us.

'I did bring a gift,' I said. 'But if it proves not to your liking then I can make you some promises. I'll have Sir Makin promise you too, and he's a man of his word.' I smiled down at her. 'When I saw this place on a map ...' I paused and remembered the circumstances with a certain fondness.

'Sally ...' the girl whispered, remembering the tavern with me.

That shocked me for a moment. I didn't like the idea of this little girl in my head, opening doors, making childish judgment, shining her light in places that should be dark. Part of me wanted to cut her down, a large part of me.

I unclenched my jaw. 'When I saw this gorge on my map, I thought to myself "what a godforsaken spot". And that's when it occurred to me what to bring for barter. I brought you God.' I turned and pointed to Father Gomst. 'I've brought you salvation, the blessing of communion. I've brought you benediction, catechism ... confession if you must. All the saving your ugly little souls can handle.'

Gomst let out a girlish scream and started to run. The Nuban caught a dark arm around his waist and hauled him up over one shoulder.

I expected Jane to answer, but Gorgoth made the deal.

'We will take the priest.' Something about his voice made my chest hurt. 'We will guide you to the Great Stair. The necromancers will find you, though. You will not return.'



*Some said that Red Kent had a black heart, and that might be true, but anyone who had seen him take out a six-strong foot patrol with hatchet and knife would tell you the man had an artist's soul.*

‘Necromancers?’ I trudged behind Jane with Gorgoth at my back. There had been nothing about necromancers in my books.

‘They command the dead. Mages—’

‘I know what they are.’ I cut across Gorgoth. ‘What are they doing in my way?’

‘Mount Honas attracts them,’ Jane said. ‘There’s death at the heart of the mountain. Old magics. It makes their work easier.’

Even the leucrotas’ caves looked ugly. When I was seven, and William five, Tutor Lundist took us secretly to the caverns of Paderack. Unknown to any at court, the heirs of Ancrath slid and slipped into the blind depths, and came to a cathedral hall of such pillared wonder that it beggared the grace of God. I carry the glory of that place with me still. The chambers of the leucrota had none of that fluid elegance, no touch of the hidden artistry that lies in the deep places of the world. We walked through corridors of Builderstone, poured and shaped using arts long forgotten. Jane’s light showed us ancient vaults, cracked in places and scaled with lime. We wove a path around fallen blocks, larger than cart-horses, heading deeper all the time, like worms burrowing to the core, seeking the roots of the mountain.

‘Shut your moaning, priest.’ Row came up behind the Nuban and showed old Gomsty his knife, a wicked piece of ironwork to be sure.

Father Gomst let up his wailing at that, and I did miss it for the echoes had been quite haunting. I fell back for a word. That, and to make sure Row didn’t decide to carve up our gift to the monsters before we’d handed it over proper-like.

‘Peace now, Father,’ I said.

I pushed Row’s blade aside. He scowled at that, did Row, all pock-marks and squinting eyes.

‘You’ll just be changing flocks, Father,’ I told Gomsty. ‘Your new congregation might look a little fouler, but on the inside? Well I’m sure

they'll be fairer than Row here.'

The Nuban grunted and shifted Father Gomst's weight on his shoulder.

'Set him down,' I said. 'He can walk. We're good and lost now, there'll be no running.'

The Nuban set old Gomsty on his feet. He looked at me, his face too black to read. 'It's wrong, Jorg. Trade in gold, not people. He's a holy man. He speaks for the white-Christ.'

Gomst looked at the Nuban with a hatred I'd never seen in him before, as if he'd just grown horns and called on Lucifer.

'Well now he can speak to Gorgoth for Christ,' I said.

The Nuban said nothing, his face a blank.

Something about the Nuban's silences always made me want to say a little more. As if I had to make it right with him. Makin scraped at me that same way, but not so bad.

'It's not like he can't leave,' I said. 'He's free to walk home if he really must. He'll just have to earn himself some food for the journey and a map is all.'

The Nuban gave me the white crescent of his smile.

I walked on, a cold voice inside me whispering, whispering of weakness, of the thin edge of a wedge, of a sharp knife cutting without tears, of a hot iron to cauterize a wound before infection spread. It doesn't do to love a brother.

Jane's light dimmed and flickered as I drew near. She recoiled slightly with an intake of breath. I curled my lip and imagined her falling from a cliff. It worked better than I'd hoped. She gave a squeal and covered her eyes.

Gorgoth stepped between us. 'Keep away from her, Dark Prince.'

So I walked in the shadows, and they led us on into the mountain. We followed wide tunnels that stretched for miles, level-floored with curved ceilings. Rust stains ran the length of the passages in parallel lines, though to what end men would lay iron in such a manner I can't say, unless these were the pipes through which the secret fire of the Builders ran.

We left Jane and all but two of her kindred at the shores of a lake so wide even her silver light could not reach across the waters. The Builders had made this place too. Stone gave away to water with a single sharp step, the ceiling stretched flat and without adornment. Jane's folk moved away toward shelters of wood and skins huddled at the water's edge. Gorgoth led them, one hand enveloping Father Gomst's shoulders.

Jane paused, her gaze moving between the two grotesques who remained to guard us. She said nothing but I could feel the undercurrent of unvoiced speech as she instructed them.

‘No final words for me, little one?’ I asked. I went on one knee before her. A fierce humour gripped me. ‘No predictions? No pearls to throw before this swine? Come, share a glimpse with me. Blind me with the future.’

She met my gaze and the light dazzled, but I wouldn’t look away.

‘Your choices are keys to doors I cannot see beyond.’

I felt anger rise in me and pushed it down with a snarl. ‘There’s more than that.’

‘You have a dark hand on your shoulder. A hole in your mind. A hole. In your memories. A hole – a hole – pulling me in – pulling—’

I seized her hand. That was a mistake, for it burned the skin and froze the bone in equal measure. I’d have set it down if I could, but the strength left me. For a moment I could see only the child’s eyes.

‘When you meet her, run. Just run. Nothing else.’ It felt as though I were speaking the words, though I could hear Jane’s voice frame them. Then I fell.

I woke to the light of torches.

‘He’s up.’

I found myself face to face with Rike.

‘Jesu, Rike, you been gargling rat piss again?’ I pushed his brutal jaw to one side and used his shoulder to lever myself up. The brothers began to rise around me, hefting their packs. Makin came from the water’s edge, Gorgoth looming behind him.

‘Don’t go touching the Prophetess of the Leucrota!’ He used a mock-scold. I could see the relief hidden in his eyes.

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ I said.

Gorgoth paused to scowl at me, then led the way, holding a pitch-torch the size of a small tree.

Our path angled up now, the tunnel thick with dust that tasted of bitter almonds. We walked for less than a thousand yards before the way broadened into a wide gallery crossed by stone trenches of obscure purpose, yards across, and as deep as a man is tall. At the mouth of the gallery a wooden pen hugged the wall, the stays bound with rope. Two children huddled together in the middle of the bare cage. Two leucrota. Gorgoth hauled the door open.

‘Out.’

They were neither of them past seven summers, if summers were a proper count for the dark halls of the leucrota. They came out naked, two skinny boys, brothers to look at them, the younger one perhaps five. Of all the leucrota I'd seen they looked the least monstrous. A black-and-red stippling marked their skin, colouring them like the tigers of Indus. Dark barbs of horn jutted from their elbows, mirrored in the talons on their fingers. The elder of the two shot me a glance, his eyes utterly black, no white, iris, or pupil.

'We don't want your children,' Makin said. He reached into his pocket and tossed a twist of dry-meat to the brothers. 'Put them back.'

The meat twist skittered to a halt at the elder child's feet. He kept his eyes on Gorgoth. The littlest watched the dry-meat intently, but made no move. Their skin stretched so tight over the bone I could count every rib.

'These are for the necromancers, don't waste your food on them.'

Gorgoth's rumble came so low it hurt to hear it.

'A sacrifice?' the Nuban asked.

'They're dead already,' Gorgoth said. 'The strength of the leucrota isn't in them.'

'They look hearty enough to me,' I said. 'With a meal or two in 'em. Sure you're not just jealous because they're not as ugly as the rest of you?' I didn't much care what Gorgoth did with the runts, but I took a pleasure in taunting him.

Gorgoth flexed his hands and six giant knuckles popped like logs on the fire.

'Eat.'

The two boys fell on Makin's food, snarling like dogs.

'The leucrota are pure-born, we gain our gifts as we grow. It is a slow change.' He gestured to the boys licking the last fragments of dry-meat from the stone. 'These two have the changes of a leucrota twice their age. The gifts will come faster now, faster and stronger. None can bear such changes. I have seen it before. Such gifts will turn a man inside out.' Something in those cat's eyes of his told me he meant it, told me he'd seen it. 'Better they serve us as payment to keep the necromancers from our caves. Better the dead-ones take these than search for victims who could have lived. They will find a quick death and a long peace.'

'If you say it, then it is so.' I shrugged. 'Let's be moving on. I'm keen to meet these necromancers of yours.'

We followed Gorgoth through the gallery. The brothers scampered around

us, and I saw the Nuban slip them dried apricots from the woollen depths of his tunic.

‘So what’s your plan?’ Makin sidled close to me, voice low.

‘Hmmm?’ I watched the younger child skip away from Liar’s well-aimed boot.

‘These necromancers – what’s your plan?’ Makin kept to a hiss.

I didn’t have a plan, but that was just one more obstacle to overcome. ‘There was a time when the dead stayed dead,’ I said. ‘I’ve read it in Father’s library. For the longest time the dead only walked in stories. Even Plato had the dead comfortably far away, over the river Styx.’

‘That’s what you get for all that reading,’ Makin said. ‘I remember the marsh road. Those ghosts hadn’t read your books.’

‘Nuban!’ I called him over. ‘Nuban, come tell Sir Makin why the dead don’t rest easy any more.’

He joined us, crossbow over one shoulder, oil of cloves in the air around him. ‘The wise-men of Nuba tell it that the door stands ajar.’ He paused and ran a very pink tongue over very white teeth. ‘There’s a door to death, a veil between the worlds, and we push through when we die. But on the Day of a Thousand Suns so many people had to push through at once, they broke the door. The veils are thin now. It just takes a whisper and the right promise, and you can call the dead back.’

‘There you have it, Makin,’ I said.

Makin furrowed his brow at that, then rubbed his lips. ‘And the plan?’

‘Ah,’ I said.

‘The plan?’ He could be annoyingly persistent could Makin.

‘Same as normal. We just keep killing them until they stay down.’



*Brother Row you could trust to make a long shot with a short bow. You could trust him to come out of a knife fight with somebody else's blood on his shirt. You could trust him to lie, to cheat, to steal, and to watch your back. You couldn't trust his eyes though. He had kind eyes, and you couldn't trust them.*

## 29

The Builders had an aversion to stairs it seems. Gorgoth led us up through the mountain by treacherous paths cut into the walls of endless vertical shafts. Perhaps the Builders grew wings, or like the far-seers of Indus they could levitate through force of will. In any case, the picks of later men had chewed a stair into the poured stone of the shaft walls, narrow and crudely hewn. We climbed with care, our arms tight before us, keeping narrow for fear of pitching ourselves into a fall with an inadvertent shrug of the shoulders. If the depths had been lit I don't doubt but some of the brothers would have needed the point of a sword to help them up, but darkness hides all sins, and we could fool ourselves a floor lay unseen twenty feet below.

Strange how the deeper a hole the stronger it draws a man. The fascination that lives on the keenest edge, and sparkles on the sharpest point, also gathers in depths of a fall. I felt the pull of it every moment of that climb.

Gorgoth seemed least well crafted for such an ascent, but he made it look easy. The two leucrota children danced in front of me, skipping up the steps with a disregard that made me want to shove them into space.

'Why don't they run off?' I called ahead to Gorgoth. He didn't answer. I guessed the boys' disdain for the fall had to be set against the fate that awaited them if they made it safely to the top.

'You're taking them to die. Why do they follow you?' I called the words at the broad expanse of his back.

'Ask them.' Gorgoth's voice rumbled like distant thunder in the shaft.

I caught the elder brother by the neck and held him out over the fall. There was almost no weight to him and I needed a rest. I could feel the tally of all those steps fuelling a fire in my leg muscles.

'What's your name, little monster?' I asked him.

He looked at me with eyes that seemed darker and wider than the drop to my right.

'Name? No name,' he said, high and sweet.

‘That’s no good. I’ll give you a name,’ I said. ‘I’m a prince, I’m allowed to do things like that. You’ll be Gog, and your brother can be Magog.’

I glanced around at Red Kent who stood behind me, puffing, not the slightest flicker of comprehension on his peasant face.

‘Gog, Magog ... Jesu, where’s a priest when I need someone to get a biblical joke!’ I said. ‘I never thought to miss Father Gomst!’

I turned back to young Gog. ‘What’re you so happy about? Old Gorgygoth up there, he’s taking you to be eaten by the dead.’

‘Can fight ’em,’ Gog said, quiet-like. ‘Law says so.’ If he felt uncomfortable being held up by the neck, he didn’t show it.

‘What about little Magog?’ I nodded to his brother squatting on the step above us. ‘He going to fight too?’ I grinned at the notion of these two doing battle with death mages.

‘I’ll protect him,’ Gog said, and he started to twist in my hand, so hard and fast that I had to set him down, or else pitch over the edge with him.

He scampered to his brother’s side and set striped hand to striped shoulder. They watched me with those black eyes, quieter than mice.

‘May be some sport in this,’ Kent said behind me.

‘I bet the littlest one lasts longest,’ Rike shouted, and he bellowed with laughter as if he’d said something funny. He almost slipped off then, and that shut up his laughing quick enough.

‘You want to win this game, Gog, you leave little Magog to look after himself.’ As I spoke the words a chill set the hairs standing on my neck. ‘Show me you’ve the strength to look after yourself, and maybe I’ll find something those necromancers want more than they want your scrawny soul.’

Gorgoth started up again, and the brothers followed without a word.

I walked on, rubbing the scars on my forearms where the hook-briar had started to itch at me again.

I counted a thousand steps, and I only started out of boredom, so I missed the first ten minutes of the climb. My legs turned to jelly, my armour felt as though it were made from inch-thick lead, and my feet got too clumsy to find the stairs. Brother Gains convinced Gorgoth to call a rest halt by stumbling into space, and wailing for a good ten seconds before the unseen floor convinced him to shut up.

‘All these stairs so we can reach “The Great Stair”!’ I spat a mess of phlegm after dear departed Brother Gains.

Makin flashed me a grin and wiped the sweaty curls from his eyes. ‘Maybe

the necromancers will carry us up.'

'Going to need a new cook.' Red Kent spat after Gains.

'Can't anyone be worse than Gainsy.' Fat Burlow moved only his lips. The rest of him slumped lifeless, hugging the wall. I thought it a rather poor eulogy for Gains, since Burlow seemed to put away more of the man's culinary efforts than the rest of us put together.

'Rike would be worse,' I said. 'I see him tackling an evening meal the way he approaches burning a village.'

Gains was all right. He'd carved me a bone flute once, when I first came to the brothers. On the road, we talk away our dead with a curse and a joke. If we'd not liked Gains, nobody would have made comment. I felt a little stupid for letting Gorgoth walk us so hard. I took the bitter taste of that and set an edge on it, to save for the necromancers if they wanted to test our mettle.

We found the top of the stair without losing any more brothers. Gorgoth took us through a series of many-pillared halls, echoingly empty, the ceilings so low that Rike could reach up to touch them. Wide curving ramps stepped us up from one hall to the next, each the same as the one before, dusty and empty.

The smell crept up around us, so slowly that there wasn't a point where I could say I noticed it. The stink of death comes in many flavours, but I like to think I recognize the Reaper in all his guises.

The dust became thicker as we made our way, an inch deep in places. Here and there the occasional bone lay half-covered. Then more bones, then a skull, then three. Where the Builder-stone cracked and the waters oozed, the dust became a grey mud and flowed in miniature deltas. I pulled a skull from one such swamp. It came free with a satisfying squelch and mud poured from its sockets like syrup.

'So where are these necromancers of yours, Gorgoth?' I asked.

'We make for The Great Stair. They will find us,' he said.

'They've found you.' She slid around the pillar closest to me, a woman from the night of my imagination. She moved her body over the rough stone as if it were sheerest silk. Her voice fell on the ear like velvet, dark and rich.

Not one sword left its scabbard. The Nuban lifted his crossbow and heaved the loading lever back, bunching the heavy muscle in his arm into a black ball. The necromancer ignored him. She let the pillar go with a lover's reluctance and turned to face me. I heard Makin suck in his breath at my side. The woman mixed supple strength with a succulence that young princes

doodle into the margins of their studies. She wore only paints and ribbons, the patterns swirled across her in Celtic knots of grey on black.

*When you meet her, run.*

‘Well met, my lady.’ I sketched her a court bow.

*Just run.*

‘Gorgoth, you bring us guests as well as tribute!’ Her laughter set a tingling in my groin.

*Nothing else. Just run.*

She offered her hand. For a moment I hesitated.

‘And you would be?’ Her eyes, that had held only the reflection of fire, now stole the green I remembered from a distant throne-room.

‘Prince Honourous Jorg Ancrath.’ I took her hand, cool and heavy, and kissed it. ‘At your service.’ And I was.

‘Chella.’ A dark fire ran in my veins. She smiled and I felt the same smile cross my face. She stepped closer. My skin sang with the thrill of her. I breathed her in, the bitter scent of old tombs, cut with the hot tang of blood.

‘The little one first, Gorgoth,’ she said, without taking her eyes from mine.

From the corner of my eye I saw Gorgoth take Gog in the hugeness of his hand.

The air became suddenly icy. The sound came of rock grinding on rock, setting my teeth on edge. The hall itself seemed to let forth a sigh of release, and with that exhalation mists swirled up among us, wraiths finding momentary form in the pale coils. I felt my finger freeze in the muck within the skull that dangled in my grasp.

The scraping ceased as bones found their partners. First one skeleton rose in a complex ballet of inter-articulation, then the next. The mists bound each bone in a spectral mockery of flesh.

I saw Gog explode into a fit of thrashing and writhing within Gorgoth’s implacable grip. Little Magog stood his ground as the first skeleton advanced on him. Gog was too far gone in his rage to demand release. The roar that came from him sounded comical, so high-pitched and thick with fury.

The necromancer slipped her arm around me. I can’t tell you how it felt. We turned to watch Magog fight.

The leucrota child reached up to the skeleton’s knee, no higher. He saw his moment, or rather, thought he did, and threw himself forward. You can’t expect much from a five year-old. The undead caught him in bony fingers and threw him carelessly against a pillar. Magog hit hard, leaving it bloody.

He didn't cry though. He struggled to get up as the second skeleton stepped toward him. A flap of the child's pretty skin hung away from the red flesh of his shoulder.

I looked away. Even with Chella's softness pressed to me, this sport tasted sour in ways I didn't understand. My eyes found Gog, still fighting in Gorgoth's fists. Gorgoth had both hands on the child now, though I doubted even I could fight out of his single grip. I hadn't imagined strength like that could lie in so small a thing.

The skeleton had Magog in one hand, two bone fingers of the other hand ready to drive through his eyes.

It seemed to me that a storm rose, though maybe it rose just in me, a storm lashing a moonless night and showing the world in lightning slices. A child's voice howled in my head and would not quiet though I cursed it to silence. Every fibre of me strained to move – and no part of me so much as twitched. Hooks held me. There in the cradle of the necromancer's arms I watched the skeletal fingers plunge toward the black pools of the leucrota's eyes.

When the hand exploded I was as surprised as anyone. A big crossbow bolt will do that to a hand. The Nuban turned his face toward me, away from the sights of his bow. I saw the white crescent of his smile and my limbs were free. I swung my arm up, sharp and hard. The skull in my hand hit the necromancer's face with a most satisfying crunch.

*Whoever made the Nuban must have fashioned him from bedrock. I never knew a man more solid. He held his words close. Few among the brothers sought his counsel, men upon the road have little use for conscience, and although he never judged, the Nuban carried judgement with him.*

## 30

I cleared scabbard and followed the arc of my family blade to face the necromancer. It's one of those swords they say can make the wind bleed. Appropriately the edge found only empty air, which hissed as if cut.

The necromancer fell back too swiftly for me to reach. The skull had taken her by surprise, but I didn't think I'd catch her again so easily.

I guess the skull hit her in the bridge of the nose, because that's where the mess was. No blood, but a dark stain and a writhing of the flesh as though a hundred worms wriggled, one over another.

For the most part the brothers still stood in the daze that had held me. The Nuban worked to load another bolt into his crossbow. Makin half-drew his sword. Gorgoth let go of Gog.

The necromancer took a breath, like a rasp drawn over ironwork, rattling in her throat. 'That,' she said, 'was a mistake.'

'So sorry!' I kept my voice cheerful and lunged at her. She slipped around the pillar, leaving me to skewer the stonework.

Gog hurled himself bodily at Magog, and tore his little brother from the skeleton's one-handed grip. I caught a glimpse of pale finger-marks on the child's neck.

I moved around the pillar with a little caution, only to find the necromancer had somehow slipped back to a further pillar, five yards off.

'I'm very particular about who I allow to place spells on me,' I said, turning and aiming a swift kick at Rike. He's hard to miss. 'Come on, Rikey! Up and at 'em!'

Rike came to with a wordless howl of complaint, somewhere between disturbed walrus and bear-prodded-out-of-hibernation. Just in front of him the two skeletons bent to reach for the leucrota brothers, still a tangle of limbs on the dusty floor. Rike loomed over both of the undead, and took a skull in each hand. He wrenched them together in a clap that reduced the pair to shards.



Roaring unintelligibly, he shook his hands. ‘Cold!’ He graduated to words. ‘Fecking freezing!’

I turned to the necromancer, some witticism ready on my tongue. The taunt died where it sat. Her whole face writhed now. The flesh lay shrunken on her limbs, pulsing sporadically. The body that seduced my eyes now held all the allure of a famine-corpse. She held me with a dark gaze, glittering in rotting slaughter. She laughed and her laughter came as the sound of wet rags flapping at the wind.

The brothers stood with me now. Gorgoth made no move, keeping his place. The little leucrotas crouched together in the shadows.

‘We’re many, and you’re one, my lady. And a damned ugly one at that. So you’d best step aside and let us past,’ I said. Somehow I didn’t think she was going to, but nothing ventured nothing gained, as they say.

That worm-flesh of hers crawled into a smile so wide I could see her jawbones past the hinge-point. For a second her face rippled and we saw Gains there, screaming as he fell.

‘The dead are many, child,’ she said. ‘I’ll let you pass – into their realm.’

The temperature fell, and kept falling, like there was no bottom for it to hit. It went from uncomfortable, to painful, to plain stupid in no time at all. And the noise. The awful grinding as the skeletons built themselves from pieces and wrapped themselves in the spirit-mist that rose around us. A sound to make you want to pull your teeth out. The torch in Makin’s hand gave up its struggle against the cold and guttered out.

The mist hid all but our nearest neighbours. The skeletons came at us slowly, as if in a dream. If not for the fire of Gorgoth’s torch we’d have been left in utter darkness.

I swung my sword at the first attacker. The hilt felt frozen onto my hand, but I wasn’t inclined to drop it in any case. I needed the exercise to keep warm. The skeleton disintegrated into a shower of brittle bone. I had no time to cheer before the next came lurching out of the fog.

We fell to the fight, and time left us. We hung in a freezing limbo where only the shattering of bone and the rise and fall of swords held meaning. Every time I cut ghost-flesh it seemed that the cold bit a little deeper into me. The sword grew heavy in my hand until it felt as if they’d fashioned it from lead.

I saw Roddat die. A skeleton caught him with his guard down. Bony fingers found either side of his head and a whiteness spread from them; the

living flesh dying where the ghost flesh touched. He was a weasel, was Roddat, but I took a pleasure in cutting in half the dead thing that killed him. Behind me someone screamed. Sounded like Brother Jobe. It wasn't the kind of scream you get up from.

Makin found his way to my side, frost on his breastplate, blue in his lips. 'They just keep coming.'

I could hear a roaring behind us. The mist seemed to swallow sound, but the roaring ripped on through.

'Rike?' I had to shout to be heard above it.

'Gorgoth! You want to see him fight. He's a monster!' Makin shouted. I had to smile at that.

They just kept coming. More and more, rank by rank, out of the dark. Somebody died beside me. I couldn't tell you who.

We must have smashed two hundred of the bastards and still they kept coming.

My sword got caught in the ribs of the skeleton I'd swung at. Not enough force in the blow. Makin shattered its neck with a flat swing.

'Thanks.' The word came out blunt, through numb lips.

*I'm not going to die here.* I kept running the thought through my head. It held less conviction each time. *I'm not going to die here.* I felt too cold to think. *Not going to die here. Swing low to cut off those reaching hands. These bastards don't even feel it. The bitch felt it though, when I broke her face.*

*The bitch.*

When in doubt, let your hate lead you. Normally I'd reject that advice. It makes a man predictable. But there, in that miserable hall of bones, I was past caring. Hate was all I had to keep me warm. I cut a skeleton down and lunged past.

'Jorg!' I heard Makin's startled shout behind me, then the darkness took my sight and the mist threw a thick blanket over the crash of battle.

Oh it was black out there. So dark as to reach inside you and rip out all memory of colour. I swung my sword a few times, broke some bones, carved air for a while, then hit a pillar which shook the damn thing out of my frozen grip. I hunted my sword frantically, with hands too numb to find my face. Gradually it came to me that I was free of the skeletons. No bone fingers sought me in the night. Without sword or direction I stumbled on.

*The bitch.* She'd be somewhere near. Surely. Waiting to trap our souls as we died. Waiting to feed.

I stopped and stood as still as my shivering would let me. The necromancer had lifted the veil. Just like the Nuban said, she had lifted the veil between the worlds and the dead were coming through. If I stopped her, they'd stop coming. I listened, listened deep, to a silence as velvet as the dark. I held more still, straining for her, tight and focused.

'Cloves.' My lips formed the word. I wrinkled my nose. Oil of cloves? The scent drew me on. It hung fainter than faint but, with nothing to fight against, it held me. I let it carry me forward, swaying, turning, seeking the source.

My hands found a narrow doorway and I stepped through into a chamber lit by the flickers of a dropped torch.

I understood the scent. The Nuban's crossbow lay a foot from the torch, dropped carelessly, the cable drawn but the bolt spilled to the stones. He'd broken from the brothers to hunt her. Beaten me to the chase.

'Necromancer,' I said.

She stood at the mouth of one of the Builders' shafts. The square maw filled the rear of the chamber behind her and the feeble light could not plumb its depths. She held the Nuban before her, holding his head to one side and her mouth to the straining cables of his neck. I could see the tension in his thick arms, but his fingers curled useless by his sides and his broadsword lay at his feet, hilt jutting into space over the edge of the shaft.

The necromancer lifted her face from the Nuban's neck. Blood dripped from her teeth. Whatever strength she gleaned from it had restored her looks. The blood ran over full lips and down a perfect throat.

'You sent such a fresh one to hunt me down, Prince Jorg,' she said. 'Mmmm, flavoured with heathen spices. I thank you.'

I knelt and picked up the Nuban's bow. The weight of it always surprised me. I set the bolt in place. She moved to use him as a shield, her heels to the pit.

'You're cold, my prince,' she said. The sudden music of her voice caught me off guard. It ran deep, rich with complexity. 'I could warm you.'

My tired body thrilled with the dark melody of her. It took the memory of Gains's face crawling across her worm-flesh to stop me rising to her call. I lifted the bow. I knew I couldn't hold it for long.

'It's grave-cold that's in you.' Her voice became an angry hiss. 'It will kill you.'

She smiled at me over the Nuban's shoulder, enjoying his helplessness. 'You're trembling, Jorg. Put the bow down. You probably couldn't even hit

your friend here, let alone me.'

It felt so tempting. Put the bow down.

'He's not my friend,' I said.

She shook her head. 'He'd die for you. I can taste it in his blood.'

'You're playing the wrong game with me, dead-thing.' I raised the bow and sighted it. The tremor in my arms kept the aim-point jumping. Any worse and the bolt would have shaken from its groove.

She laughed at me. 'I can see the ties that bind the living. You only have two friends, Prince Jorg. You're as bound to this sweet-blooded man as any son to his father.'

*Sacrifice.*

She set her fingers to the red holes in the Nuban's neck. 'Let me have the others. Let me take their life-juice, and you and him, you can stay with me. You can help me harvest the leucrota. There are several tribes, some of them quite fractious. There are other necromancers against whom a living ally, one as sharp as you, would be most useful.'

*Play the game.*

She smiled, and that dark fire lit in me again. 'I like you, Prince. We can rule under the mountain, together.' Sex dripped off her words. Not that pallid roll in the sheets that Sally surrendered, but something potent, unseen, and consuming. She offered me a draw. Life, power, and command. But in her service.

*Play to win.*

The Nuban's eyes were on mine. For the first time ever, I could read what he held there. I could have taken anything else. I could have taken hatred, or fear, or pleading. But he forgave me.

*ChooOom!*

The bolt hit the Nuban square in the chest. It put a hole through both of them and took them off the edge. Neither of them screamed, and it took forever before they hit the bottom.

*Most men have at least one redeeming feature. Finding one for Brother Rike requires a stretch. Is 'big' a redeeming feature?*

## 31

I came back to find the brothers nursing their wounds among drifts of broken bone. Roddat, Jobe, Els, and Frenk lay stretched out, apart from the group. Death makes lepers of even the most popular men. I didn't bother with them: any loot would be long gone.

'Thought you'd left us, Brother Jorg.' Red Kent spared me a glance from beneath lowered brows and returned to the business of whetstone and sword.

That 'brother' held a note of reproach. A note at the least, perhaps a whole symphony. No 'prince' for the runaway.

Makin watched me with dark speculation, sprawled on the floor, too spent to prop himself against a pillar.

Rike hefted himself to his feet. He came toward me slowly, polishing a ring against the leather padding of his breastplate. I recognized it as Roddat's luck-ring, a nice piece of yellow gold.

'Thought you'd left us, Brother Jorgy,' he said. He loomed over me, a broad and brooding form.

There's some, like Liar, that aren't much to look at, and it's a surprise for folks when they find out what a truly nasty bastard they're dealing with. Rike never surprised anyone that way. The menace of him, the sheer brutality, his love of other people's pain, well Mother Nature wrote it in every line of him just to warn us.

'The Nuban is dead.' I ignored Rike and looked to Makin. I pulled the Nuban's crossbow off my back and showed it. No doubt after that. The man was dead.

'Good,' said Rike. 'Serves him right for running. Never did like that weasel coward.'

I hit Rike as hard as I could. In the throat. I made no conscious decision. If I'd given it the smallest moment's consideration I'd have held my blow. I might have stood a chance against him with a sword, but never with bare hands.

Actually 'bare hands' is going too far. I had my gauntlets on, riveted iron. I stood six foot tall at fourteen, lean, but hard with muscle from swinging a sword and carting my armour around. I knew how to punch too. I put my whole weight behind that blow, and every ounce of my strength.

Iron knuckles crunched into Rike's bull-throat. I may not have been thinking with my head, but thankfully some part of me hadn't abandoned all sense. Punching Rike's blunt face would have probably broken my fist and just tickled him a little.

He gave a kind of grunt and stood there, looking slightly bewildered. I supposed the idea that I'd just committed suicide in such grand style took some getting used to.

Somewhere in the back of my mind it dawned on me that I'd made a very big mistake. The rest of me didn't much care. I think blind rage, and the pure enjoyment of using Rike as a punch-bag, figured in equal measure.

Since I'd been offered a second free blow, I took two. An iron-clad knee driven accurately into the groin will give pause for thought even to a seven foot maniac who's twice your weight. Rike folded up obligingly and I brought both fists down together on the back of his neck.

I studied the fighting arts of the Nippon with Tutor Lundist. He brought a book on the subject with him from the Utter East. Page upon rice-paper page of fighting stances, kata moves, and anatomical diagrams to show the pressure points. I'm sure I hit the two stun points on the back of Rike's neck, and I know I hit hard.

I blame him for being too stupid to know how they work.

Rike swung at me. A lucky thing, because if he'd grappled me he'd have twisted my head off in no time. His vambrace caught my ribcage. I guess if I'd not been wearing that breastplate all my ribs would have broken, rather than just the two. The force took me off my feet and sent me sliding among the bones. I fetched up against one of those pillars with a painful little clang.

I could have drawn my sword then. It would have been the only sensible decision. Against all the unwritten rules, of course. I started it with a punch and that was the way the thing should have ended. But when you weigh a loss of face with the brothers against having Rike actually rip your face off, well it's not a hard decision.

I picked myself up. 'Come here, you fat bastard.'

The words emerged without a by-your-leave. The anger spoke for me. Anger at having lost control, more that now than anger at him calling the

Nuban a coward. The Nuban didn't need Rike beaten bloody to prove his courage. Angry at being angry – there's a worm that will eat its tail and no mistake. I should have Oroborus on my family crest.

Rike rushed me with that wordless howl of his. He reached a fair clip. Not many castle doors would stop Little Rikey at that speed. Pretty scary, unless you know he can't turn corners.

I stepped aside nice and sharp, cursing at my ribs. Rike hit the pillar and bounced off. To his credit several bits of stone came loose. I picked up a good stout thigh-bone and smacked him around the head with it as he tried to get up. The thing cracked almost in two, so I finished the job and had myself two knob-ended clubs.

The single most depressing thing about fighting Rike would have to be the way he'd never stay down. He came at me, a bit woozy now, but snarling dire threats and meaning every one of them.

'Gonna feed you your own eyeballs, boy.' He spat out a tooth.

I danced back and hit him in the face with the longer of my two clubs. He spat out another tooth at that. I had to laugh. The anger left me and it felt good.

So Rike lumbered after me, and I kept my distance, clouting him a good one when I could. The closest thing I can think of is bear-baiting. *Whack! Growl. Clang! Snarl!* I had the giggles, which was a bad thing, because one slip and he really would have me. If he got just one of those paws of his on me and got a grip ... well I *would* be eating my own eyeballs. He did things like that.

The brothers started to lay bets and clap the sport.

'I'll pull your guts out.' Rike seemed to have an endless supply of threats.

Unfortunately he seemed to have an endless supply of energy too, and my dancing days were coming to an end, my footwork getting a little clumsy.

'Break every little bone in that pretty face o' yours, Jorgy.'

Our circle took us back to where I threw the first blow.

'Pull those skinny arms out of their sockets.' He looked an evil sight with blood spilling down his chin.

I saw my chance. I ran straight at him, taking him by surprise yet again. In the long run it promised to be a pushing contest as unequal as Rike against the pillar, but he gave a step. A step gave me all I'd hoped for. He hit Makin's legs, stumbled and went over backward. I scooped up the Nuban's bow, and before Rike could get up I was over him. I had the snout of the



bow, a heavy iron falcon, poised above Rike's face.

'What's it going to be, Little Rikey?' I asked. 'I think I can crush your skull like an egg before you get your hands on me. Should we try it and see? Or do you want to take that back?'

He gave me a blank look.

'About the Nuban,' I said. Rike had genuinely forgotten what he'd said.

'Uh.' Doubt crinkled his brow. He tried to focus on the bow. 'I take it back.'

'Christ bleeding!' I sagged, exhausted, clothed in sweat. The brothers surged round us then, a new life in them, paying their bets, reliving the moment when Rike charged the pillar. I made note of who backed me, Burlow, Liar, Grumlow, Kent, the older men who could look past youth. Makin even went so far as to get up off the floor. He clapped a hand to my shoulder. 'You and the Nuban, you caught her?'

I nodded.

'I hope she went to Hell screaming,' Makin said.

'She died hard,' I said. An easy lie.

'The Nuban ...' Makin had to hunt for the words. 'He was better than the rest of us.'

I didn't have to hunt. 'Yes.'

Gorgoth hadn't stirred while I fought Rike. He sat on the cold stone, legs crossed under him. Here and there the ghost-flesh of skeletal fingers had marked his hide with dead spots, little white fingerprints where the flesh had died. He didn't move, but he watched me with those cat's eyes of his.

A yard or two from Gorgoth I could make out a small dark huddle, Gog and Magog clutched one to another.

'A fine fight, lad,' I called to Gog. 'You were as good as your word.'

Gog lifted his face to me. Magog's head flopped back, rolling on a neck scored by white lines, dead white lines across his tiger stripes.

I found myself kneeling beside them. Gog snarled when I touched his brother, but he didn't stop me. Magog felt so light in my hands, a curious mix of bony starvation and child softness.

'Your brother,' I said. For the longest moment I had nothing else to say, as though my throat closed away all my words. 'So little.' I remembered him scampering up those endless stairs. In the end I had to press on my broken ribs to let the pain sharpen me and chase out the stupidity.

I set the dead child down, and stood. ‘You fought for him, Gog. Stupid, but maybe you’ll find comfort in it.’ Maybe his reproach won’t follow you the length of your days.

‘We have a new mascot!’ I announced to the brothers. ‘Gog here is now part of our merry band.’

Gorgoth started up at that. ‘The necromancers—’

I stepped in before he rose to his feet, the iron face of the Nuban’s crossbow three inches from his ridged forehead. ‘What’s it going to be, Gorgoth?’ I asked. He sat himself back down.

I turned away. ‘We burn the dead. I’m not having them come back to say hello.’

‘Burn ’em with what?’ Red Kent wanted to know.

‘Bones is poor kindling, Jorth.’ Elban hawked a wad of phlegm into the nearest pile as if to prove his point.

‘We’ll have us a bone-fire even so,’ I said. ‘I saw a tar drip on my way back.’

So we took the bones to where the black stuff leaked slow and stinking from a crack in the Builder-stone and daubed them one by one. We made a heap for Roddat and the others, and a little pyre for the leucrota. Elban built it like the ones they fashion for kings in the Teuton lands.

I set the fire with Makin’s torch. ‘Goodnight, lads,’ I said. ‘Thieves and road-scum the lot of you. Tell the Devil I said to take good care of you.’

I gave the torch to Gog. ‘Light it up, you don’t want the necromancers playing with his bones.’ A heat came off the boy, as if a fire banked inside him had woken. Any hotter and he might light the pyre without the torch.

He set the flame and we backed off before the billowing smoke. Tar never burns clean, but I wasn’t sorry for the veil it gave us. Gog gave me the torch back. The inky pools of his eyes held their secrets even tighter than the Nuban’s did, but I could see something in there. A kind of pride.

We made our way on. I let Burlow carry the Nuban’s bow. A prince must exercise some privilege after all. We walked with our tar-bone torches smoking, and Gorgoth at the fore to find the path.

He showed us mile after mile of dull box-chamber, square corridor, and low gallery. I guess when the Builders bought their hell-fire from Lucifer they must have paid for it with their imaginations.

The Great Stair took me by surprise.

‘Here.’ Gorgoth halted at a spot where a natural tunnel undercut the passage.

The Great Stair proved to be less grand than I had imagined. No more than ten yards across in any place I could see, and a squeeze at the entrance. At least it was natural though. My eyes had ached for a curved line, and here I could rest them. Some ancient stream had carved a path down a fault-line, stepping by leaps and bounds into the deep places. The waters, long since reduced to a trickle, dripped in a rocky gullet as steep and twisting as a man could hope for.

‘Seems we have a climb ahead of us,’ I said.

‘These stairs are not for the living.’ A necromancer insinuated himself into the narrow entrance, pulling himself from the shadows as though they clung like webs. He could have been a twin to the bitch that took the Nuban.

‘For Christ’s sake!’ I drew my sword and swung on a rising arc in the same motion. His head came off clean. I let the momentum carry me round, and brought the blade down with all my strength, overhand on the pulsing stump of his neck. The blow caught him before he could fall and cut deep, splitting his sternum.

‘I’m not interested!’ I shouted the words at his corpse as I let its weight pull me to the ground. As with so many things in life the bringing of death is simply a matter of timing. I made the mistake of giving Chella a moment and she took it. Jane should have told me just to attack her, nothing else, just attack her. Forget running. I had in mind that if my reply to Chella’s first words had been a well judged sword blow, the Nuban might yet be standing with me.

A savage twist on my sword hilt opened the necromancer’s chest. I keep a little dagger in my boot, wicked sharp. I took it out, and whilst the brothers watched in silence I cut out the necromancer’s heart. The thing pulsed in my hand, warmish, lacking the heat of the living or the cold of the dead. His blood lacked a certain vitality too. When cutting out a heart, and I speak from experience here, expect to be crimson head to toe. The necromancer’s blood looked purple in the torchlight and barely reached past my elbows.

‘If any more of you bastards want to waste my time with stupid melodrama, please form an orderly queue.’ I let my voice echo down the corridors.

The Nuban once told me about a tribe in Nuba that ate the heart and the brains of their enemies. They thought it gave them their foes’ strength and

cunning. I never saw the Nuban do it, but he didn't dismiss the idea.

I held the heart up to my mouth.

'Prince!' Makin stepped toward me. 'That's evil meat.'

'There is no evil, Makin,' I said. 'There's the love of things, power, comfort, sex, and there's what men are willing to do to satisfy those lusts.' I kicked the ruin of the necromancer's corpse. 'You think these sad creatures are evil? You think we should fear them?'

I took a bite, as big as I could manage. Raw flesh is chewy, but the necromancer's heart had some give in it, like a game bird hung until it's ready to drop off the hook. The bitter gall of the blood scoured my throat. I swallowed my mouthful and it slid down, slow and sour.

I think for the first time Burlow watched me eat without the green eyes of jealousy. I threw the rest of it down. The brothers stood mute, eyes watering from the torch-smoke. That's the problem with tar-torches, you have to keep moving. I felt a touch odd. I had the feeling you get when you know you really should be somewhere else, as if you'd promised a duel that morning or some such but couldn't quite remember what it was. Chills ran up my back and along my arms, as if ghosts trailed their fingers over me.

I opened my mouth, then closed it, interrupted by a whisper. I looked around. Whispers came from every corner, just at that maddening level where you can hear the words but not understand them. The brothers started to look around too, nervous.

'Do you hear it?' I asked.

'Hear what?' Makin said.

The voices came louder, angry but indistinct, louder, a multitude advancing, louder. A faint breeze disturbed the air.

'Time to climb, gentlemen.' I wiped my hand across my mouth, scraping away purple muck on the back of my gauntlet. 'Let's see how fast we can do this.'

I picked the necromancer's head from the floor, half expecting the eyes to roll down and fix me with a glare. 'I think our heartless foe has friends coming,' I said. 'Lots of friends.'

*Everyone likes to eat. One man marches on his stomach as much as an army does. Only Fat Burlow didn't much take to marching, and took too much to munching. And some of the brothers were apt to hold that against a man. Still, I had more time for old Burlow than I did for most of my road-kin. Of all of them, save Makin, he was the only one who owned to reading. Of course he bore watching for that. There's a saying on the road, 'Never trust a lettered man'.*

We ascended the Great Stair with the screams of ghosts rising beneath us. They say fear lends a man wings. None of the brothers flew up the Stair, but the way they scrambled over the slickness of that rocky throat would teach a lizard plenty about climbing.

I let them lead the way. It was as good a means as any to test the footing. Grumlow first, then Liar and young Sim. Gog scrambled behind them, followed by Gorgoth. I guessed the leucrotas' accord with the necromancers might be somewhat broken.

Makin was the last of them. He could feel the dead coming. I saw it in the pallor of his skin. He looked like a dead thing himself.

'Jorg! Get up here! Climb!' He grabbed at my arm as he passed.

I shook him off. I could see ghosts boiling along the tunnel toward us, others stepping from the walls.

'Jorg!' Makin took my shoulders and pulled me toward the Stair.

He couldn't see them. I knew from the wild sweep of his gaze. His eyes never touched them. The closest of them looked to me like chalk drawings half-erased, hanging in the air. Sketches of corpses, some naked, some clad in rags, or pieces of broken armour. A coldness came from them, reaching for my flesh, stealing warmth with invisible fingers.

I laughed at them. Not because I thought they had no power to harm me, but because they had. I laughed to show them what I cared for their threat. I laughed to hurt them. And they suffered for it. The taste of dead heart-meat lingered at the back of my throat, and a dark power ran through me.

'Die!' I shouted at them, spitting away the laughter. 'A man should at least know how to stay dead!'

And they did. I think. As if my words held them to obey. Makin had me dragged away, nearly round the corner, but I saw the spirits stop. I saw pale flames light upon their limbs, the ghost of fire. And, oh, the screaming. Even Makin heard it, like the scrape of nails on slate, cold wind on a migraine. We

both ran then, close enough to flying.

It was hours before we stopped, a thousand feet or more up the Stair. The downward tumble of the long-vanished river paused here to scour out a bowl, set about with smaller sinkholes and decorated with the frozen tracery of stone that graces the deep places of the world.

‘Fuckit.’ Fat Burlow collapsed in a boneless heap and lay motionless.

Red Kent sat back against a stalagmite, his face coloured to match his name.

Close by, Elban spat into a sinkhole pool then turned, wiping mucus from his wizened lips. ‘Heh! You looks like one o’ them Blushers, Kent.’

Kent just gave him mean eyes.

‘So.’ Makin hauled in a huge breath and tried again. ‘So, Prince, we’re climbing up. Well and good. But if we keep on up we’re just going to reach the Castle Red.’ Another breath. A long climb in armour will do that for you. ‘We might surprise the hell out of them, coming up out of their vaults, but we’re still twice a dozen men against nine hundred.’

I smiled. ‘It’s a dilemma ain’t it, Brother Makin? Can Jorg work the magic one more time?’

The brothers all had an eye on me now. All save Burlow, after that climb he wouldn’t turn his head for anything less than the Second Coming.

I pulled myself to my feet and gave a little bow. ‘That Jorg, that Prince Jorg, he’s got a madness in him. A stranger to reason, a little in love with death perhaps?’

Makin had a frown on him, worried, wanting me to shut up.

I strode around them. ‘Young Jorg, he’s apt to throw it all away on a whim, gamble the brotherhood on wild chance ... but somehow, just somehow, it keeps turning out a-right!’

I clapped a hand to Rike’s greasy head and he gave me a bruise-faced scowl.

‘Is it luck?’ I asked. ‘Or some sort of royal magic?’

‘Nine hundred o’ them Blushers up there in the Castle Red, Jorth.’ Elban gestured at the ceiling with his thumb. ‘No way we can turn them out of there. Not if we were ten times the number.’

‘The wisdom of age!’ And I crossed to Elban and threw an arm around his shoulders. ‘Oh my brothers! I may have given our priest away, but it sorrows me that your faith departs so swiftly on his heels.’

I steered Elban to the Stair. I felt the tension in him as we neared the point where the floor fell away. He remembered the Watch Master.

I pointed up the stepped river course. ‘That’s where our path lies, Old Father.’

I let him go and he drew in a sigh. Then I turned to face the brothers once again. Gorgoth watched me with his cat’s eyes, Gog with strange fascination from behind a pillar of rock.

‘Now I’m thinking that I’ll find what I’m looking for before we reach the under-vaults of the Castle Red.’ I put a little iron in my voice. ‘But if it turns out we have to murder us a quiet path to Duke Merl’s bedchamber, and I have to plant him on my sword like a puppet on a stick to get him to sign the place over to me ...’ I swept my gaze across them, and even Burlow managed to look up. ‘Then ...’ I let my voice fill the chamber and it echoed marvellously. ‘Then that is what you will fecking well do, and the first brother that doubts my fecking luck, will be the first to leave this little family of ours.’ I left them in no doubt that such a parting would be ungentle.

So we climbed again, and in time we left the Great Stair behind us, finding once more the box-halls of the Builders. Gorgoth’s knowledge reached only to the Stair’s foot so I led the way. Lines danced in my mind. Rectangles, squares, precise corridors, all etched into scorched plasteek. A turn there, a chamber on the left. And with sudden certainty, like one of Lundist’s potions turning to crystal at the addition of the smallest grain, I knew where we were.

I pictured the map and followed it. The Builders’ book sat in my pack, and I’d returned to its pages many times on our journey from The Falling Angel. No need to dig it out now. Let the brothers have their magic show.

We came to a five-way intersection. I put one hand to my forehead and let the other wander the air as if seeking our path. ‘This way! We’re close.’

An opening on the left, edged by the ancient rust-stain of a long vanished door.

I paused and lit a new torch of tar and bone from the blackened stick of my old one.

‘And here we are!’

With my best courtly flourish I pointed the way, then stepped through.

We entered an ante-chamber to the vault I sought from my map. The door that blocked the way from our chamber into the vault stood maybe ten foot tall, a huge circular valve of gleaming steel, set about with rivets thick as my arm. Damned if I know what Builder spells kept it from rusting away like the



rest, but there it was, big shiny and implacably in my way.

‘So how’re you going to open that?’ Rike’s words came out mumbled. I’d mashed his lips up pretty good.

I hadn’t the slightest idea.

‘I thought we could try knocking it down with your head.’

*I named him Liar the day I put a knife through his hand. The knife came out, but the name stuck. He was a mean bit of gristle wrapped round bone. Truth might burn his tongue but his looks didn't lie.*

## 33

‘Looks pretty solid to me,’ Makin said.

I couldn’t argue. I’d never seen anything more solid than that door. I could hardly even scratch it with my sword.

‘So what’s the plan?’ Red Kent stood with both hands on the hilts of his short-swords.

I held the gleaming wheel at the centre of the door and leaned back. The door loomed above me. It looked like silver, a king’s ransom in silver.

‘We could dig through,’ I said.

‘Builder-stone?’ Makin raised an eyebrow.

‘Try anyway.’ I released the wheel and pointed to Burlow then Rike. ‘You two. Start over there.’

They moved forward with shrugs. Rike reached the spot and kicked the wall. Burlow held his hands out before him and studied them with a speculative pout.

I had picked them for strength, not initiative. ‘Makin, give them your flail. Row, let’s put that war-hammer of yours to good work.’

Rike took the hammer in one hand and set to pounding on the wall. Burlow took a swing with the flail and nearly got both the spiked iron balls in his face as they bounced back.

‘My money’s on the wall,’ Makin said.

After five minutes I could see we’d be there a while. The wall fell away not in chunks but in scatters of pulverized stone. Even Rike’s furious attack left only shallow scars.

The brothers began to settle, leaning back against their packs. Liar set to cleaning his nails with a small knife. Row put down his lantern, Grumlow took out cards, and they hunkered down to play a hand. Lost most of their loot that way, Row and Grumlow, and practice never made them better. Makin pulled out a stick of dried meat and set to chewing. ‘We’ve a week’s rations at most, Jorg.’ He got the words out between swallows.

I paced the room. I knew we weren't going to dig through. I'd given them make-work to keep them quiet. Or at least as quiet as men wielding hammers can be.

*Perhaps there's no way through.* The thought gnawed at me, an unscratchable itch, refusing to let me rest.

The hammering made the room ring. The noise struck at my ears. I walked the perimeter, trailing the point of my sword along the wall, deep in thought. *No way through.* Gog crouched in a corner and watched me with dark eyes. Where the brothers lay, I stepped over them as though they were logs. As I passed by Liar I felt a change in the texture of the wall. It looked the same, but beneath my blade it felt like neither stone nor metal.

'Gorgoth, I need your strength here, if you please.' I didn't look to see if he got up.

I sheathed my sword and pulled the knife from my belt. Moving in close, I scratched at the strange patch and managed to score a line across the surface. It left me little wiser. Not wood.

'What?' The torches threw Gorgoth's shadow over me.

'I hoped you could tell me,' I said. 'Or at least open it.' I struck my fist on the panel. It gave the faintest hint at some hollow behind.

Gorgoth pushed past and felt out the edges. It was about a yard by half a yard. He struck it a blow that would have caved in an oak door. The panel hardly shook, but the edge on the left lifted ever so slightly. He set the three thick fingers of each hand to the edge, digging in with dark red talons. Beneath his scarred hide the muscles seemed to fight each other, one surging over the next in a furious game of King of the Mountain. For the longest time nothing happened. I watched him strain, then realized I'd forgotten to breathe. As I released my breath, something gave inside the wall. With a snap and then a tortured groan the panel came free. The empty cupboard behind it proved to be somewhat of an anti-climax.

'Jorg!' The hammering had stopped.

I turned to see Rike wiping sweat and dust from his face, and Burlow beckoning me over.

I crossed the room slowly, though half of me wanted to run, and the other half not to go at all.

'Doesn't look like you're through yet, Burlow.' I shook my head in mock disappointment.

'Not going to be neither.' Rike spat on the floor.

Burlow brushed the dust from the shallow hole their labour had forged. Two twisted metal bars showed through, bedded in the Builder-stone. 'Reckon these run through the whole wall,' he said.

My eyes strayed to the knife I held clenched in one fist. I have, on occasion, punished the messenger. There are few things more satisfying than taking out your frustrations upon the bearer of bad tidings.

'Reckon they might at that.' I pushed the words through gritted teeth.

Quickly, before Fat Burlow could open his mouth again and earn himself the name Dead Burlow, I turned and went back to the secret compartment. Just enough space to hold a folded corpse. Empty save for dust. I drew my sword and reached in to check the back of the compartment. As I did a strange chime sounded.

'External sensors malfunctioning. Biometrics offline.' The voice came from the empty cupboard, the tone calm and reasonable.

I looked to either side, then back to the space before me. The brothers looked up and started to get to their feet.

'What language is that?' Makin asked. The others were looking for ghosts, but Makin always asked good questions.

'Damned if I know.' I knew a few languages, six fluent enough for conversation and another six well enough to recognize when spoken.

'Password?' The voice came again.

I recognized that. 'So you can speak Empire Tongue, spirit.' I kept my sword raised, looking all around to find the speaker. 'Show yourself.'

'State your name and password.'

Beneath the dust on the back wall of the compartment I could see lights moving, like bright green worms.

'Can you open that door?' I asked.

'That information is classified. Do you have clearance?'

'Yes.' Four foot of edged steel is clearance enough in my book.

'State your name and password.'

'How long have you been trapped in there, spirit?' I asked.

The brothers gathered around me, peering into the compartment. Makin made the sign of the cross, Red Kent fingered his charms, Liar pulled his self-collected reliquary from beneath his mail shirt.

A long moment passed while the green worms marched down the back wall, a flood of light beneath the dust. 'One thousand one hundred and eleven years.'

‘What’s it going to take for you to open that door? Gold? Blood?’

‘Your name and password.’

‘My name is Honorus Jorg Ancrath, my password is divine right. Now open the fecking door.’

‘I don’t recognize you.’ Something about the spirit’s calmness infuriated me. If it had been visible I’d have run it through right there and then.

‘You haven’t recognized anything but the back of this panel for eleven hundred years.’ I kicked the panel in question for emphasis and sent it skittering across the room.

‘You are not authorized for chamber twelve.’

I looked to the brothers for inspiration. A more blank sea of faces is hard to imagine.

‘Eleven hundred years is a long time,’ I said. ‘Wasn’t it lonely there in the dark, all those long years?’

‘I was alone.’

‘You were alone. And you could be again. We could wall you up so you’d never be found.’

‘No.’ The tone remained calm, but there was something frenzied in the pattern of lights.

‘... or, we could set you free.’ I lowered my sword.

‘There is no freedom.’

‘What do you want then?’

No reply. I leaned into the compartment, far enough that I could set my fingers to the far wall. The surface beneath the dust felt glassy and cool.

‘You were alone,’ I said. ‘Trammelled in the thousand-year dark with only memories for company.’

What had it witnessed, this ancient spirit, trapped by the Builders? It had lived through the Day of A Thousand Suns, it had seen the end of the greatest empire, heard the scream of millions.

‘My creator gave me awareness, for a “flexible and robust response to unforeseen situations”,’ the spirit said. ‘Awareness has proved to be a weakness in periods of prolonged isolation. Memory limitations become significant.’

‘Memories are dangerous things. You turn them over and over, until you know every touch and corner, but still you’ll find an edge to cut you.’ I looked into my own darkness. I knew what it was to be trapped, and to watch ruination. ‘Each day the memories weigh a little heavier. Each day they drag

you down that bit further. You wind them around you, a single thread at a time, and you weave your own shroud, you build a cocoon, and in it madness grows.’ The lights pulsed beneath my fingers, ebbing and flowing to the beat of my voice. ‘You sit here with your yesterdays queuing at your shoulder. You listen to their reproach and curse those that gave you life.’

Veins of light spread through the glass beneath my palm, miniature lightning reaching across the wall. My hand tingled. I felt a moment of kinship.

‘I know what you want,’ I said. ‘You want an end.’

‘Yes.’

‘Open the door.’

‘The EM-bolts failed over six hundred years ago. The door is not locked.’

I drove my sword into the panel. The glass shattered and a brilliant flash lit the compartment. I pushed on, through a softness yielding like flesh, and things that crunched and gave like the bones of birds. Something hit me in the chest and I staggered back, caught by Makin. When I’d shaken the after-images from my eyes I could see my sword standing from the rear wall, smoking and blackened.

‘Open the damn door!’ I shook Makin off.

‘But—’ Burlow started. I cut through his objection.

‘It’s not locked. Gorgoth, Rike, give it a decent pull. Burlow, get in there and make that lard work for us for once.’

They did as I said, setting their bulk to the task, well over a thousand pounds of dumb muscle between them. For a moment nothing happened. Another moment, and then, without the slightest whisper from the hinges, the massive door stole into motion.

*The road may go ever on, but we don't: we wear out, we break. Age makes different things of different men. It will harden some, sharpen them, to a point. Brother Elban has that toughness, like old leather. But in the end the weakness comes and the rot. Perhaps that's the fear behind his eyes. Like the salmon, he's been swimming upstream all his life, and he knows there's no shallows waiting for him, no still waters. Sometimes I think it would be kindness to make a swift end for Elban, before the fear eats up the man he was.*



## 34

‘What is this place?’ Makin stood at the entrance with me.

The vault stretched beyond sight. On the ceiling ghost lights flickered into life, some obedient to the opening of the door, others struggling into wakefulness, tardy children late for the day’s lesson. I could see little of the floor past the crush of treasures. No Hollander grain-master owns a warehouse so well packed. To describe it fully would require all the vocabulary of shape and solid so kindly furnished by Euclid and by Plato. Cylinders longer and wider than a man, and cubes a yard on each side, lay stacked to scrape the Builder-stone above, and against the wall-cones and spheres in wire cradles, all skinned with dust. Row upon row, stack upon stack, marching beyond sight.

‘It’s an armoury,’ I said.

‘Where are the weapons?’ Rike came to join us from his struggles with the door. He wiped the sweat from his brow, and spat into the dust.

‘Inside the boxes.’ Makin rolled his eyes.

‘Let’s get ’em open then!’ Burlow said. He pulled a small crowbar from his belt. It never took much encouragement to set the brothers to looting.

‘Surely.’ I waved him in. ‘But open one at the back please. They’re all filled with poison.’

Burlow took a few steps into the vault before that sunk in. ‘Poison?’ He turned round slow-like.

‘The best the Builders could make. Enough to poison the whole world,’ I said.

‘And this will help us how?’ Makin asked. ‘We sneak into the Castle Red’s kitchens and slip some in their soup? That’s a plan for children’s games, Jorg.’

I let that slide. It was a fair question, and I didn’t feel like falling out with Makin.

‘These poisons can kill by a touch. They can kill through the air,’ I said.

Makin put a hand to his face and drew it down in a slow motion, pulling at his cheeks and lips. ‘How do you know this, Jorg? I looked at that old book of yours, there was nothing about this in there.’

I stabbed a finger toward the piled weapons. ‘These are the poisons of the Builders.’ I pulled the Builders’ book from my belt. ‘This is the map. And that,’ I pointed to Gorgoth, ‘is the evidence of their potency. Him and the Blushers of the Castle Red.’

I crossed to where Gorgoth leaned against the silvery mass of the door.

‘If you were to search the depths of this vault, and I don’t advise that you do, you’ll find fissures where underground waters have found their way in and out. And where do these waters run?’

For a moment I expected an answer, then I remembered who my audience were. ‘Where does any water run?’ Still dumb looks and silence. ‘Down!’

I put a hand to the deformed rib-bones that reached out of Gorgoth’s chest. He made a growl that would put a grizzly bear to shame, and the vibration of his ribs undercut it.

‘Down to the valley where, in the tiniest of doses, it makes monsters of men. And where did the water run from?’ I asked.

‘Up?’ Makin at least was game to try.

‘Up,’ I said. ‘So our poison wafts up, and what hint escapes into the Castle Red paints the folk that live there, the Blushers, an attractive lobster red. Which, my brothers, is what it says the stuff does in this here book handed down through some thousand years to your own sweet Jorgy.’

I spun away from Gorgoth, caught up in my display, and mindful of his fists. ‘And these poisons, in their interesting boxes, can do all this when what we have is an ancient spill, washed over for a thousand years. So all in all, Brother Burlow, it would be best not to open one with your crowbar, just yet.’

‘So what will we do with them, Jorth?’ Elban came to lisp at my elbow. ‘Sounds like dirty work, no?’

‘The dirtiest, old man.’ I clapped a hand to his shoulder. ‘We’re going to build a slow fire, bank it well, and run for our lives. The heat will crack open these marvellous toys, and the smoke will make a charnel house of the Castle Red.’

‘Will it stop there?’ Makin shot me a sharp glance.

‘Maybe.’ I looked around at the brothers. ‘Liar, Row, and Burlow, see to finding some fuel for our fire. Bones and tar if you must.’

‘Jorg, you said “enough to poison the world”,’ Makin said.

‘The world is already poisoned, Sir Makin,’ I said.

Makin pursed his lips. ‘But this could spread. It could spill out over Gelleth.’

BurLOW and the others stopped by the door and turned to watch us.

‘My father asked for Gelleth,’ I said. ‘He did not specify the nature of its delivery. If I hand him a smoking ruin he will thank me for it, by God he will. Do you think there is a crime he would not countenance to secure his borders? Even one crime? Any single sin?’

Makin frowned. ‘And if the fumes roll into Ancrath?’

‘That,’ I said, ‘is a risk that I am prepared to accept.’

Makin turned from me, his hand on his sword hilt.

‘What?’ I questioned his back, and my voice echoed in the Builders’ dusty vault. I spread my arms. ‘What? And don’t you dare speak to me of innocents. It is late in the day for Sir Makin of Trent to champion maids and babes in arms.’ My anger sprang from more than Makin’s doubt. ‘There are no innocents. There is success, and there is failure. Who are you to tell me what can be risked? We weren’t dealt a hand to win with in this game, but I will win though it beggar heaven!’

The tirade left me breathless.

‘But it’d be so many, Jorth,’ Elban said.

You’d think seeing me knife Brother Gemt not so many weeks earlier, over a far smaller dispute, would have taught them sense, but no.

‘One life, or ten thousand, I can’t see the difference. It’s a currency I don’t understand.’ I set my sword to Elban’s neck, drawing too quick for him to react. ‘If I take your head once, is that less bad than taking it again, and then again?’

But I had no appetite for it. Somehow losing the Nuban had made what brothers I had left seem more worth keeping, scum though they were.

I put the blade away. ‘Brothers,’ I said. ‘You know it’s not like me to lose my temper. I’m out of sorts. Too long without sight of the sun perhaps, or maybe something I ate ...’ Rike smirked at the reference to the necromancer’s heart. ‘You’re right, Makin, to destroy more than the Castle Red would be ... wasteful.’

Makin turned to face me, hands together now. ‘As you say, Prince Jorg.’

‘Little Rikey, get you just one of those wonderful toys. That one, like a giant’s gonad, if you please.’ I pointed out the closest of the spheres. ‘Don’t

drop it mind, and have Gorgoth help out if it's as heavy as it looks. We'll take it up a little higher and set it cooking for the castle's breakfast. One should be enough.'

And we did.

With hindsight, if all the detail were known, Makin's stand there in the Builders' vault should be sufficient to wash the blood from his hands, to erase all his crimes, the cathedral at Wexten notwithstanding, and make of him a hero fit to stand beside any that may be found in legend. Given the swathe of death downwind of the Castle Red, it's clear that the drastic scaling-down of my original plan saved the world from a rather unpleasant death. Or at least delayed it.

## 35

‘We should have seen something by now,’ Makin said.

I looked back over my shoulder. The ugly bulk of Mount Honas made a black fist against the sky, the Castle Red cradled in its grip. Behind us the brothers straggled, a line of vagabonds labouring down the slope.

‘This death walks softly, Makin,’ I said. ‘An invisible hand with fatal fingers.’ I gave him a grin.

‘Finding every baby in its crib?’ Distaste thinned Makin’s thick lips.

‘Would you rather it were Rike that found them, or Row?’ I asked. I set a hand to his shoulder, gauntlet to breastplate, both smeared with the grey mud from our escape tunnel. He had it in his hair too, drying on black curls.

‘You seem troubled of late, old friend,’ I said. ‘The past sins weigh so heavy that you’re afraid to add more?’

I noticed that we stood nearly of a height, though Makin was a tall man. Another year’s growth and he’d be tilting his head to meet my gaze.

‘Sometimes you almost fool me, you’re that good, Jorg.’ He sounded weary. I could see the web of fine lines around the corners of his eyes. ‘We’re not old friends. A little over three years ago you were ten. Ten! Maybe we’re friends, I can’t tell, but “old”? No.’

‘And what is it that I’m so good at?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘Playing a role. Filling in for lost years with that intuition of yours. Replacing experience with genius.’

‘You think I have to be old to think with an old head?’ I asked.

‘I think you need to have lived more to truly know a man’s heart. You need to have made more transactions in life to know the worth of the coin you spend so freely.’ Makin turned to watch the column close on us.

Rike came into view at the rear of the line, cresting a ridge, black against a dawn-pale sky. Behind him the clouds ran out in ribbons, the dirty purple of a fresh bruise, reaching for the west. Bandages on his upper arm, and around his brow, flapped in the breeze.

Something tickled at me, the ghosts of whispers, colder than the wind.  
Makin turned to go.

‘Wait—’

Screams now. The terror of those already dead.

No sound came, but Mount Honas lifted, like a giant drawing breath. A light woke beneath the rock, bleeding incandescence through spreading fissures. In one moment, the mountain vanished, thrown at heaven in a spiralling inferno. And, somewhere within that gyre, every stone of the Castle Red, from deepest vault to tower high.

A brilliance took all glory from the morning, making a pale wash of the land. Rike became a flicker of shadow against the blinding sky. I felt the hot kiss of that distant fury, like sunburn on my cheeks.

What burns so bright cannot endure. The light failed, leaving us in shadow, the kind of darkness that precedes a squall. I saw the storm’s outriders, newborn ghosts, driven before the rage. I watched them sweep out across the land, like the ripple from a pond-thrown stone, a grey ring where rock became dust, racing fast as thought. The sky rippled too, the ribbon-cloud now whips for the cracking.

‘Dear Jesu.’ Makin left his mouth open, though he had no more words.

‘Run!’ Burlow’s shout sounded oddly mute.

‘Why?’ I spread my arms to welcome the destruction. We had nowhere to run.

I watched the brothers fall. Time ran slow and the blood pulsed cold in my veins. Between two beats of my heart, the blast cut them all down, Rike first, lost beneath the grey maelstrom, a child before an ocean breaker. The hot wind took my feet. I felt the dead flow through me, and tasted the bitter gall of necromancer blood once more.

For a time I floated, like smoke above the slaughter.

I lay in nothing. I knew nothing. A peace deeper than sleep, until ...

‘Oh! Bravo!’ The voice cut into me, too close, and somehow familiar. ‘Now is the winter of our Hundred War made fearsome summer by this prodigal son.’ His words flowed like rhyme, and carried strange accents.

‘You maul Shakespeare worse than you abuse his mother tongue, Saracen.’ This a woman, velvet and rich.

*Just run.*

‘He has woken a Builders’ Sun, and you make jokes?’ A child spoke, a girl.

‘You’re not dead yet, child? With the mountain levelled into the valley?’  
The woman sounded disappointed.

‘Forget the girl, Chella. Tell me who stands behind this boy. Has Corion grown weary of Count Renar and taken a new piece to the board? Or has the Silent Sister shown her hand at last?’

Sageous! I knew him.

‘She thinks to win the game with this half-grown child?’ The woman laughed.

And I knew her too. The necromancer.

‘I sent you to Hell, with the Nuban’s bolt through your heart, bitch,’ I said.

‘What in Kali’s n—’

‘He hears us?’ She cut across him, Chella, I knew her voice, the only corpse ever to make me rise.

I hunted for them, there in the smoke.

‘No, it’s not possible,’ Sageous said. ‘Who stands behind you, boy?’

I could find nothing in the swirl of blindness enfolding me.

‘Jorg?’ A whisper at my ear. The girl again. The monsters’ glowing child.

‘Jane?’ I whispered back, or thought I did, I couldn’t feel my lips or any other part of me.

‘The ether doesn’t hide us,’ she said. ‘We are the ether.’

I thought on that for a moment. ‘Let me see you.’

I willed it. I reached for them. ‘Let me see you.’ Louder this time. And I painted their image on the smoke.

Chella appeared first, lean and sensual as I first met her, the coils of her body-art spiralled from etheric wisps. Sageous next. He watched me with those mild eyes of his, wider and more still than mill-pools, as I cut his form from nothing. Jane stepped out beside him, her glow faint now, a mere glimmer beneath the skin. There were others, shapes in the mist, one darker than the rest, his shape half-known, familiar. I tried to see him, poured my will into it. The Nuban came to mind, the Nuban, the glimpse of my hand on a door, and the sensation of falling into space. *Déjà vu*. ‘Who lends you this power, Jorg?’ Chella smiled seduction at me. She stepped around me, a panther at play.

‘I took it.’

‘No,’ Sageous shook his head. ‘This game has played out too long for trickery. All the players are known. The watchers too.’ He nodded toward Jane.

I ignored him, and kept my eyes on Chella. 'I brought the mountain down on you.'

'And I am buried. What of it?' An edge of her true age crept into her voice.

'Pray I never dig you out,' I said.

I looked to Jane. 'So you're buried too?'

For a moment her glow flickered, and I saw another Jane in her place, this one a broken thing. A rag-doll held between shards of rock in some dark place where she alone gave light. Bones stood from her hip and shoulder, very white, traced with blood, black in the faint illumination. She turned her head a fraction, and those silver eyes met mine. She flickered again, whole once more, standing before me, free and unharmed.

'I don't understand.' But I did.

'Poor sweet Jane.' Chella circled the girl, never coming too close.

'She'll die clean,' I said. 'She's not afraid to go. She'll take that path you fear so much. Cling to carrion flesh and rot in the bowels of the earth if that's where cowardice keeps you.'

Chella hissed, venom on her face, the wet flap of decay in her lungs. The smoke began to take her again, writhing around her in serpent coils.

'Kill this one slow, Saracen.' She threw Sageous a hard look. And she was gone.

I felt Jane at my side. The light had left her. Her skin held the colour of fine ash when the fire has taken all there is to give. She spoke in a whisper. 'Look after Gog for me, and Gorgoth. They're the last of the leucrota.'

The thought of Gorgoth needing a guardian brought sharp words to the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them. 'I will.' Maybe I even meant it.

She took my hand. 'You can win the victories you seek, Jorg. But only if you find better reasons to want them.' I felt a tingle of her power through my fingers. 'Look to the lost years, Jorg. Look to the hand upon your shoulder. The strings that lead you ...'

Her grip fell away, and smoke coiled where she had been.

'Don't come home again, Prince Jorg.' Sageous made his threat sound like fatherly advice.

'If you start running now,' I said. 'I might not catch you.'

'Corion?' He looked into the coiling ether behind me. 'Don't send this boy against me. It would go ill.'

I reached for my sword, but he'd gone before I cleared scabbard. The smoke became bitter, catching at my throat, and I found myself coughing.



‘He’s coming round.’ I heard Makin’s voice as if from a great distance.

‘Give him more water.’ I recognized Elban’s lisp.

I struggled up, choking and spitting water. ‘God’s whore!’

A vast cloud, like the anvil of a thunderhead, stood where Mount Honas had been.

I blinked and let Makin haul me to my feet. ‘You’re not the only one to take a hard knock.’ He nodded across to where Gorgoth crouched a few yards off, with his back to us.

I stumbled over, stopping when I noticed the heat – the heat and a glow that made a silhouette of Gorgoth despite the daylight, as if he were huddled over a fierce campfire. I edged around and to the side. Gog lay coiled like a babe in the womb, every inch of him white hot, as if the light of the Builders’ Sun were bleeding through him. Even Gorgoth had to shuffle back.

As I watched, the boy’s skin shaded down through colours seen in iron in the forge, hot orange, then the duller reds. I took a step toward him and he opened his eyes, white holes into the centre of a sun. He gasped, the inside of his mouth molten, then curled more tightly. At times fire danced across his back, running along his arms, then guttering out. It took ten minutes for Gog to cool so that his old colours returned and a man could stand beside him.

At last he lifted his head and grinned. ‘More!’

‘You’ve had enough, lad,’ I said. I didn’t know what the Builders’ Sun had woken as it echoed through him, but from what I’d seen, better it went back to sleep.

I looked back at the cloud still rising above Mount Honas and the countryside burning for miles around.

‘I think it’s time to go home, lads.’

### *Four years earlier*

It can't be done,' said the Nuban.

'Few things worth having can be got easily', I said.

'It can't be done,' he said. 'Not by anyone who expects to live five minutes past the act.'

'If a suicidal assassin were all it took, then the Hundred would be the Dozen by now.' My own father had survived several attempts in which the would-be killer had no interest in escape. 'No one with a claim to the empire throne is that easy to bring to an end.'

The Nuban turned in the saddle to frown at me. He'd given up asking how a child knew such things. I wondered how long before he gave up telling me it couldn't be done.

I nudged my horse on. The towers of the Count's castle hadn't seemed to get any closer over the last half hour.

'We need to find the Count's strongest defence,' I said. 'The protection that he most relies upon. The one upon which his faith rests.'

The Nuban frowned again. 'Seek out your enemy's weakness,' he said. 'Then take your shot.' He patted the heavy crossbow strapped across his saddlebags.

'But you've already told me it can't be done,' I said. 'Repeatedly.' I pulled my cloak tight against the evening wind. The man I had taken it from had been a tall one, and it hung loose about me. 'So you're just planning the most sensible way to lose.'

The Nuban shrugged. He never argued for the sake of being right. I liked that in him.

‘The weakest spot in a good defence is designed to fail. It falls, but in falling it summons the next defence and so on. It’s all about layers. At the end of it all you’ll find yourself facing the thing you sought to avoid all along, only now you’re weaker, and it’s forewarned.’

The Nuban said nothing, the blackness of his face impenetrable in the dying light.

‘Surprise is our only real weapon here. We sidestep that process of escalation. We cut straight to the heart of the matter.’

And the heart is what we want to cut.

We rode on, and at length the towers grew closer, and taller, and loomed until the castle gates yawned before us. A sprawl of buildings pooled before them like vomit – taverns and tanneries, hovels and whorehouses.

‘Renar’s shield is a man named Corion.’ The Nuban twitched his nose at the stench as the horses threaded a path to the gates. ‘A magician from the Horse Coast, they say. Certainly a good councillor. He has the Count guarded by mercenaries from his homeland. Men with no families to threaten, and an honour code that keeps them true.’

‘So, what could get us an invitation to see this Corion, I wonder?’

The queue at the gates moved in fits and starts, but never above a snail’s pace. Ten yards ahead of us a peasant with an ox in tow argued with a guard in the Count’s livery.

‘Is he really a magician, do you think?’ I watched the Nuban for his answer.

‘The Horse Coast is the place for them.’

The peasant seemed to have won his case, and moved on with his ox, into the outer yard where the market stalls would still be set out.

By the time we reached the gate a light rain had started to fall. The guard’s plume drooped somewhat in the drizzle, but there was nothing tired about the look he gave us.

‘What’s your business in the castle?’

‘Supplies.’ The Nuban patted his saddlebags.

‘Out there.’ The guard nodded to the sprawl before the gates. ‘You’ll find all you want out there.’

The Nuban pursed his lips. The castle market would have the best goods, but that line wasn’t going to carry us far. We’d need a better reason before the Count’s man was going to let a road-worn Nuban mercenary across his master’s threshold.

‘Give me your bow,’ I said to the Nuban.

He frowned. ‘You’re going to shoot him?’

The guard laughed, but there wasn’t an ounce of humour in the Nuban. He was getting to know me.

I held out my hand. The Nuban shrugged and hauled his crossbow up from where it hung behind his saddle. The weight of it nearly took me to the ground. I had to grab the bow in both hands and cling to my mount with my legs but I managed the feat without too great a loss of dignity.

I offered it to the guard.

‘Take this to Corion,’ I said. ‘Tell him we’re interested in selling.’

Irritation, scorn, amusement, I could see them all fighting to put the next words on his tongue, but he raised a hand for the weapon even so.

I pulled the bow back as the guard reached up. ‘Be careful, half the weight is enchantments.’ That lifted his brow an inch. He took it gingerly, eyeing the iron faces of Nuban gods. Something he saw there seemed to set aside his objections.

‘Watch these two,’ he said, calling another man from the shadows of the gatehouse. And off he went, holding the Nuban’s crossbow before him as if it might bite given half a chance.

The drizzle thickened into a steady downpour. We sat on our horses, letting it all soak in.

I thought about vengeance. About how it wouldn’t give me back what had been taken. About how I didn’t care. Hold to a thing long enough, a secret, a desire, maybe a lie, and it will shape you. The need lay in me, it could not be set aside. But the Count’s blood might wash it out.

The night came, the guards lit lanterns in the gatehouse, and in niches along the wall of the entry way. I could see the teeth of two portcullises waiting to drop if some foe should storm the entrance whilst the gates stood wide. I wondered how many of Father’s soldiers would have died here if he had sent his armies to avenge my mother. Perhaps it was better this way. Better that I come calling. More personal. She was my mother after all. Father’s soldiers had their own mothers to be worrying about.

The rain dripped from my nose, ran cold down my neck, but I felt warm enough, I had a fire inside me.

‘He’ll see you.’ The guard had returned. He held a lantern up. His plume lay plastered to the back of his helm now, and he looked as tired himself. ‘Jake, get their horses. Nadar, you can walk these boys in with me.’

And so we entered Count Renar's castle on foot, as wet as if we'd swum a moat to get there.

Corion had his chambers in the West Tower, adjacent to the main keep where the Count held court. We followed a winding stair, gritty with dirt. The whole place had an air of neglect.

'Should we give up our weapons?' I asked.

I caught the whites of the Nuban's eyes as he shot me a glance. Our guard just laughed. The man behind me tapped the knife at my hip. 'Going to jab Corion with this little pig-sticker are you, boy?'

I didn't have to answer. Our guard pulled up before a large oak door, studded with iron bolts. Somebody had burned a complex symbol into the wood, a pictogram of sorts. It made my eyes crawl.

The guard rapped on the door, two quick hits.

'Wait here.' He thrust his lantern into my hands. He gave me a brief look, pursed his lips, then pushed past the Nuban to head back down the stairs. 'Nadar, with me.'

Both men were out of sight, behind the curve of the stair, before we heard the sound of a latch being raised. Then nothing. The Nuban set his hand to the hilt of his sword. I flicked it away. Shaking my head I knocked again on the door.

'Come.'

I thought I'd faced down all my fears, but here was a voice that could melt my resolve with one word. The Nuban felt it too. I could see it in every line of him, poised to flee.

'Come, Prince of Thorns, come out of your hiding, come out into the storm.'

The door fell away, eaten by darkness. I heard screaming, awful screaming, the sort you get from prey with a broken back as it crawls to escape the hunter's claws. Maybe it was me, maybe the Nuban.

And then I saw him.

The Castle Red left no ruins to gaze upon. All we had were the ruins of the mountain on which it had stood. We beat the most hasty of retreats and made thanks that the wind blew against us not chasing us to share the smoke and taint of Gelleth. That night we slept cold and none amongst us had an appetite, not even Burlow.

The road from the Castle Red to the Tall Castle is a long one, longer in the coming back than in the going. For one thing, on the way out we rode – on the way back we had to walk. And most of those miles back pointed down. Given the choice I'd rather climb a mountain than come down one. The down-slope puts a different kind of hurting in your legs, and the gradient pulls on you every step, as if it's steering you, as if it's calling the shots. Going up you're fighting the mountain.

'Damn but I miss that horse,' I said.

'A fine piece of horse-flesh.' Makin nodded and spat from dusty lips. 'Have the King's stable-master train you another. I'm sure there's not a paddock in Ancrath without it has at least one of Gerrod's bastards.'

'He was a lustful one, I'll give you that.' I hawked and spat. My armour chafed, and the metal held the heat of the late afternoon sun, sweat trickling underneath.

'It doesn't feel right though,' Makin said. 'The most convincing victory in memory and all we have to show for it is a lack of horses.'

'I've had more loot from a peasant hut!' Rike called out from back down the line.

'Christ bleeding! Don't start Little Rikey off,' I said. 'We're rich in the coin that counts the most, my brothers. We return laden in victory.' There indeed was a currency I could spend at court. Everything is for sale at the right price. A king's favour, a succession, even a father's respect.

And that's another thing that made those returning miles longer than the going ones. Not only did I have to carry myself, my armour, my rations, but I

had a new burden. It's hard to carry a weight of news with none to tell and days ahead before you can release it. Good news weighs just as heavy as bad. I could imagine myself back at court, boasting of my victory, rubbing noses in it, a certain stepmother's nose in particular. What would not paint itself on the canvas of my imagination was my father's reaction. I tried to see him shake his head in disbelief. I tried to see him smile and stand and put his hand on my shoulder. I tried to hear him thank me, praise me, call me son. But my eyes went blind and the words I heard were too faint and deep for distinction.

The brothers had little to say on the return journey, feeling the holes left in our ranks, haunted by the space where the Nuban should be. Gog on the other hand bubbled over with energy, running ahead, chasing rabbits, asking question after question.

'Why is the roof blue, Brother Jorg?' he asked. He seemed to think the outside world was just a bigger cave. Some philosophers agree with him.

There were other changes too. The red marks on Gog's hide had shaded to a fiercer red, and the nightly campfires fascinated him. He would stare into the flames, entranced, edging closer moment by moment. Gorgoth discouraged the interest, flicking the child into the shadows, as if the attraction worried him.

The roads became more familiar, the inclines gentle, the fields rich. I walked the paths of my childhood, a golden time, easy days without care, scored by my mother's music and her song, with no sour note until my sixth year. My father had taught me the first of the hard lessons then, lessons in pain and loss and sacrifice. Gelleth had been the sum of that teaching. Victory without compromise, without mercy or hesitation. I would thank King Olidan for his instruction and tell him how his enemies had fared at my hands. And he would approve.

I thought of Katherine too, as we drew nearer. My idle moments filled with her image, with the moments I had spent close enough to touch her. I saw again how the light caught her, how it found the bones of her face, the softness of her lips.

We came footsore and road-weary to the heartlands of Ancrath, too deep in our own thoughts even to steal the horses that would ease the last of our journey. I had but to close my eyes and I would see the new sun rise over Gelleth, rise through Gelleth, and hear the screams of her ghosts.

We saw the Tall Castle's battlements from the Osten Ridge, with seven miles still before us to the gates. The sun descended in the west, crimson,

racing us to the city.

‘We’ll be heroeth, Jorth?’ Elban asked. He sounded uncertain as if all his years had yet to teach him that the end justifies the means.

‘Heroes?’ I shrugged. ‘We will be victors. And that’s what counts.’

We walked the last mile in dusk. The guards at the gates of the Low City had no questions for me. Perhaps they recognized their prince, or perhaps they read my look and some instinct for self preservation kicked in. We walked through unopposed.

‘Brother Kent, why don’t you lead the way to the Low Town and find the lads somewhere to drink? The Falling Angel, maybe.’ Sir Makin and I would go to court. The remainder of my brothers would find no welcome in the Tall Castle.

With Makin at my side I set off for the High City and at last we came to the castle itself. I put fatigue aside when we entered by the Triple Gate. We crossed the LECTERN Courtyard in the deepest shadows, thrown by a failing sun.

By the time we passed the table knights at Father’s doors I had a spring in my step. I looked first for Sageous, seeking him at the King’s side, then amongst the glitter of the crowd. I let the herald finish our introduction, and still I sought the heathen. I found Katherine beside the Queen, one hand on her sister’s shoulder, hard eyes for poor Jorg. I let the silence stretch a moment longer.

‘Where have you hidden your painted savage, Father-dear? I did so want to meet the old poisoner of dreams again.’

I slid my gaze across the sea of faces one more time.

‘Sageous’s services to the Crown have taken him from our borders.’ Father held his face impassive, but I saw the quick glance exchanged between his queen and her sister.

‘I’ll be sure to look for his return.’ So, the heathen had run before me ...

‘I’m told that you limped back without the Forest Watch.’ Queen Sareth spoke from Father’s side, her hands upon the greatness of her belly. ‘Are we to assume your losses were total?’ A smile escaped the tight line of her mouth. An exceptionally pretty mouth, it has to be noted.

I spared her a small bow. A bow for my half-brother, struggling to claw his way from her womb. ‘Lady, there were losses among the Forest Watch, I cannot deny it.’

Father inclined his head, as if the crown weighed heavy upon him. Pale



eyes watched me from the shadow of his brow. ‘We will have an account of this rout.’

‘Lord Vincent de Gren ...’ I counted him off on my index finger.

An intake of breath hissed through the aristocracy.

‘Even the Watch Master!’ Queen Sareth struggled to her feet. ‘He has even lost the Watch Master! And this boy seeks our throne?’

‘Lord Vincent de Gren,’ I resumed my count. ‘I had to push him over the Temus Falls. He vexed me. Coddin is the Watch Master now, low born but a sound fellow.’

‘Jed Willox.’ I counted a second finger. ‘Killed in a knife fight over a game of cards, two days’ march past the Gelleth border.’

‘Mattus of Lee.’ I counted a third finger. ‘Apparently he urinated on a bear by mistake. It seems that the legendary woodcraft of the Forest Watch maybe somewhat overstated. And ... that’s it.’

I held the three fingers at arm’s length above my head and turned left, then right, to survey my audience.

‘The losses among my own picked men were similarly grievous, but in our defence you must consider that the razing of a castle defended by nine hundred Gellethian veterans is a dangerous undertaking. With two hundred and fifty lightly-armed forest rangers, there is a limit to what can be achieved without casualties.’

‘The coward never reached Castle Red!’ The Queen pointed at me – as if anyone would mistake her target – and her voice became a shriek.

I smiled and held my peace. Women are apt to lose perspective when fat with child. I saw Katherine try to press Sareth back into her throne.

‘I ordered you to assault the Castle Red.’ Father’s words held no hint of anger, and carried all the more threat for it.

‘Indeed.’ I advanced on the throne, leaving Sir Makin in my wake. ‘Bring me Gelleth, you said.’

A yard separated us, no more, before the first palace guard thought to raise his crossbow. Father lifted a finger, and we paused, me and the guard sweating in his hauberk.

‘Bring me Gelleth, you said. And you were good enough to grant me the Forest Watch to do it with.’

I reached into the road-sack at my hip, ignoring the crossbows held on me, and the fingers ever tighter on their triggers.

‘Here is Merl Gellethar, Lord of Gelleth, master of the Castle Red.’ I

opened my hand and dust trickled through my fingers. ‘And here,’ I drew out a chunk of rock no bigger than a walnut. ‘Here is the largest stone that remains of the Castle Red.’

I let the stone fall, dropped into silence. Neither dust nor stone were what I purported, of course, but the truth lay there on the throne-room floor. Merl Gellethar was dust on the wind, and his castle rubble.

‘We killed them all. Every man in that fortress is dead.’ I looked to the Queen. ‘Every woman. Lady, scullion, drudge, and whore.’ My eyes fell to her belly. ‘Every child, every babe in cradle.’ I raised my voice. ‘Every horse and dog, every hawk and every dove. Each rat, and down to the last flea. Nothing lives there. Victory does not come in half measures.’

Father lurched to his feet.

In one pace I stood almost nose to nose with him. I couldn’t read what his eyes held, but the old fear had left me, as if it too had trickled from my hands.

‘Give me my birth right.’ I kept all colour from the words, though my jaw ached from the strain of it. ‘Let me lead our armies, and I will take the Empire, and make it whole once more. Set aside the heathen. And his plans.’ I glanced toward the new queen at that.

I should have kept my eyes on him, should have remembered where I got my mean streak.

I felt a sharp pain under my heart. It made me bite off my sentence, nearly my tongue too. I tasted blood, hot and copper. One step back, two, staggering now. I saw the blade, exposed in Father’s hand when I slipped from it.

*Is this a dagger I see before me?* The quotation bubbled up, and laughter too, breaking out of me, crimson with spittle. I wanted to speak, but for once words escaped me, leaking away with my life’s blood.

The throne-room swam before me, its architecture no longer certain in the face of such betrayal. Every eye watched my retreat toward the great doors. Their stares lanced me, lords and ladies, Princess, Queen, and King. The legs that had borne me league upon league from Gelleth now turned traitor, as if each mile from the ruin of the Castle Red settled upon my shoulders and left me drunk with weariness.

*He stabbed me!*

There was a time when I loved my father. A time remembered, in dreams, or in rare waking moments, like the shadow of a high cloud crossing my mind. There’s a laughing face from a year I no longer own, from a season when I was too young to see the distance between us. The face is bearded,

fierce, but without threat.

*Is this a dagger I see before me?* My mouth wouldn't frame the joke. The laugh burst from me, and I fell, as if the knife had cut my strings.

For an eternity I lay before them, my cheek to the cold marble. I heard Makin roar. I heard the clatter as he went down beneath too many guards. The slow thud of a heartbeat filled me.

When I fell I saw the blackness of my father's hair, darker than night, with the faintest sheen of emerald like a magpie's wing.

'Take this away.' He sounded weary. The slightest hint of human weakness at the last.

'Will he lie by his mother's tomb?' A new voice. The words drew out to fill an age, but somewhere in me they echoed and I saw their owner, Old Lord Nossar who bore us on his shoulders, Will and I, a lifetime ago. Old Nossar, come to carry me one last time. I heard the answer, too faint and deep for distinction. My eyes went blind. I felt the floor scrape between my cheek, and then no more.

## 38

I swallowed darkness, and darkness swallowed me.

Without light, without the beat of a heart to count the time, you learn that eternity is nothing to fear. In fact, if they'd just leave you to it, an eternity alone in the dark can be a welcome alternative to the business of living.

Then the angel came.

The first glimmers felt like paper-cuts on my eyes. The illumination built from a distant pin-point, splinters of light lodging in the back of my mind. A dawn came, and in an instant, or an age, darkness fled, leaving no hint of shadow to record its passage.

'Jorg.'

Her voice flowed through the octaves, an echo of every kind word and every promise fulfilled.

'Hello.' My voice sounded like a cracked reed. *Hello?* But what do you say to heaven when you meet her? Two syllables, weakness and doubt underwriting both.

She opened her arms. 'Come to me.'

I crouched, naked on a floor too white for any shadow to dare. I could see the dirt on my limbs, like veins, and blood, blood from the wound that killed me, dried and black as sin.

'Come.'

I tried to look at her. No point in her held constant. As if definition were a thing for mortals, a reduction that her essence would not allow. She wore pale, in shades. She had the eyes of everyone who ever cared. And wings – she had those too, but not in white and feathers, rather in the surety of flight. The potential of sky wrapped her. Sometimes her skin seemed to be clouds, moving one across the other. I looked away.

I crouched there, a knot of flesh and bone, with only dirt and old blood to define me beneath the scrutiny of her brilliance.

'Come to me.' Arms open. A mother's arms, a lover's, father's, friend's.

I looked away, but she drew me still. I felt her breathing. I felt the promise of redemption. I had but to lift my eyes and she would forgive me.

‘No.’

Her surprise fluttered between us, a palpitation of the light. I felt tension in the muscles of my jaw, and the bitter taste of anger, hot at the back of my throat. Here at last were things familiar to me.

‘Put aside your pain, Jorg. Let the blood of the Lamb wash your sins away.’ Nothing false in her. She stood transparent in her concern. The angel held her gifts in open hands, compassion, love, ... pity.

One gift too many. The old smile twisted on my lips. I stood, nice and slow, head bowed still. ‘The Lamb doesn’t have enough blood for my sins. May as well hang a sheep for me as a lamb.’

‘No sin is too great to repent,’ she said. ‘There’s no evil that cannot be put aside.’

She meant it too. No lie could pass those lips. That truth, at least, was self-evident.

I met her eyes then, and the wash of her love, so deep and so without condition, nearly carried me away. I dug deep and fought her. I manufactured my smile once again, cursing myself for a slack-jawed fool.

‘I left few sins untasted.’ I took a step toward her. ‘I cursed ... in church. I coveted my neighbour’s ox. I stole it too, roasted it whole, and finished it off with gluttony, a deadly sin, the first of the Seven, learned at my mother’s breast.’

The hurt in her eyes hurt me, but I’d lived a life striking blows that cut two ways.

I moved around the angel, and my feet stained the floor, leaving bruises that faded in my wake.

‘I coveted my neighbour’s wife. And I had her. Murder too. Oh yes, murder and more murder. So few sins untasted ... If I’d not died so young I’m sure I’d have met you with a full list.’ Anger closed my jaw. Any tighter and my teeth would have exploded. ‘If I’d lived but five minutes longer you could have put patricide at the head of the tally.’

‘It can be forgiven.’

‘I don’t require your forgiveness.’ Veins of darkness reached across the floor, growing outward from where I stood.

‘Let it go, Child.’ A warmth and a humour ran through her words, so strong it nearly carried me with it. Her eyes stood as windows to a world of

things made whole. A place built of tomorrows. It could all be made right. I could taste it, smell it. If she weren't so sure of her success, she'd have had me, there and then.

I held to my anger, drank from my well of poison. These things are not good things, but at least they're mine.

'I could go with you, Lady. I could take what you offer. But who would I be then? Who would I be if I let go the wrongs that have shaped me?'

'You would be happy,' she said.

'Someone else would be happy. A new Jorg, a Jorg without pride. I won't be anyone's puppy. Not yours, not even His.'

The night crept back like mist rising from the mire.

'Pride is a sin too, Jorg. Deadliest of the Seven. You have to let it go.' At last, a hint of challenge in her words. All I needed to give me strength.

'Have to?' Darkness swirled around us.

She held out her hands. The dark grew and her light quailed.

'Pride?' I said, my smile dancing now. 'I *am* pride! Let the meek have their inheritance – I'd rather have eternity in shadows than divine bliss at the price you ask.' It wasn't true, but to speak otherwise, to take her hand rather than to bite it, would leave nothing of me, nothing but pieces.

Glimmers held her now, glimmers against the velvet blackness. 'Lucifer spoke thus. Pride took him from heaven, though he sat at God's right hand.' Her voice grew faint, the hint of a whisper. 'In the end pride is the only evil, the root of all sins.'

'Pride is all I have.'

I swallowed the night, and the night swallowed me.

## 39

‘He’s not dead yet?’ A woman’s voice, Teuton accent with a creak of age in it.

‘No.’ A younger woman, familiar, also Teuton.

‘It’s not natural to linger so long,’ the older woman said. ‘And so white. He looks dead to me.’

‘There was a lot of blood. I didn’t know men had so much blood in them.’

Katherine! Her face came to me in my darkness. Green eyes, and the sculpted angles of her cheekbones.

‘White and cold,’ she said, her fingers on my wrist. ‘But there’s mist on the mirror when I hold it to his lips.’

‘Put a pillow over his face and be done with it, I say.’ I imagined my hands around the crone’s neck. That brought a hint of warmth.

‘I did want to see him die,’ Katherine said. ‘After what he did to Galen. I would have watched him die on the steps of the throne, with all that blood running down, one step after the next, and been glad.’

‘The King should have slit his throat. Finished the job there and then.’ The old woman again. She had a servant’s tone about her. Voicing her opinion in the security of a private place, opinions held back too long and grown bitter in the silence.

‘It’s a cruel man who will take a knife to his only son, Hanna.’

‘Not his only son. Sareth carries your nephew. The child will be born to his due inheritance now.’

‘Will they keep him here, do you think?’ Katherine said. ‘Will they lay him in his mother’s casket, beside his brother?’

‘Lay the whelps with the bitch and seal the room, I say.’

‘Hanna!’ I heard Katherine move away from me.

They’d taken me to my mother’s tomb, a small chamber in the vaults. The last time I’d visited the dust had lain thick, unmarked by footprints.

‘She was a queen, Hanna,’ Katherine said. I heard her brush at something.

‘You can see the strength in her.’

Mother’s likeness had been carved into her coffer’s marble lid, as if she lay there at rest, her hands together in devotion.

‘Sareth is prettier,’ Hanna said.

Katherine returned to my side. ‘Strength makes a queen.’ I felt her fingers on my forehead.

Four years ago. Four years ago I’d touched that marble cheek, and vowed never to return. That was my last tear. I wondered if Katherine had touched her face, wondered if she’d stroked the same stone.

‘Let me end this, my princess. It would be a kindness to the boy. They’ll lay him with his mother and the little prince.’ Hanna honeyed her voice. She set her hand to my throat, fingers coarse like sharkskin.

‘No.’

‘You said yourself that you wanted to see him die,’ Hanna said. She had strength in that old hand. She’d throttled a chicken or three in her time, had Hanna. Maybe a baby once or twice. The pressure built, slow but sure.

‘On the steps I did, while his blood was hot,’ Katherine said. ‘But I’ve watched him cling to life for so long, with such a slight hold, it’s become a habit. Let him fall when he’s ready. It’s not a wound that can be survived. Let him choose his own time.’

The pressure built a little more.

‘Hanna!’

The hand withdrew.



We wrap up our violent and mysterious world in a pretence of understanding. We paper over the voids in our comprehension with science or religion, and make believe that order has been imposed. And, for the most of it, the fiction works. We skim across surfaces, heedless of the depths below. Dragonflies flitting over a lake, miles deep, pursuing erratic paths to pointless ends. Until that moment when something from the cold unknown reaches up to take us.

The biggest lies we save for ourselves. We play a game in which we are gods, in which we make choices, and the current follows in our wake. We pretend a separation from the wild. Pretend that a man's control runs deep, that civilization is more than a veneer, that reason will be our companion in dark places.

I learned these lessons in my tenth year, although little of them stayed with me. It took Corion only moments to teach me, the heartbeats in which my will guttered like a candle flame in the wind, and then blew out utterly.

I lay with the Nuban, boneless on the stairs. Only my eyes would move, and they followed the old man. He could have looked kindly in a different light. He had something of Tutor Lundist about him, though more gaunt, more hungry. The horror wasn't in his face, or even his eyes, just in the knowing that these were mere skins, stretched taut across all the emptiness in the world.

The sight of him, just an old man in a dirty robe, put the kind of fear into me that shame erases from our memories. The fear the rabbit has when the eagle strikes. The kind of fright that makes a nothing of you. The kind of fear that'd make you sacrifice mother, brother, everything and anything you've ever loved, just for the chance to run.

Corion shuffled closer, and stooped to take my wrist. In one instant the touch silenced the raw terror that had so unmanned me. As completely as if he'd turned the spigot on a wine-barrel, the flow stopped. Without a word he hauled me into his room. I felt the flagstones scrape my cheek.

The chamber held nothing, save for the Nuban's crossbow, propped against the far wall. I imagined Corion closeted here in his empty chamber, a place to leave his old flesh whilst he stared into eternity.

'So, Sageous's hunter finally tracked down something with more bite than him, eh?'

I tried to speak, but my lips didn't as much as twitch. He knew about the dream-witch and his hunter. He'd called me the Thorn Prince. What else did he know?

'I know it all, child. The things you know, the secrets you hold. Even the secrets you've forgotten.'

He could read my mind!

'Like an open scroll.' Corion nodded. He turned my head with his boot, so that I could see the Nuban's bow once more.

'You intrigue me, Honourous Jorg Ancrath,' he said. He moved to stand beside the bow. 'You're wondering why a man with such power isn't emperor over all the lands.'

I was too.

'It has to be one of the Hundred. Nations won't follow monsters like me. They'll follow a lineage, divine right, the spawn of kings. So we who have taken our power from the places where others fear to reach ... we play the game of thrones with pieces like Count Renar, pieces like your father. Pieces like you, perhaps.'

He reached out to touch the bow. The air around it shimmered as if the mouth of a furnace had opened.

'Yes. I rather like that idea. Let Sageous have King Olidan, let him work to bend your father to his will, and I will have the firstborn son.'

The fear had sunk low enough to let my anger rise. I pictured the old man dying on a blade, my hand on the hilt.

'Let the wilds temper you, and if you weather it, in time the prodigal will return, a viper to his father's bosom. Pawn takes king.' He mimed the chess-board gesture. 'You might become something, Thorn Prince. A piece to win the game.'

Corion took the bow as if it weighed nothing. Raising it to his lips, he whispered a word, too soft for hearing. Five paces took him to the door and he set the bow on the steps by the Nuban's head. 'A black knight to guard my pawn.'

'And you, boy. You will forget the Count of Renar.'

*Like hell I will.*

‘Turn your vengeance anywhere you choose, share it with the world, spill some blood; but never return to these lands. Set no foot upon these paths. Your mind will not wander here.’

I could only watch him. He came closer. He knelt beside me, took my collar and drew my face to his. I met his blank eyes. I could feel the horror rising, a flood that would carry me away. And worse, I felt his fingers cold inside my skull, erasing memories, turning aside purpose.

‘Forget Renar. Take your vengeance to the world.’

*Renar will die.* ‘By ... my ... hand ...’ Somehow my lips spoke the words.

But already he’d taken the conviction from me. I could no longer say how I’d reached the tower, or even name him.

The old man smiled. He bent to whisper in my ear. I remember his breath on my neck, and the smell of rot.

Then I heard his words and all reason left me.

Worms writhed behind my eyes. Nothing remained of him in my thoughts, just a hole where I couldn’t look. Renar became a name without weight, and my hatred a gift for anyone and everyone.

I fell, through darkness, deafened by my own howling. Unknown hands locked around my throat, and in the darkness my own hands found a neck to throttle. The grip tightened, and tightened again. The screams died to a hiss, a rattle, and then silence. I squeezed. My hands became iron hooks. If I could have squeezed harder my finger-bones would have snapped like dry twigs.

I fell through darkness, through silence, only the hands on my throat, and the throat in my hands, and the hunger for air, my heart beating sledgehammer blows.

I fell through years. I’ve been falling through my life ...

I hit the ground. Hard. My eyes opened. I lay on a stone floor. A purple face stared at me, eyes distended, tongue protruding. Daylight streamed in from a high window. My heart hammered at my breastbone, wanting out. Everything hurt. I saw hands on the neck below that face. My hands. With great effort I unlocked them. The white fingers had little inclination to obey.

Still the pain swelled in me. I needed something, but couldn’t name it. My vision pulsed red, dimming from one moment to the next. I touched a stiff-fingered hand to my neck and found hands there.

I didn’t recognize the face. A woman?

The world grew distant, the pain less.

*Renar...* The name rose through me, and with it a whisper of strength. The hands that prised the strangler's fingers from my neck didn't feel like mine.

*Renar!* My first breath whistled into me, as if sucked through a reed.

Air! I needed air.

I choked, heaved but nothing came, hauled in breaths through a throat grown too narrow for the task.

*Renar.*

The purple face belonged to a woman with grey hair. I didn't understand.

*Renar. And Corion.*

*Oh Jesu!* I remembered. I remembered the horror, but it burned pale against the cold fury that ate me now.

'Corion.' For the first time in the four years since that night in the tower, I spoke his name. I remembered. I recalled what had been taken, and for the first time in forever, I felt whole.

I found the strength to lift myself up on my arms.

I was in a chamber in a castle. Beside a bed ... I'd fallen out of bed. Whilst an old woman tried to throttle me.

The door shook. Somebody rattled at the latch. 'Hanna! Hanna!' A woman's voice.

Somehow I stood before the door opened.

'Katherine.' My voice escaped a bruised throat as a squeak.

There she was. Beautiful in disarray. Mouth half open, green eyes wide.

'Katherine.' I could only get her name out as a whisper, but I wanted to shout, I wanted to scream so many things at once.

I understood. I understood the game. I understood the players. I knew what had to be done.

'Murderer!' she said. She took a knife from her sash, a sharp bodkin long enough to run a man through. 'Your father knew best.'

I tried to tell her, but no words would come now. I tried to raise my arms, but I had no strength.

'I'll finish what he started,' she said.

And all I could do was marvel at the beauty of her.

## 41

In a duel, man to man, sword against sword, it can be a lack of skill that gets you killed. Often as not, though, it'll be a matter of luck, or if it goes on too long then it'll be the man who tires first that tends to die.

In the end it's about staying power. They should put that on headstones, 'Got tired', maybe not tired of life, but at least too tired to hold on to it.

In a real fight, and most fights are real, not the artifice of a formal duel, it's fatigue that's the big killer. A sword is a heavy chunk of iron. You swing that around for a few minutes and your arms start to get ideas of their own about what they can and can't do. Even when your life depends on it.

I've known times when to lift my sword was the equal of any labour of Hercules, but never before I faced Katherine's knife had I felt so drained.

'Bastard!'

The fire in her eyes looked fierce enough to burn until the deed was done.

I looked for the will to stop her, and came up empty.

A knife is a scary thing right enough, held to your throat, sharp and cool. The thought echoed back to me from that night when the dead came up out of their bog-pools around the Lichway.

The glitter along that knife edge as she came at me, the thought of it slicing my flesh, piercing an eye maybe, these are all the sort of thing that might give a man pause. Until you realize what they are. They're just ways to lose the game. You lose the game, and what have you lost? You've lost the game. Corion had told me about the game. How many of my thoughts were his? How much of my philosophy was filth from that old man's fingers?

I'd swum in the darkness too long. The game didn't seem so important any more.

With the embers of my strength I raised both arms. I stretched them wide, to receive the blow. And I smiled.

Something reached out and held her arm. I saw it in her face, twisting there on that perfect brow, wrestling with the rage.

‘Father didn’t quite reach the heart, it seems.’ I managed a hoarse whisper.  
‘Perhaps, Aunt, you have a better hand?’

The knife shook. I wondered if she’d cut live meat before.

‘You ... you killed her.’

The fingers of my right hand closed around something, a heavy smooth something, on the shelf beside my bed.

Her eyes dropped to the old woman’s face.

I hit her. Not hard, I didn’t have the strength, but hard enough to break the vase I’d found. She collapsed without a murmur.

She lay in the sapphire pool of her dress, sprawled across the flagstones. Life flowed in my arms once more. It seemed as if my strength began to return the moment she fell. As if a spell were broken.

*Kill her and you’ll be free forever.* A familiar voice, dry like paper. Mine, or his?

Her hair hid her face, auburn on sapphire.

*She’s your weakness. Cut the heart from her.*

I knew it to be true.

*Choke her.*

I saw my hands, pale on a neck shading into crimson.

*Have her.* The voice of the briar. The hooks slipped beneath my skin, and drew me down to kneel beside her. *Have her. Take what might never be given.* I knew the creed.

*Kill her, and you’ll be free.*

I heard the echo of a distant storm.

Katherine’s hair ran like silk between my fingers. ‘She’s my weakness.’ My voice now, my lips. One little step, one more death, and nothing would ever touch me again. One little step and the door on that wild night would close forever. The game would truly be a game. And I would be the player to win it.

*Choke her. Have her.* The voice of the briar. A crackle in the mind. A hollow sound. An emptiness.

Empty.

Her neck felt warm. Her pulse beat under my fingertips.

‘Kill her, Briar Prince.’

I saw the words on thin lips, spoken in an empty chamber.

‘Kill her.’

I saw the lips move again. I saw the blank eyes, fixed on eternity. ‘Kill

her.'

'Corion!'

For a moment my hands tightened around Katherine's neck.

'I'm coming for you, you old bastard.' I released my grip.

A smile twisted those thin lips, a fierce twist. I saw it as the vision faded, those blank eyes, and that twist of a smile. My smile.

He had played me. I'd wandered for years with no recollection of him, thinking it my own idea to turn from Renar, thinking the choice a symbol of my strength and purpose, to put aside empty vengeance in favour of the true path to power. And now, on the edge of death, I had recovered what was taken. Recovered or been given. I glanced at Katherine. I recalled an angel in a dark place. The memory left me with a shiver.

I took Katherine's dagger from the floor, and stood. I left her where she lay, beside the crone I'd throttled. The door opened onto a corridor, one I recognized. The West Corner, I knew where I was. I raised the knife to my lips and kissed the blade. Count Renar, and the puppet master who pulled so many strings, one sharp edge would be enough for them all.

*Brother Roddat stabbed three men in the back for each one he faced. Roddat taught me all I know about running and about hiding. Cowards should be treated with respect. Cowards best know how to hurt. Corner one at your peril.*



‘Get out of my way.’

‘Who the hell—’

‘Please Jesu! You’re the same old wart-bag that tried to stop me last time!’ And he was. The stink that jumped me when he opened the door brought it all back. ‘I’m surprised my father let you live.’

‘Who—’

‘Who the hell am I? You don’t recognize me? You didn’t last time either. I was shorter then, yay high.’ I held out a hand to show him. ‘It seems like a while ago to me, but you’re an old man, and what’re three or four years to the old?’ I sketched a bow. ‘Prince Jorg at your service, or rather you at mine. Last time I walked out of here with a band of outlaws. This time I just need one knight, if you please. Sir Makin of Trent.’

‘I should call the guards on you,’ he said, without conviction.

‘Why? The King has issued no orders about me.’ That was a guess, but Father thought he’d struck a mortal blow, so I was probably correct. ‘Besides, it’d only get you killed. And if you’re thinking of that big fellow with the pike, I rammed his head into the wall not three minutes ago.’

The jailer stepped back and let me pass, just as he had the time Lundist escorted me when I was a boy. On this occasion, I hit him as I went by. Once in the stomach, and a second blow to the back of the neck as he doubled up. For a moment I considered finishing the job with Katherine’s knife, but it’s good insurance to let ineffective jailers live.

I took his keys and moved on down the corridor, knife at the ready. I’d rather have had my sword. I felt half-dressed without it. My mind kept returning to the fact of its absence, to the weightless sensation around my hip, like a tongue returning to an empty socket in constant overestimation of the loss.

Makin put that sword in my hand on the day he found me. As captain of the guard in search of the heir, he had the right to bear it. I’d kept it close ever

since, the family blade, Builder-steel.

I found my way to the torture chamber where I'd first met the Nuban. The table at the centre lay empty. There were no faces at the cell door windows. I made a slow circuit, directing the beam of my lantern into each cell in turn. The first held a corpse, or someone so near death as to be mere bones in a bag of skin. The next three were bare. The fifth held Sir Makin. He sat back against the far wall, bearded and smeared with filth, a hand lifting to shield his eyes from the light. He made no move to rise. I felt a hurt in the back of my throat. I don't know why, but I did. Anger in my stomach, and an acid pain in my throat.

'Makin, oh my brother.' Soft.

'Wha—?' A croak, the sound of something broken.

'I'm to the road again, Brother Makin. I have business to the south.'

I set the key in the lock. A slight tremble, a little rattle.

'Jorg?' A wet sob, half gurgle. 'He killed you, Prince. Your own father.'

'I'll die when I'm ready.'

The key turned, the door opened without resistance. The stink grew worse.

'Jorg?' Makin let his hand fall. They'd made a mess of his face. 'No! You're dead. I saw you fall.'

'All right, I'm dead and you're dreaming. Now get on your feckin' feet before I kick out whatever shit they left you. And that ain't too much by the smell of it.'

That got to him. He tried to rise, one hand scraping across the wall.

I hadn't thought what kind of state he might be in. To me it seemed I'd taken Father's knife only yesterday. Makin's beard said weeks at the least.

He got halfway to his feet, and his leg failed.

I took two steps toward him.

The Count's castle stood well over a hundred hard miles ahead of me, through the garden lands of Ancrath and into the Renar highlands. He'd never make it.

Makin slid to the floor with a groan. 'You're dead anyway.' The one good eye shone bright with tears.

*Play the game. Sacrifice knight, take castle.* That old dry voice again. I'd listened to it so long I couldn't tell if it were mine or Corion's. Either way, I should leave him.

'You've got one chance here, Makin. That's two more than most bastards get in life.' The lantern beam swung from wall to wall. 'Dead or not, I'll

leave you if you can't stand and follow me. I left a man here to die before. A man I should have loved. I'll leave you in a heartbeat.'

He kicked out, fierce with fear or something else, but his arm buckled and his foot just skittered across the muck.

I turned and walked away. Two yards past the door I stopped.

'Lundist died here.' I was speaking too loud for safety, wasting breath on foolishness. 'On this spot.' I stamped on it. 'I left him to bleed.'

Nothing from the darkness of the cell.

I'd been soft with Katherine, but at no real cost. This was different. They'd broken Makin, he could do nothing but slow me at a time when I most needed speed.

I started for the exit.

'No ...'

*Don't let him beg.*

'No ... he didn't die there.' Makin's voice came a little stronger now.

'What?'

'He got a bad knock.'

Sounds of movement in the dark.

'A knock's all. Nothing but a bruise to show for it the next day.'

'Lundist is alive?'

'Your father had him executed, Jorg.' Makin came into the light, clutching the doorframe. 'For failing to protect you, he said.' He spat a black mess onto the floor. 'More likely he just didn't have any use for a tutor once his son had run off. That's been the King's way all these years. When a thing's no use any more – throw it away.'

Makin managed a grin. 'Damn but it's good to see you, lad.'

I watched him for a moment. I saw his smile die, and an uncertainty replace it, mirroring my own.

I should leave him. In truth, I should kill him. No loose ends.

I didn't look at my knife. You never take your eyes off your mark, not when it's a man like Makin, not even in his current state. But I knew the knife was there. In my mind's eye I could see the gleam where it cut the lantern's light from the air. Makin didn't look at it either. He knew better than to offer weakness to the viper. Nothing decides a man's mind better than opportunity.

Father would leave him. Dead.

The creature into which Corion had chosen to forge me, that tool, that

piece in a game of thrones, he'd never even have come close enough to savour the dungeon stink.

But what about Jorg?

'I'm my father's son, Makin.'

'I know.' He didn't plead. I admired that in him. I chose my pieces well.

The knife felt like hot iron in my fist. I hated myself for what I was going to do, and just as much for hesitating. I hated myself for the weakness in me.

For a moment I saw the Nuban, just the white line of his teeth, and the darkness of his eyes, watching me as he'd watched since the day we met.

Makin took that moment. A swift kick snatched my legs from under me. He followed down with what weight remained to him, and sandwiched my head between the flagstones and his fist. We neither of us were in great shape. One punch was all it took to send me back to wherever it was I'd escaped from in Katherine's room.

*Shakespeare had it that clothes maketh the man. The right clothes could take Brother Sim from a boy too young to shave to a man too old to be allowed to. He makes a fine girl also, though that was a dangerous business in road company and reserved for targets that just couldn't be killed any other way. Young Sim is forgettable. When he's gone, I forget how he looks. Sometimes I think of all my brothers it's Sim that's the most dangerous.*

## 43

‘Explain it to me again.’ Makin leaned forward in the saddle to be heard above the rain. ‘Your father stabs you, but it’s to Count Renar’s castle we’re going so you can cut yourself some revenge?’

‘Yes.’

‘And it’s not even the Count we’re after. Not him that sent your sainted mother on her way, but some old charm seller?’

‘Right.’

‘Who had you and the Nuban at his mercy when you first ran from home. And let you go without so much as a beating?’

‘I think he put a spell on the Nuban’s crossbow,’ I said.

‘Well if he did, it must have been to prevent it missing. The Nuban could stop an army with that thing. Given the right spot.’

‘There wasn’t much that the Nuban missed, true enough,’ I said.

‘So?’

‘So?’

‘So, I don’t understand why we’re out here in the pissing rain on stolen nags, riding into the worst kind of danger.’

I rubbed my jaw where he’d hit me. It felt sore. The coldness of the rain did little to ease it.

‘What’s the world about, Makin?’

He looked at me, eyes narrowed against the wetness of the wind.

‘I never had time for those philosophers of yours, Jorg. I’m a soldier, and that’s the end of it.’

‘So you’re a soldier. What’s the world about?’

‘War.’ He set a hand to the hilt of his sword, unconscious of the action. ‘The Hundred War.’

‘And what’s that about, soldier?’ I asked.

‘A hundred noble-born fighting across as many lands for the Empire throne.’

‘That’s what I always thought,’ I said.

The rain came down harder, bouncing off the backs of my hands with a sting as if it carried ice. Ahead, at a place where the road forked, I could see a glow, three of them in fact, three patches of warm light.

‘Tavern up ahead.’ I spat water.

‘So aren’t we fighting for the Empire then?’ Makin kept pace, though his horse slipped in the mud torrent at the roadside.

‘I killed Price here,’ I said. ‘Outside this inn. They called it The Three Frogs back then.’

‘Price?’

‘Little Rikey’s big brother,’ I said. ‘You never met him. Made Rike look like a gentleman.’

‘Oh right, I remember the story. The brothers told it around the fire once or twice when Rikey was off on some private whoring.’

We reached the inn. They still called it The Three Frogs if the sign was anything to go by.

‘I’ll bet they didn’t tell you the whole story.’

‘Brained him with a rock, didn’t you? Now you mention it, none of them was too keen to talk about it.’

‘Me and the Nuban had come down out of the highlands. We didn’t speak the whole time. I had Corion in my head, or the touch of him, like a black hole behind my eyes.

‘We didn’t expect to see the brothers. We’d arranged to meet a week earlier on the other side of Ancrath. But I’d called the Nuban on his debt, and off we’d gone.

‘Anyhow, there they were. A score of horses on the road, the flame just starting to lick the thatch. Burlow over by that tree, there, with a keg of ale all to his-self. Young Sim, axe on high, chasing a pig. And out comes Price, bending low to fit through the door, smoke billowing around him as if he was the devil himself, and dragging the landlord, one hand round the man’s neck, not choking him, mind: Price could get his mitts all the way round a man’s neck without so much as pinching.

‘Price sees me and it’s like something explodes inside him. He knocks the landlord against the doorframe, and there’s brains everywhere. Keeps his stare nailed to me the whole time.

“‘You little bastard. I’m going to open you up.’”

‘He didn’t shout it, but there wasn’t one of the brothers who didn’t hear

him. Me and the Nuban were thirty yards off still, and it was like he'd hissed it into my ear.

“With a big crossbow like that, I bet you could hit him between the eyes from here,” I told the Nuban.

“No”, he said. Didn't sound like the Nuban though. Sounded like a dry voice I'd heard before. “They have to see you do it.”

‘Price came on at a stroll. I didn't have any illusions that I could stop him, but running wasn't an option, so I thought I might as well have a go.

‘I picked up a stone. A smooth one. Fit my hand like it was made for me.

“David had a sling,” Price said. He had an ugly smile on him.

“Goliath was worth one.”

‘He was only strolling, but thirty yards never seemed to vanish so fast.

“What's got you so riled anyhow? You missed the Nuban that much?” I thought I might as well find out what I was going to die for.

“I...” He seemed foxed at that. Had a distant look, like he was trying to see something I couldn't.

‘I took the moment to let fly. With a stone like that you can't miss. It hit him in the right eye. Really hard. Even a monster like Price notices that sort of thing. He made an awful howling. You'd have shat yourself if you heard it, Makin, if you'd known he was after you.

‘So, I crouched down, and my hands just found another couple of stones, each as perfect as the first one.

‘Price is still hopping about, with a hand pressed to his eye and a goo leaking past his fingers.

“Hey, Goliath!”

‘That got his attention. I crack my arm out and let go a second stone. Hits him in the good eye. He roars like a mad beast and charges. I put that last stone through his front teeth and down the back of his throat.

‘I tell you, Makin, they were all impossible throws. Not lucky, impossible. I've never thrown like that since.

‘Anyhow, I step out of his way, and he blunders on for ten yards before going down, choking. I'd put that third one right into his windpipe.

‘I pick up the biggest rock I can from that drystone wall over there, and I follow him. He'd probably have choked to death by himself. He had that hanged-man purple look by the time I got there. But I don't like to leave things to chance.

‘He's half crawling, blind. And the stink of him, soiled most every way



there is. I almost felt sorry for the bastard.

‘I didn’t think his skull would break first time. But it did.’

Makin, stepped off his horse, ankle-deep into mud. ‘We could go inside.’

I didn’t feel the weather any more. I felt the heat of the day I killed Price. The smoothness of the small stones, the coarse weight of the rock I’d used to end it.

‘It was Corion that guided my hand. And I think it was Sageous who set Price on me. Father reckons the dream-witch serves him, but that’s not the way of it. Sageous saw that Corion had sunk his hooks into me, he saw he’d lost his new pawn’s heir, so he infected Price’s dreams and fanned the hatred there just a little bit. It wouldn’t have taken much.

‘They play us, Makin. We’re pieces on their board.’

He had a smile at that, through torn lips. ‘We’re all pieces on someone’s board, Jorg.’ He went to the tavern door. ‘You’ve played me often enough.’

I followed him through into the warm reek of the main room. The hearth held a single log, sizzling and giving out more smoke than heat. The small bar held a dozen or so. Locals by the look of them.

‘Ah! The smell of wet peasants.’ I threw my sodden cloak over the nearest table. ‘Nothing beats it.’

‘Ale!’ Makin pulled up a stool. A space began to clear around us.

‘Meat too,’ I said. ‘Cow. Last time I came here we ate roast dog, and the landlord died.’ It was true enough, though not in that order.

‘So,’ Makin said. ‘This Corion just had to click his fingers on your first meeting, and you and the Nuban keeled over. What’s to stop him doing it again?’

‘Maybe nothing.’

‘Even a gambler likes to stand a chance, Prince.’ Makin took two glazed jugs from the serving wench, both overrunning with foam.

‘I’ve grown a bit since we last met,’ I said. ‘Sageous didn’t find me so easy.’

Makin drank deep.

‘But there’s more. I took something from that necromancer.’ I could taste his heart, bitter on my tongue. I swigged from my jug. ‘Bit off something to chew on. I’ve got a pinch of magic in me, Makin. Whatever runs in the veins of that dead bitch who did for the Nuban, that little girl too, who ran with the monsters, whatever kept her glowing, well I’ve got a spark of it now.’

Makin wiped the foam from his dungeon-grown moustache. He managed

to convey his disbelief with the slightest arching of a brow. I hauled up my shirt. Well not *my* shirt, but something Katherine must have selected for me. Where Father's knife had found me, a thin black line ran across my hairless chest. Black veins ran from the wound, reaching out over my ribs, up for my throat.

'Whatever my father is, he isn't inept,' I said. 'I should have died.'

They call the castle ‘The Haunt’. When you ride up the valley of an evening, with the sun going down behind the towers, you can see why. The place has that classic brooding malice about it. The high windows are dark, the town below the gates lies in shadow, the flags hang lifeless. It brings to mind an empty skull. Without the cheery grin.

‘So the plan is?’ Makin asked.

I gave him a smile. We nosed the horses up the road, past a wagon creaking beneath a load of barrels.

‘We seem to have arrived in time for tourney,’ Makin said. ‘Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?’

‘Well, we’ve come for a test of strength haven’t we?’ I’d been trying to make out the pennants on the pavilions lining the east side of the tourney field. ‘Better to keep incognito for now though.’

‘So about this plan—’ The scattered thunder of approaching hooves cut him off.

We looked back over our shoulders. A tight knot of horsemen was closing fast, half a dozen, the leader in full plate armour, long shadows thrown behind them.

‘Nice bit of tourney plate.’ I turned my nag in the road.

‘Jorg—’ It was Makin’s day for getting cut off.

‘Make way!’ The lead horseman bellowed loud enough, but I chose not to hear him.

‘Make way, peasants!’ He pulled up rather than go around. Five riders drew alongside him, house-troops in chainmail, their horses lathered.

‘Peasants?’ I knew we looked down-at-heel, but we hardly counted as peasants. My fingers found the empty space where my sword should hang. ‘Who might we be clearing a path for, now?’ I recognized their colours, but asked by way of insult.

The man on the knight’s left spoke up. ‘Sir Alain Kennick, heir to the

county of Kennick, knight of the long—’

‘Yes, yes.’ I held up a hand. The man fell silent, fixing me with a pale eye from beneath the rim of his iron helm. ‘Heir to the Barony of Kennick. Son of the notoriously blubbery Baron Kennick.’ I rubbed at my chin hoping that the grime there might pass as stubble in the half-light. ‘But these are Renar lands. I thought the men of Kennick weren’t welcome here.’

Alain drew his steel at that, four foot of Builder-steel cutting a bloody edge from the sunset.

‘I’ll not be debated in the road by some peasant boy!’ His voice held a whine to it. He lifted his face-plate then took the reins.

‘I heard that the Baron and Count Renar made up their differences after Marclos got himself killed,’ Makin said. I knew he’d have his hand on the flail we inherited with the horses. ‘Baron Kennick withdrew his accusations that Renar was behind the burning of Mabberton.’

‘Actually it was me that burned Mabberton,’ I said. I had to wonder, though. I might have been the one to put torch to thatch. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. But whose good idea was it? Corion’s perhaps.

‘You?’ Alain snorted.

‘I had a hand in Marclos’s death too,’ I said. I kept his eyes and edged my horse closer. Without weapon or armour I didn’t present much of a threat.

‘I heard that the Prince of Ancrath turned Marclos’s column with a dozen men,’ Makin added.

‘Did we have a full dozen, Sir Makin?’ I asked in my best court voice. I kept my eyes on Alain and ignored his men. ‘Perhaps we did. Well, no matter, I like these odds better.’

‘What are—’ Alain glanced to either side where the hedgerow seethed with possibilities.

‘You’re worried about an ambush, Alain?’ I asked. ‘You think Prince Honourous Jorg Ancrath and the captain of his father’s guard can’t take six Kennick dogs in the road?’

Whatever Alain might think, I could tell his men had heard their fill of Norwood stories. They’d heard of the Mad Prince and his road hounds. They’d heard how ragged warriors burst from the ruins, stood their ground, and broke a force ten times their number.

Something grunted in the gloom to our right. If Alain’s men had any doubt that they were already targeted by bandits in the shadows, the grunt of a small forager hunting grubs was enough to convince them otherwise.

‘Now! Attack!’ I yelled it for the benefit of my non-existent ambush party, and flung myself from my saddle, dragging Alain off his horse.

The fight went out of Alain as soon as we hit the sod, which was good because the fall knocked all the wind out of me, and a clash of heads set me seeing stars.

I heard the whack of Makin’s flail and the thump of retreating hooves. With a heave and a clatter I disentangled myself from Alain.

‘Best get out of here quick, Jorg.’ Makin was heading back after the briefest of pursuits. ‘Won’t take them long to work out we’re alone.’

I found Alain’s sword. ‘They won’t be back.’

Makin frowned at me. ‘Head-butting a helmed knight scrambled your brains?’

I rubbed at the sore spot, fingers coming away bloody.

‘We’ve got Alain. A hostage or a corpse. They don’t know which.’

‘He looks dead to me,’ Makin said.

‘Broke his neck, I think. But that’s not the point. The point is that they know they’re not getting him back in one piece, so they’ll be looking to their own escape. There’s no going back to Kennick for those lads now. No welcome in the Haunt either. They’ll know Renar won’t want any part of this.’

‘So what now?’

‘We get him off the road. That beer wagon is going to come by here in a few minutes.’ I threw a look down the road. ‘Hitch him to his horse. We’ll drag him into the wheat field.’

We took the armour off him in the gloom, amongst the wheat still wet from the day’s rain. It stunk a bit – Alain had soiled himself in death – but it was a good fit for me, if a bit roomy around the waist.

‘What do you think?’ I stepped back for Makin to admire me.

‘Can’t see a damn thing.’

‘I look good, trust me.’ I half-drew Alain’s sword, then slammed it back into its scabbard. ‘I think I’ll give the jousts a miss.’

‘Very wise.’

‘The Grand Mêlée is more me. And the winner gets his prize from Count Renar himself!’

‘That’s not a plan. That’s a way to get a death so famously stupid that they’ll be laughing about it in alehouses for a hundred years to come,’ Makin said.

I started to clank back toward the road, leading Alain's horse.

'You're right, Makin, but I'm running out of options here.'

'We could hit the road again. Get a little gold together, get some more, enough to make lives somewhere they've never heard of Ancrath.' I could see a longing in his eyes. Part of him really meant it.

I grinned. 'I may be running out of options, but running out isn't an option. Not for me.'

We rode toward The Haunt. Slowly. I didn't want to visit the tourney field yet. We had no tent to pitch, and the Kennick colours would inevitably draw me deeper into the charade than my acting skills could support.

As we came out of the farmland into the sprawl of houses reaching from the castle walls, a hedge-knight caught up with us and pulled up.

'Well met, sir ...?' He sounded out of breath.

'Alain of Kennick,' I supplied.

'Kennick? I thought ...'

'We have an alliance now, Renar and Kennick are the best of friends these days.'

'Good to hear. A man needs friends in times like these,' the knight said.

'Sir Keldon, by the way. I'm here for the lists. Count Renar places generous purses where a good lance can reach them.'

'So I hear,' I said.

Sir Keldon fell in beside us. 'I'm pleased to be off the plains,' he said.

'They're lousy with Ancrath scouts.'

'Ancrath?' Makin failed to keep the alarm from his voice.

'You haven't heard?' Sir Keldon glanced back into the night. 'They say King Olidan is massing his armies. Nobody's sure where he'll strike, but he's sent the Forest Watch into action. Most of them are back there if I know anything!' He stabbed a gauntleted finger over his shoulder. 'And you know what that meant for Gelleth!' He drew the finger across his throat.

We reached the crossroads at the town centre. Sir Keldon turned his horse to the left. 'You're to the Field?'

'No, we've to pay our respects.' I nodded toward The Haunt. 'Good luck on the morrow.'

'My thanks.'

We watched him go.

I turned Alain's horse back toward the plains.

'I thought we were going to pay our respects?' Makin asked.

'We are,' I said.

I kicked my steed into a trot. 'To Watch Master Coddin.'

## 45

I like mountains, always have done. Big obstinate bits of rock sticking up where they're not wanted and getting in folk's way. Great. Climbing them is a different matter altogether though. I hate that.

'What in feck's name was the point of stealing a horse if I have to drag the damn thing up the slightest incline we meet?'

'To be fair, Prince, this is more by way of a cliff,' Makin said.

'I blame Sir Alain for owning a deficient horse. I should have kept the nag I came in on.'

Nothing but the labour of Makin's breath.

'I'm going to have to see Baron Kennick about that boy of his one day,' I said.

At that point a stone turned under my foot and I fell in a clatter of what little armour I'd kept on.

'Easy now, you've three bows on each of you.' The voice came from further up the slope where the moonlight made little sense of the jumbled rock.

Makin straightened up slow and easy, leaving me to find my own way to my feet.

'Sounds like a good Ancrath man to me,' I said, loud enough for any on the slopes. 'If you're going to shoot anyone, might I suggest this horse here, he's a better target and a lazy bastard to boot.'

'Lay your swords down.'

'We've only got one between us,' I said. 'And I'm not inclined to lose it. So let's forget about that now and you can take us to see the Watch Master.'

'Lay down—'

'Yes, yes, so you said. Look.' I stood up straight and turned to try and catch the moonlight. 'Prince Jorg. That's me. Pushed the last Watch Master over the falls. Now take me to Coddin before I lose my famously good temper.'



We reached an understanding and before long I had two of them leading Alain's horse, and another lighting the way for us with a hooded lantern.

They took us to an encampment a couple of miles further on, fifty men huddled in a hollow just below the saddle of a hill. Brot Hill, according to the leader of the band taking us in. Nice to know somebody had a clue.

The watch brought us in with whistled signals to the guards. The camp lay dark, which was sensible enough given they weren't ten miles from The Haunt.

We stumbled in amongst sleeping watchmen, tripping over the guys of various tents set up for command.

'Let's have some light!' I made enough noise to wake the sleepers. A prince deserves a little fanfare even if he has to make it himself. 'Light! Renar doesn't even know you've crossed the borders yet, he's holding a tourney in the shadow of his walls for Jesu's sake!'

'See to it.' I recognized the voice.

'Coddin! You came!'

Lanterns began to be lit. Fireflies waking in the night.

'Your father insisted on it, Prince Jorg.' The Watch Master ducked out of his tent, his face without humour. 'I'm to bring your head back, but not the rest of you.'

'I volunteer to do the cutting!' Rike stepped into the lantern glow, bigger than remembered, as always.

Men stepped aside, and Gorgoth came out of the gloom, huger than Rike, his rib-bones reaching from his chest like a clawed hand. 'Dark Prince, a reckoning is due.'

'My head?' I put a hand to my throat. 'I think I'll keep it.' I turned to see Fat Burlow arrive, a loaf in each hand.

'I believe my days of pleasing King Olidan are over,' I said. 'In fact I'm even tired of waiting for him to die. The next victory I take will be for me. The next treasure I seize will stay in these hands, and the hands of those that serve me.'

Gorgoth looked on, impassive, little Gog watching from his shadow. Elban and Liar elbowed their way through the growing ring of watchmen.

'And what treasure would that be, Jorth?' Elban asked.

'You'll see it when the sun rises, old man,' I said. 'I'm taking the Renar Highlands.'

'I say we take him in.' Rike loomed behind me. 'There'll be a price on his

head. A princely price!’ He laughed at his own joke, coughing on that fishbone again, the old ‘*hur! hur! hur!*’

‘Funny you should mention Price, Brother.’ I kept my back to him. ‘I was reminiscing with Makin down at the Three Frogs just the other day.’

That stopped his laughing.

‘I won’t lie to you, it’s not going to be easy.’ I turned nice and slow to address the whole circle of faces. ‘I’m going to take the county from Renar, and make it my kingdom. The men that help make that happen will be knights of my table.’

I found Coddin in the crowd. He’d brought the brothers to me on the strength of my message, but how much further he’d follow me was another matter: he was a hard man to predict.

‘What say you, Watch Master? Will the Forest Watch follow their prince once more? Will you draw blood in the name of vengeance? Will you seek an accounting for my royal mother? For my brother who would have sat upon the throne of Ancrath had I fallen?’

The only motion in the man lay in the flicker of lamplight along the line of his cheekbone. After too long a wait, he spoke. ‘I saw Gelleth. I saw the Castle Red, and a sun brought to the mountains to burn the rock itself. Mighty works.’

Around the circle men nodded, feet stamped approval. Coddin held up a hand.

‘But the mark of a king is to be seen in those closest to him. A king needs be a prophet in his homeland,’ he said.

I didn’t like where we were going.

‘The watch will serve if these ... road-brothers stay true, once you have told them of their task,’ he said, eyes on me all the while, steady and calm.

I made another half circle, until Rike filled my vision, my eyes level with his chest. He smelled foul.

‘Christ Jesu, Rike, you stink like a dung heap that’s gone bad.’

‘Wh—’ He furrowed his brow and jabbed a blunt finger toward Coddin. ‘He said you had to win the brothers to the cause. And that’s me that is! The brothers do what I say now.’ He grinned at that, showing the gaps where I’d knocked out teeth under Mount Honas.

‘I said I wouldn’t lie to you.’ I spread my hands. ‘I’m done with lying. You men are my brothers. What I would ask of you would leave most in the grave.’ I pursed my lips as if considering. ‘No, I won’t ask it.’

Rike's frown deepened. 'What won't you ask, you little weasel?'

I touched two fingers to my chest. 'My own father stabbed me, Little Rikey. Here. A thing like that will reach any man.'

'You take the brothers to the road. Break a few heads, empty a few barrels, and may whatever angel is set to watch over vagabonds fill your hands with silver.'

'You want us to go?' He spoke the words slowly.

'I'd make for the Horse Coast,' I said. 'It's that way.' I pointed.

'And what'll you be doing?' Rike asked.

'I'll go with Watch Master Coddin here. Perhaps I can make peace with my father.'

'My arse you will!' Rike hit Burlow in the arm, no malice in it, just an over-boiling of his natural violence. 'You've got it all planned out, you little bastard. Always playing the odds, always with the aces hidden away. We'll be slogging through dust and mud to the Horse Coast, and you'll be lording it here with a gold cup in your hand and silk to wipe your shit. I'm staying right where I can see you, until I get what's mine.'

'I'm telling you as a brother, you big ugly sack of dung, leave now while you've a chance,' I said.

'Stuff it.' Rike allowed himself a triumphant grin.

I gave up on him.

'Coddin's men can't get near that tourney. Men such as us though, we drift into every muster, we lurk at the edges of any place where there's blood and coin and woman-flesh. The brothers could slip into tourney crowds unseen.'

'When I make my move I need you to hold until the watch can reach us. I need you to hold The Haunt's gates. For minutes only, but make no mistake, they'll be the reddest minutes you've seen.'

'We'll hold,' Rike said.

'We will hold.' Makin raised his flail.

'We'll hold!' Elban, Burlow, Liar, Row, Red Kent, and the dozen brothers left to me.

I faced Coddin once again.

'I guess they'll hold,' I said.

## 46

‘Sir Alain, heir to the Kennick baronety.’

And there I was, riding onto the tourney field to take my place, accompanied by a scatter of half-hearted applause.

‘Sir Arkle, third son of Lord Merk.’ The announcer’s voice rang out again.

Sir Arkle followed me onto the field, a horseman’s mace in hand. Most of the entrants for the Grand Mêlée had can-openers of one sort or another. The axe, the mace, the flail, tools to open armour, or to break the bones closeted within. When you fight a man in full plate, it’s normally a matter of bludgeoning him to a point at which he’s so crippled you can deliver the coup de grâce with a knife slipped between gorget and breastplate, or through an eye-slot.

I had my sword. Well, I had Alain’s. If he had a weapon more suited to the Mêlée, then it left with his guards when they rode off.

‘Sir James of Hay.’

A big man in battered plate, heavy axe at the ready, an armour-piercing spike on the reverse.

‘William of Brond.’ Tall, a crimson boar on his shield, spiked flail.

They kept coming. A baker’s dozen. At last we were all arrayed upon the field. A lucky thirteen. Knights of many realms, caparisoned for war. Silent save for the gentle nicker of horses.

At the far end of the field, in the shadow of the castle walls, five tiers of seating, and in the centre, a high-backed chair draped in the purple of empire. Count Renar rose to his feet. Beside him on the common bench, Corion, an unremarkable figure that drew on the eye as the lodestone pulls iron.

At two hundred paces I could see nothing of Renar’s face save the glint of eyes beneath a gold circlet and a dark fall of hair.

‘Fight!’ Renar lifted his arm, and let it drop.

A knight spurred his horse toward mine. I’d not taken his name to heart. I only listened to the introductions after mine.

All around us men fell to battling. I saw William of Brond take a man from the saddle with a swing of his flail.

My attacker had a flanged mace, clutched tight, the steel of his gauntlet polished to dazzling silver. He shouted a war-cry as he came at me, trailing the mace for an overhead swing.

I stood in my stirrups and leaned toward him, arm fully extended. Alain's sword found its way through the perforated grille of the knight's helm.

'Yield?'

He wouldn't say, so I let him slip from his horse.

Another knight came my way, sidestepping his horse skilfully away from Sir William's frenzy. He wasn't even looking at me.

Around the back of the breastplate there's a gap just below the kidneys. A decent suit of plate will have chainmail to cover whatever vitals are exposed between breastplate and saddle. And he did. But Builder-steel with a little muscle behind it will cut through chain. The man fell with a vague expression of surprise, and left me facing William.

'Alain!' He sounded as if all his Christmases had come at once.

'I know, I hate him too.' I flipped my visor.

The thing about flails is you've got to keep them moving. An important point that Sir William forgot when he found himself staring into an unfamiliar face. I took the opportunity to urge Alain's horse forward, and to its credit the beast was fast enough to let me put four foot of razor-edged sword past Sir William's guard.

It's not the done thing to set to bloody slaughter at tourney. There's rarely a Grand Mêlée in which somebody doesn't die, but it's normally a day later under the knives of the surgeons. The foe is generally unhorsed, or stunned in the saddle. A few fractures and a lot of bruising are the normal consolation prizes distributed among the entrants who don't win. When a knight gets too thirsty for blood, he often finds himself meeting his opponent's friends and family in unpleasant circumstances shortly after.

I of course had a rather different view of things. The fewer armed men left able-bodied after the tourney, the better. Besides, a broadsword isn't the weapon to batter out submissions. It's for killing, pure and simple.

Sir Arkle charged me, galloping nearly the full length of the field, a felled knight in his wake. As he closed the gap, he set to swinging his mace in a tight pattern just out of kilter with his horse's gait. It looked worryingly well-practised.

If the sight of a heavy warhorse thundering toward you doesn't make at least part of you want to up and run, then you're a corpse. There's no stopping a thing like that. A thousand pounds of muscle and bone, sweating and panting as it hurtles your way.

I rolled out of the saddle as Sir Arkle arrived. I didn't just duck. He was ready for that. I fell. And yes it hurt. But not so much that it stopped me sticking old Alain's sword into that blur of thrashing legs as Arkle hurtled past.

That's another thing that isn't done in tourney. You go for the man, not the horse. A trained warhorse is frighteningly expensive, and be assured that when you break one, the owner is going to come after you for the price of a replacement.

I levered myself up, cursing, splattered with horse blood.

Sir Arkle lay under his steed, deathly quiet and still, in contrast to the horse's screaming and thrashing.

A lot of animals will suffer horrific injury in silence, but when they decide to complain, there's no holds barred. If you've heard the screams of rabbits as they're put to the knife you'll know what racket even such small creatures can make. It took two swings to fully silence Arkle's horse. Another two for good measure to take its head off.

By the time I'd finished, I'd become the archetypal Red Knight, my armour bright with arterial blood. I had the stink of battle in my nose now, blood and shit, the taste of it on my lips, salt with sweat.

There weren't many of us left standing in the tourney ring. Sir James stood amid a scatter of fallen knights at the far end, battling a man in fire-bronzed armour. Closer to hand an unhorsed knight with a war-hammer had just laid out his opponent. And that was it.

The hammer-man limped toward me, the iron plates around his knee buckled and grating.

'Yield.' I didn't move. Didn't so much as raise my sword.

A moment of silence. Nothing but the distant clash of weapons as Sir James of Hay put down his man. Nothing but the faint pitter-pat of blood dripping from my platemail.

Hammer-man let his hammer fall. 'You're not Alain Kennick.' He turned and limped toward the white tent where the healers waited.

Half of me wanted the fight. More than half of me wondered if a hammer between the eyes wasn't a whole lot more appetizing than meeting with

Corion again. It seemed impossible that he didn't already know I was here, that those empty eyes hadn't seen through Alain's armour at the first moment. I glanced toward the stands, closer now. He watched me, they all did, but this was the man who'd given me the power to fell Brother Price, the man who whispered from the hook-briar, who poisoned my every move, pulling the strings toward hidden ends. Had he drawn me here, to this moment, tugging on his puppet lines?

Sir James of Hay put an end to my speculation. He dismounted, presumably having noted my lack of respect for horseflesh, and advanced with purpose in his stride. The sunlight coaxed few glimmers from the scarred plates of his armour. His heavy axe had done good work today. I saw blood on the armour spike.

'You're a scary one,' I said.

He came on, stepping around Arkle's horse.

'Not a talker?' I asked.

'Yield, boy,' he said. 'One chance.'

'I'm not sure we even have choices, James, let alone chances. You should read—'

He charged, dragging that axe of his through the air in a blur. I managed a block, but my sword flew free, leaving my right hand numb to the wrist. He reverse-swung, his strength tremendous, and nearly took my head. I swayed aside, clear by half an inch, and staggered back.

Sir James readied himself. I knew then how the cow feels before the slaughterman. I may have been guilty of fine words about fear and the edges of knives, but empty-handed before a competent butcher like Sir James I found a sudden and healthy terror. I didn't want it all to end here, broken apart before a cheering crowd, cut down before strangers who didn't even know my name.

'Wait!'

But of course he didn't. He came on apace, swinging for me. If I hadn't tripped as I backed, I'd have been cut in two, or as near as makes no difference. The fall left me flat on my back with the air knocked out and Sir James carried two strides past me by his momentum. My right hand, grasping for purchase, found the haft of the discarded war-hammer. The old luck hadn't deserted me.

I swung and made contact with the back of Sir James' knee. It made a satisfying crunch, and he went down, discovering his voice on the way.

Unfortunately the brute hadn't the grace to know he was supposed to be beaten. He twisted onto his good knee and raised his axe over my head. I could see it black against the blue sky. At least the sun was out. A blank visor hid his face, but I could hear the rattle of his breath behind it, see the flecks of foam around the perforations.

'Time to die.'

He was right. There's not much to be done with a war-hammer at close quarters. Especially when you're spread-eagled on your back.

*ChooOm!*

Sir James' head jerked from my field of view leaving nothing but blue heaven.

'Gods but you've got to love that crossbow!' I said.

I sat up. Sir James lay beside me, a neat hole punched through his faceplate, and blood pooling behind his head.

I couldn't see who had taken the shot. Probably Makin, having regained the Nuban's crossbow from one of the brothers. He must have loosed his bolt from the commons where the rabble stands. Renar would have men stationed where anyone might get a clear shot at the royal seating area, but targeting the combatants on the field was a far easier proposition.

I recovered my sword before the crowd really took in what had happened. A scuffle of some kind had broken out in the commons, a large figure in the midst of it all. Rike breaking heads perhaps.

I scooped up Sir James's axe and caught Alain's horse again. Once in the saddle I took axe and sword in hand. Townsfolk began to stream onto the field with some kind of riot in mind. It wasn't entirely clear where their anger lay, but I felt sure a whole lot of it rested on Sir Alain of Kennick.

A line of men-at-arms had positioned themselves in front of the royal stand. A squad of six soldiers in castle livery were angling toward me from their station by the casualty tent.

I lifted axe and sword out to shoulder height. The axe weighed like an anvil; it'd take a man like Rike to wield it as lightly as Sir James had.

From the corner of my eye I could see guards leaving their posts at the castle gates to help calm the disturbance and come to their lord's aid.

Corion found his feet, oddly reminiscent of a scarecrow, standing just below Count Renar's seat. The Count himself remained in his chair, motionless, hands in his lap, fingers steepled.

Did Corion know it was me? He had to, surely? When I'd broken his spell,



when I'd woken from dark dreams after Father's tender stab, and finally remembered how he'd turned me from my vengeance, how he'd made me his pawn in the hidden game of empire, hadn't he known?

Time to find out.

I urged Alain's horse into a canter and aimed him straight at Renar, axe and sword in outstretched hands. I hoped I looked like Hell risen, like Death riding for the Count. I could taste blood, and I wanted more.

There really is something about a heavy warhorse coming your way. The stand began to empty at speed, the gentry climbing over each other to get clear. A space opened up around Renar's high-backed chair, just him, Corion, and the two chosen men flanking. A ripple even ran through the line of soldiers before the seating, but they held their ground. At least until I really picked up speed.

Alain's horse carried me through the soldiers, up the stands, like climbing a giant staircase, right to Count Renar's chair, and through it.

Had the Count not been hauled from his seat moments before, it could have all ended there.

'Get him away!' Corion said to the quick-handed body-guard.

The other chosen man came straight for me as the horse beneath me panicked at the strange footing. I couldn't control the beast, and I didn't want it to land on me when it fell, so I leapt from the saddle. Or got as close to a leap as a man in full plate can, which is to say that I chose where I fell. I trusted to my armour and dropped onto Renar's bodyguard.

The man cushioned my fall, and in exchange got most of his ribs broken. I heard them crack like sappy branches. I clambered up, with the horse whinnying behind me, hooves flying in all directions as it turned and bucked, threatening to fall at every moment.

I threw Sir James' axe at Renar's back, but the thing proved too heavy and ill-weighted for a clean throw. It hit his second bodyguard between the shoulderblades and felled him. Renar himself managed to reach the soldiers I'd scattered in my charge, and they circled around to escort him toward the castle.

I took my sword in two hands and made to follow.

'No.'

Corion stepped into my path, one hand raised, a single finger lifted.

I felt a giant nail skewer me to the spot, struck through the top of my head, driven into the bedrock far beneath my feet. The world seemed to spin around me, slow revolutions, measured by heartbeats. My arms fell, limp, hands numb, losing their grip on the sword hilt.

'Jorg.' I wouldn't meet his eyes. 'How could you think you might defy me?'

'How could you think I wouldn't?' My voice sounded far off, as if

somebody else were speaking. I managed to fumble the dagger from my hip.

‘Stop.’ And my arms lost all remaining strength.

Corion moved closer. My eyes struggled to keep with him as the world turned. Behind me the sounds of the thrashing horse, muffled and distant.

‘You’re a child,’ he said. ‘You gamble everything on each throw, no bet hedged, no reserve. That’s a strategy that always ends in defeat.’

He took a small knife from his robe, three gleaming inches of cut-throat.

‘Gelleth, though! That took us all by surprise. You exceeded all expectations there. Sageous even left your father’s side rather than face you on your return. He’s back there now, of course.’

Corion put the blade to the side of my neck, angled between helm and gorget. His face held no emotion, his eyes empty wells that seemed to suck me in.

‘Sageous was right to run,’ I said. My voice reached up from a chasm.

I had no plan, but I’d had my moment of fear with Sir James and I wasn’t about to reward Corion with any more.

I reached for whatever power the necromancer’s heart had given me. I let my eyes look where the ghosts walk, and a cold thrill burned across my skin.

‘Necromancy won’t save you, Jorg.’ I felt the bite of the knife at my neck. ‘Even Chella doesn’t trust in her death magic enough to face me. And whatever you stole beneath that mountain is just a shadow of her skill.’

It’s will. In the end it always comes down to will. Corion held me, nailed within a treacherous body, because he willed it, because his want had overwritten mine.

Hot blood trickled down my neck. I felt it run beneath my armour.

I threw everything I had against him. All my pride, my anger, an ocean of it, the rage, the hurt. I reached back across the years. I counted my dead. I reached into the briar and touched the bloodless child who hung there. I took it all, and made a hammer of it.

Nothing! All I managed was to flop my head forward so I no longer saw his face. He laughed. I felt the vibration of it in the knife. He wanted my death to be slow.

I could see my arms, metal clad, dagger held in loose fingers. Life pulsed through those arms, driven with each beat of my heart, mixed with the dark magic that had kept me from death at the King’s hand. I saw Father’s face again, in the moment of the blow, the bristle of his beard, the tight line of his mouth. I saw Katherine’s face, the light in her eyes as she nursed me. And I

reached with all of it, the bitter and the sweet, just to move the arms that lay before me. I put the whole of my life behind that plea.

It accomplished nothing but to turn the point of my dagger toward Corion.

‘They’re dying, Jorg,’ he said. ‘See with my eyes.’

And I was the hawk. Part of me stayed on the stands, being bled like a pig, and the rest flew, wild and free across the tourney field.

I saw Elban defending Rike’s back amid the common crowd, Renar’s soldiers closing on them from all angles, like hunting dogs knifing through the tall grass. A spear got him in the stomach. He looked surprised. Old all of a sudden, wearing all his years. I saw him shout, and spit blood over those toothless gums of his. But I couldn’t hear him. A glimpse of Elban cutting down the man who speared him, and we moved on.

Liar stood out on the edge of the tourney field, a mean streak of gristle, bow in hand, arrows planted at his feet. He took the castle-soldiers down as they streamed toward the royal stands. Quick but unhurried, each arrow finding a mark, a tight smile on his lips. They got him from behind. The first soldier to reach him drove a spear through his back.

We swept closer to the gates. A tinker’s cart. The sack covering shrugged aside, and Gorgoth rolled out, reaching the ground on two hands and one knee. He ran for The Haunt. The castle folk scattered before him, some screaming. Even soldiers turned aside, all of a sudden finding their duty to be on the tourney field. Two men discovered their courage and barred his way, spears levelled. Gorgoth didn’t slow. He caught a spear in each hand, snapped the last foot off, and drove the broken ends through their owners’ necks. He ran through the men before they fell. Three arrows hit him as he left my view.

Corion drew our sight back. On the cart the sacking twitched again. Something quick and mottled slipped out. Gog. The leucrota child ran in the direction Gorgoth had taken.

Our sight drew back. Across the tourney field where a score of soldiers closed on the royal stand. Burlow stood guard. A lone man between Renar’s spears and the young Prince of Ancrath, yours truly. How he’d got there I didn’t know. Or why. But he had nowhere to run, and he was too fat to win free in any case.

Burlow took the first man down with an axe blow that sliced head from shoulders. A reverse swing put the blade between the next man’s eyes. Then they were all over him. A single arrow looped in from somewhere and found

a Renar neck.

Our sight drew back. I saw myself on the stand, face to face with Corion. Bleeding. Alain's horse still thrashing, as if it had been seconds rather than a lifetime since I rode up.

And we parted. I saw with my own eyes again. The knife in my hand, raised but impotent, the splintered boards beneath my feet. The sounds of Burlow dying. The scream of horse. I thought of Gog, chasing Gorgoth toward the gates, of Elban's toothless shout, of Makin out there somewhere, fighting and dying.

None of it made any difference. I couldn't move.

'It's over, Jorg. Goodbye.' The magus placed his knife for the final cut.

You'd think there was never a good time to get kicked by a horse.

The wild hoof hit me square in the back. I would probably have flown ten yards if I hadn't crashed straight into Corion. As it was, we flew about five yards together. We landed on grass, at the side of the royal stand, clutched in an embrace, like lovers. The eyes that had held me were screwed shut in pain. I tried again to lift my dagger. It didn't move. But this time there was a difference, I felt the strain and play of the muscles in my arm. With a grunt I pushed him from me. The hilt of my dagger jutted between his ribs. What all my will, all my rage and pain, had been unable to accomplish, a single kick from a panicked horse had achieved.

I twisted the dagger, digging it in. A last breath escaped him. His eyes rolled open, glassy and without power.

The Count's bodyguard had fallen this way too, with the axe that had brought him down still bedded in his back. I wrenched it free. It's a nasty sound that sharp iron makes in flesh. I took Corion's head in two blows. I didn't trust him to be dead.

The soldiers that had taken Burlow began to boil around the side of the stand. I held Corion's head up before them.

There's an unsettling weight to a severed head. It swung on the grey hair knotted between my fingers, and I tasted bile at the back of my throat.

'You know this man!' I shouted.

The first three soldiers coming into view halted, maybe from fear, maybe to let the numbers build before the charge.

'I am Honourous Jorg Ancrath! The blood of Empire flows through my veins. My business is with Count Renar.'

More soldiers came around the corner of the stand. Five, seven, twelve. No

more. Burlow had given good account of himself.

‘This is the man you have served.’ I took a step toward them, Corion’s head held out before me. ‘He made Count Renar his puppet years ago. You know this to be true.’

I walked forward. No hesitation. Believe they will step aside, and they will.

They didn’t watch me. They watched the head. As if the fear he’d instilled in them ran so deep that they expected those dead eyes to swivel their way and draw them in with that hollow pull.

The soldiers parted for me, and I walked out across the tourney field toward The Haunt.

Other units broke from the left of the field where Rike and Elban had been fighting. They moved to intercept me. Two groups of five. They started to fall before they got within fifty yards. The Forest Watch were advancing along the Elm Road. I could see archers lining the ridge from which I’d first seen The Haunt.

I let Corion’s head drop. I just opened my fingers and let his hair slide through. It took an age to fall, as though it fell through cobwebs, or dreams. It should have hit the ground like a hammer against a gong, but it made no sound. Silent or roaring though, I heard it, I felt it. A weight lifted from me. More weight than I’d ever imagined I could carry.

I could see the gateway ahead. The Haunt’s great entrance arch. The portcullis had all but descended. A single figure stood beneath it, holding up an impossible mass of wood and iron. Gorgoth!

I started to run.

I ran for the castle gates. I had my armour on, save for the pieces I'd lost in the tourney, but it didn't seem to weigh heavy. I heard the hiss of arrows about me. Other men fell. The Forest Watch's finest archers kept my path clear.

I wondered where I was going, and why. I'd left Corion in the mud. When he died, it felt like an arrow being drawn from a wound, like shackles struck away, like the hangman's noose worked free from a purpled neck.

A few shafts reached me from guards up in The Haunt's ramparts. One shattered on my breastplate. But in the main they had too hard a time picking targets in the confusion of the tourney field to worry about one knight storming the castle single-handedly.

I let my feet carry me. The empty feeling wouldn't leave me. Where there had been an inner voice to goad me on, I heard only the rasp of my breath.

I met more serious resistance in the street running up to the gates, out of sight from the watch's positions. Soldiers had gathered, between the taverns and tanneries. They held the road I had passed when I first came to The Haunt with the Nuban as a child seeking revenge.

Twenty men blocked the way, spearmen, with a captain in Renar finery, dull gleams from his chainmail. Behind them I could see Gorgoth holding up the portcullis. More soldiers milled in the courtyard beyond. There seemed to be no reason why they hadn't cut the leucrota down, and sealed the gates.

I pulled up before the line of spearmen, and found I had no breath with which to address them. A cold bluster of wind swirled between us, laced with rain.

What to do? All of a sudden, impossible odds seemed ... impossible.

I glanced back. Two figures were pounding up along the path I'd taken. The first was too big to be anyone but Rike. I could see the feathered end of an arrow jutting from the joint above his left shoulder. Too much mud and blood on the second man to identify him by his armour. But it was Makin. I

knew it from the way he held his sword.

I looked at the soldiers, along the points of their spears, held in a steady row.

What's it going to be then?

Another scatter of rain.

'House of Renar?' the captain called. He sounded uncertain.

They didn't know! These men had come out of the castle, without a clue what kind of attack they were under. You've got to love the fog of war.

I scraped a gauntlet across my breastplate to show the coat of arms more clearly. 'Sanctuary!'

'Alain Kennick, ally to the House of Renar, seeking sanctuary.' I pointed back toward Rike and Makin. 'They're trying to kill me!'

Perhaps Corion's death hadn't taken all of the wickedness from me. Not all of it.

I ran toward the line, and they parted for me.

'They won't get past us, my lord.' The captain offered a brief bow.

'Make sure they don't,' I said. And it didn't seem likely that they would.

I hurried on, up to the gates, feeling the weight of my plate-mail now. The air held an odd stench, rich and meaty, bacon burning over the hearth. It put me in mind of Mabberton where we torched all those peasants, a lifetime ago.

I could see squads of soldiers assembling in the great courtyard beyond the gates. Half-armoured men, some with shields, some without, many of them full of tourney-day ale, no doubt.

Coming closer I saw the corpses. Charred things, smouldering in their own molten fats, like bodies from a pauper's funeral with too little wood to make them ash.

Gorgoth stood with his back to me. Arrows pierced his arms and legs. At first I thought him a statue, but as I came closer I could see the quiver in those huge slabs of muscle across his back.

I moved past him, ducking under the portcullis. A hundred men in the courtyard watched me. Gorgoth's eyes were screwed tight with strain. He observed me through the narrowest of slits. More arrows jutted from his chest, standing among the reaching claws of his deformed ribcage. Blood bubbled around the shafts as he released a breath, and sucked back as he drew the next.

I kicked a smouldering head. It rolled clear of the charred body.

'That's one hell of a guardian angel you've got looking out for you,



Gorgoth,' I said. Every soldier to have run at him lay in ashes.

The faintest shake of his head. 'The boy. Up there.'

Above Gorgoth, crouched in one of the gaps between the portcullis' timbers, Gog lurked. The inky voids that served him for eyes now burned like hot coals beneath the smith's bellows. His thin body had folded tighter than I believed possible. A few arrows studded the woodwork around him.

'The little one did all this?' I blinked. 'Damn.'

Gorgoth had told me the changes would come too quickly to Gog and his little brother. Too quickly and too dangerous to be borne.

'Bring this mad dog down.' The voice rang out behind me. It sounded familiar. It sounded like my father.

'Shoot him.'

It wasn't a voice to be disobeyed. But nobody had shot at me yet, so I turned from Gorgoth, and faced The Haunt.

Count Renar stood before the great keep, flanked by two dozen men-at-arms. To the left and right, bands of spearmen, a score in each. Other guards were coming down from the battlements above the gates.

I sketched a bow. 'Hello, Uncle.'

I'd only seen Renar in portrait before taking to the tourney field, and this was the best look I'd had at him so far. His face was rather thinner, his hair longer and less grey, but all in all he was the spitting image of his elder brother, and in truth, not that different from yours truly. Though far less handsome, of course.

'I am Honourous Jorg Ancrath.' I pulled my helm clear and addressed the men before me. 'Heir to the throne of Renar.' Not strictly true, but it would be once I'd killed the Count's remaining son. Wherever Cousin Jarco might be, he surely wasn't at home or I'd have seen his colours on the tourney field. So I let them think him dead. I let them picture him in the same pyre I'd set his brother Marclos on.

'You.' The Count singled out a man at his side. 'Put a hole in this bastard's head, or I'm going to cut yours from your shoulders!'

'This matter is between my uncle and me.' I set my gaze on the bowman. 'When it is done, you will be my soldiers, my victory will be yours. There will be no more blood.'

The man raised his crossbow. I felt a wave of heat sear my neck, as if a furnace door had opened behind me. Blisters rose across the man's face, like bubbles in boiling soup. He fell, screaming, and his hair burst into flame

before he hit the ground. The men around him fell back in horror.

I saw the ghost leave him as he writhed, burning, clots of his flesh sticking to the flagstones. I saw his ghost, and I reached out to it. I reached with my hands, and I reached with the bitter power of the necromancers. I felt their dark energy pulse across my chest, running out from the wound I took from Father's knife.

I gave the dead man's ghost a voice, and I gave voice to the ghosts that hung smoke-like around the corpses at my feet.

The soldiers before me paled and shook. Swords dropped and terror leapt from man to man like wildfire.

With the screams of burned men echoing around me from beyond the grave, I took my sword in two hands and ran at Count Renar, my uncle, the man who sent killers after his brother's wife and sons. And I added my own scream, because Corion or no Corion, the need to kill him ate at me like acid.

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And here I am, sitting in the high tower of The Haunt, in the empty place that Corion made his own. A fire crackles in the hearth, there are furs over the flagstones, goblets on the table, wine in the jug. And books, of course. The copy of Plutarch that I carried on the road now rests on oak shelves, with three score other tomes rubbing leathery shoulders. It's a small start but even the shelves themselves grew from a little acorn.

I'm sitting by the window. The wind is sealed away behind a dozen panes of glass, each one a hand's span across, and leaded together in diamond shapes. The glass came in by ox-cart across the mountains, all the way from the Wild Coast if you can believe it. The Thurtans make it so flat you can look out and hardly see the distortion.

I study the page before me, and the quill in my hand, and the ink at its point glistening with dark possibilities. Have I seen without distortion? Looking through the years, how much gets twisted?

The Nuban told me his people made ink by grinding up secrets. Here I am untangling them, and it's been a slow business.

Out in the courtyard I see Rike, a massive figure dwarfing the soldiers he's drilling. I'm told he has taken a wife. I didn't enquire further.

I spread the pages before me. A scribe will have to copy these out. I write in a crabbed hand, a tight unbroken line, the line I've followed from there to here, from then to now.

I see my life spread out across a table top. I see the course of my days, how I spun about, aimless, like a child's top. Corion may have sought to guide the destination but the journey, the murderous, random, broken journey, was all mine.

Gog is crouched by the fire. He's grown, and not just taller. He's making shapes in the flames, having them dance. He makes a game of it until it bores him. Then he goes back to his wooden soldier, making him march, running him here and there, charging at shadows.

I think about the road. Not so often now, but I still think about it. About life that begins new each morning, walking on, chasing after blood or money or shadows. It was a different me that wanted those things, a different me that wanted to break everything for the joy of breaking it, for the thrill of what it might bring. And to see who might care.

I was like Gog's little wooden soldier, running in wild and meaningless circles. I can't say I'm sorry for the things I did. But I'm done with them. I wouldn't repeat those choices. I remember them. Blood is on these hands, these ink-stained hands, but I don't feel the sin. I think maybe we die every day. Maybe we're born new each dawn, a little changed, a little further on our own road. When enough days stand between you and the person you were, you're strangers. Maybe that's what growing up is. Maybe I have grown up.

I said by the time I was fifteen I would be a king. And I am. And I didn't even have to kill my father to have a crown. I have The Haunt and the lands of Renar. I have towns and villages, and people who call me King. And if the people call you King, that is what you are. It's no great thing.

On the road I did things that men might call evil. There were crimes. They talk about the bishop most often, but there were many more, some darker, some more bloody. I wondered once if Corion had put that sickness in me, if I were the tool and he the architect of that violence and cruelty. I wondered if having taken his head, if having grown from boy to man, I would be a better person. I wondered if I might be the man the Nuban wanted me to be, the man Tutor Lundist hoped for.

Such a man would have shown Count Renar the mercy of a quick death. Such a man would have known his mother and brother would want no more than that. Justice, not revenge.

From my window I can see the mountains. Beyond them lies Ancrath, and the Tall Castle. Father with his new son. Katherine in her chambers, probably hating me. And past that, Gelleth, and Storn, and a patchwork of lands that were once Empire.

I won't stay here forever. I'll reach the last page and set down my quill. And when that's done I will walk out and it will all be mine. I told Bovid Tor that by fifteen I'd be King. I told him over his steaming guts. I'm telling you that by twenty I'll be Emperor. Be thankful it's just being told over this page.

I'm going down to see Renar now. I keep him in the smallest of the dungeon cells. Every day I let him ask for death, and then I leave him to his pain. I think when I finish my writing I will let him have the end he seeks. I

don't want to, but I know I should. I've grown. The old Jorg would have kept him there forever. I've grown, but whatever monster might be in me, it was always mine, my choice, my responsibility, my evil, if you will.

It's what I am, and if you want excuses, come and take them.

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MARK LAWRENCE



KING OF  
THORNS

# **KING OF THORNS**



# **Book Two of The Broken Empire**

*Mark Lawrence*



*Dedicated to my son, Rhodri.*

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## Prologue

I found these pages scattered, teased across the rocks by a fitful wind. Some were too charred to show their words, others fell apart in my hands. I chased them though, as if it were my story they told and not hers.

Katherine's story, Aunt Katherine, sister to my stepmother, Katherine who I have wanted every moment of the past four years, Katherine who picks strange paths through my dreams. A few dozen ragged pages, weighing nothing in my hand, snowflakes skittering across them, too cold to stick.

I sat upon the smoke-wreathed ruins of my castle, careless of the heaped and stinking dead. The mountains, rising on all sides, made us tiny, made toys of the Haunt and the siege engines strewn about it, their purpose spent. And with eyes stinging from the fires, with the wind's chill in me deep as bones, I read through her memories.

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*October 3rd, Year 98 Interregnum*

*Ancrath. The Tall Castle. Fountain Room.*

*The fountain room is as ugly as every other room in this ugly castle. There's no fountain, just a font that dribbles rather than sprays. My sister's ladies-in-waiting clutter the place, sewing, always sewing, and tutting at me for writing, as if quill ink is a stain that can't ever be washed off.*

*My head aches and wormroot won't calm it. I found a sliver of pottery in the wound even though Friar Glen said he cleaned it. Dreadful little man. Mother gave me that vase when I came away with Sareth. My thoughts jump and my head aches and this quill keeps trembling.*

*The ladies sew with their quick clever stitches, line stitch, cross-line, layer-cross. Sharp little needles, dull little minds. I hate them with their tutting and their busy fingers and the lazy Ancrath slurring of their words.*

*I've looked back to see what I wrote yesterday. I don't remember writing it but it tells how Jorg Ancrath tried to kill me after murdering Hanna, throttling her. I suppose that if he really had wanted to kill me he could have done a better job of it having broken Mother's vase over my skull. He's good at killing, if nothing else. Sareth told me that what he said in court, about all those people in Gelleth, burned to dust ... it's all true. Merl Gellethar's castle is gone. I met him when I was a child. Such a sly red-faced man. Looked as if he'd be happy to eat me up. I'm not sorry about him. But all those people. They can't all have been bad.*

*I should have stabbed Jorg when I had the chance. If my hands would do what I told them more often. If they would stop trembling the quill, learn to sew properly, stab murdering nephews when instructed ... Friar Glen said the boy tore most of my dress off. Certainly it's a ruin now. Beyond the rescue of even these empty ladies with their needles and thread.*

*I'm being too mean. I blame the ache in my head. Sareth tells me be nice. Be nice. Maery Coddin isn't all sewing and gossip. Though she's sewing now and tutting with the rest of them. Maery's worth talking to on her own, I suppose. There. That's enough nice for one day. Sareth is always nice and look where that got her. Married to an old man, and not a kind one but a cold and scary one, and her belly all fat with a child that will probably run as savage as Jorg Ancrath.*



*I'm going to have them bury Hanna in the forest graveyard. Maery tells me she'll lie easy there. All the castle servants are buried there unless their families claim them. Maery says she'll find me a new maidservant but that seems so cold, to just replace Hanna as if she were torn lace, or a broken vase. We'll go out by cart tomorrow. There's a man making her coffin now. My head feels as if he's hammering the nails into it instead.*

*I should have left Jorg to die on the throne-room floor. But it didn't feel right. Damn him.*

*We'll bury Hanna tomorrow. She was old and always complaining of her aches but that doesn't mean she was ready to go. I will miss her. She was a hard woman, cruel maybe, but never to me. I don't know if I'll cry when we put her in the ground. I should. But I don't know if I will.*

*That's for tomorrow. Today we have a visitor. The Prince of Arrow is calling, with his brother Prince Egan and his retinue. I think Sareth would like to match me there. Or maybe it's the old man, King Olidan. Not many of Sareth's ideas are her own these days. We will see.*

*I think I'll try to sleep now. Maybe my headache will be gone in the morning. And the strange dreams too. Maybe Mother's vase knocked those dreams right out of me.*

## Wedding Day

*Open the box, Jorg.*

I watched it. A copper box, thorn patterned, no lock or latch.

*Open the box, Jorg.*

A copper box. Not big enough to hold a head. A child's fist would fit.

A goblet, the box, a knife.

I watched the box and the dull reflections from the fire in the hearth. The warmth did not reach me. I let it burn down. The sun fell, and shadows stole the room. The embers held my gaze. Midnight filled the hall and still I didn't move, as if I were carved from stone, as if motion were a sin. Tension knotted me. It tingled along my cheekbones, clenched in my jaw. I felt the table's grain beneath my fingertips.

The moon rose and painted ghost-light across the stone-flagged floor. The moonlight found my goblet, wine untouched, and made the silver glow. Clouds swallowed the sky and in the darkness rain fell, soft with old memories. In the small hours, abandoned by fire, moon and stars, I reached for my blade. I laid the keen edge cold against my wrist.

The child still lay in the corner, limbs at corpse angles, too broken for all the king's horses and all the king's men. Sometimes I feel I've seen more ghosts than people, but this boy, this child of four, haunts me.

*Open the box.*

The answer lay in the box. I knew that much. The boy wanted me to open it. More than half of me wanted it open too, wanted to let those memories flood out, however dark, however dangerous. It had a pull on it, like the cliff's edge, stronger by the moment, promising release.

'No.' I turned my chair toward the window and the rain, shading to snow now.

I carried the box out of a desert that could burn you without needing the sun. Four years I've kept it. I've no recollection of first laying hands upon it, no image of its owner, few facts save only that it holds a hell which nearly broke my mind.

Campfires twinkled distant through the sleet. So many they revealed the shape of the land beneath them, the rise and fall of mountains. The Prince of Arrow's men took up three valleys. One alone wouldn't contain his army. Three valleys choked with knights and archers, foot-soldiers, pikemen, men-at-axe and men-at-sword, carts and wagons, engines for siege, ladders, rope, and pitch for burning. And out there, in a blue pavilion, Katherine Ap Scorrion, with her four hundred, lost in the throng.

At least she hated me. I'd rather die at the hands of somebody who wanted to kill me, to have it mean something to them.

Within a day they would surround us, sealing the last of the valleys and mountain paths to the east. Then we would see. Four years I had held the Haunt since I took it from my uncle. Four years as King of Renar. I wouldn't let it go easy. No. This would go hard.

The child stood to my right now, bloodless and silent. There was no light in him but I could always see him through the dark. Even through eyelids. He watched me with eyes that looked like mine.

I took the blade from my wrist and tapped the point to my teeth. 'Let them come,' I said. 'It will be a relief.'

That was true.

I stood and stretched. 'Stay or go, ghost. I'm going to get some sleep.'

And that was a lie.

The servants came at first light and I let them dress me. It seems a silly thing but it turns out that kings have to do what kings do. Even copper-crown kings with a single ugly castle and lands that spend most of their time going either up or down at an unseemly angle, scattered with more goats than people. It turns out that men are more apt to die for a king who is dressed by pinch-fingered peasants every morning than for a king who knows how to dress himself.

I broke fast with hot bread. I have my page wait at the doors to my chamber with it of a morning. Makin fell in behind me as I strode to the throne-room, his heels clattering on the flagstones. Makin always had a talent for making a din.

'Good morning, Your Highness,' he says.

'Stow that shit.' Crumbs everywhere. 'We've got problems.'

'The same twenty thousand problems we had on our doorstep last night?' Makin asked. 'Or new ones?'

I glimpsed the child in a doorway as we passed. Ghosts and daylight don't mix, but this one could show in any patch of shadow.

'New ones,' I said. 'I'm getting married before noon and I haven't got a thing to wear.'

## Wedding Day

‘Princess Miana is being attended by Father Gomst and the Sisters of Our Lady,’ Coddin reported. He still looked uncomfortable in chamberlain’s velvets; the Watch-Commander’s uniform had better suited him. ‘There are checks to be carried out.’

‘Let’s just be glad nobody has to check *my* purity.’ I eased back into the throne. Damn comfortable: swan-down and silk. Kinging it is pain in the arse enough without one of those gothic chairs. ‘What does she look like?’

Coddin shrugged. ‘A messenger brought this yesterday.’ He held up a gold case about the size of a coin.

‘So what does she look like?’

He shrugged again, opened the case with his thumbnail and squinted at the miniature. ‘Small.’

‘Here!’ I caught hold of the locket and took a look for myself. The artists who take weeks to paint these things with a single hair are never going to spend that time making an ugly picture. Miana looked acceptable. She didn’t have the hard look about her that Katherine does, the kind of look that lets you know the person is really alive, devouring every moment. But when it comes down to it, I find most women attractive. How many men are choosy at eighteen?

‘And?’ Makin asked from beside the throne.

‘Small,’ I said and slipped the locket into my robe. ‘Am I too young for wedlock? I wonder ...’

Makin pursed his lips. ‘I was married at twelve.’

‘You liar!’ Not once in all these years had Sir Makin of Trent mentioned a wife. He’d surprised me; secrets are hard to keep on the road, among brothers, drinking ale around the campfire after a hard day’s blood-letting.

‘No lie,’ he said. ‘But twelve is too young. Eighteen is a good age for marriage, Jorg. You’ve waited long enough.’

‘What happened to your wife?’

‘Died. There was a child too.’ He pressed his lips together.

It's good to know that you don't know everything about a man. Good that there might always be more to come.

'So, my queen-to-be is nearly ready,' I said. 'Shall I go to the altar in this rag?' I tugged at the heavy samite collar, all scratchy at my neck. I didn't care of course but a marriage is a show, for high- and low-born alike, a kind of spell, and it pays to do it right.

'Highness,' Coddin said, pacing his irritation out before the dais. 'This ... distraction ... is ill-timed. We have an army at our gates.'

'And to be fair, Jorg, nobody knew she was coming until that rider pulled in,' Makin said.

I spread my hands. 'I didn't know she would arrive last night. I'm not magic you know.' I glimpsed the dead child slumped in a distant corner. 'I had hoped she would arrive before the summer ended. In any case, that army has a good three miles to march if it wants to be at my gates.'

'Perhaps a delay is in order?' Coddin hated being chamberlain with every fibre of his being. Probably that was why he was the only one I'd trust to do it. 'Until the conditions are less ... inclement.'

'Twenty thousand at our door, Coddin. And a thousand inside our walls. Well, most of them outside because my castle is too damn small to fit them in.' I found myself smiling. 'I don't think conditions are going to improve. So we might as well give the army a queen as well as a king to die for, neh?'

'And concerning the Prince of Arrow's army?' Coddin asked.

'Is this going to be one of those times when you pretend not to have a plan until the last moment?' Makin asked. 'And then turn out to really not have one?'

He looked grim despite his words. I thought perhaps he could still see his own dead child. He had faced death with me before and done it with a smile.

'You, girl!' I shouted to one of the serving girls lurking at the far end of the hall. 'Go tell that woman to bring me a robe fit to get married in. Nothing with lace, mind.' I stood and set a hand to the pommel of my sword. 'The night patrols should be back about now. We'll go down to the east yard and see what they have to say for themselves. I sent Red Kent and Little Rikey along with one of the Watch patrols. Let's hear what they think about these men of Arrow.'

Makin led the way. Coddin had grown twitchy about assassins. I knew what lurked in the shadows of my castle and it wasn't assassins that I worried about. Makin turned the corner and Coddin held my shoulder to keep me

back.

‘The Prince of Arrow doesn’t want me knifed by some black-cloak, Coddin. He doesn’t want drop-leaf mixed into my morning bread. He wants to roll over us with twenty thousand men and grind us into the dirt. He’s already thinking of the empire throne. Thinks he has a toe past the Gilden Gate. He’s building his legend now and it’s not going to be one of knives in the dark.’

‘Of course, if you had more soldiers you might be worth stabbing.’ Makin turned his head and grinned.

We found the patrol waiting, stamping in the cold. A few castle women fussed around the wounded, planting a stitch or two. I let the commander tell his tale to Coddin while I called Red Kent to my side. Rike loomed behind him uninvited. Four castle years had softened none of Rike’s edges, still close on seven foot of ugly temper with a face to match the blunt, mean, and brutal soul that looked out from it.

‘Little Rikey,’ I said. It had been a while since I’d spoken to the man. Years. ‘And how’s that lovely wife of yours?’ In truth I’d never seen her but she must have been a formidable woman.

‘She broke.’ He shrugged.

I turned away without comment. There’s something about Rike makes me want to go on the attack. Something elemental, red in tooth and claw. Or perhaps it’s just because he’s so damn big. ‘So, Kent,’ I said. ‘Tell me the good news.’

‘There’s too many of them.’ He spat into the mud. ‘I’m leaving.’

‘Well now.’ I threw an arm around him. Kent don’t look much but he’s solid, all muscle and bone, quick as you like too. What makes him though, what sets him apart, is a killer’s mind. Chaos, threat, bloody murder, none of that fazes him. Every moment of a crisis he’ll be considering the angles, tracking weapons, looking for the opening, taking it.

‘Well now,’ I pulled him close, hand clapped to the back of his neck. He flinched, but to his credit he didn’t reach for a blade. ‘That’s all well and good.’ I steered him away from the patrol. ‘But suppose that wasn’t going to happen. Just for the sake of argument. Suppose it was only you here and twenty of them out there. That’s not so far from the odds you’d beaten when we found you on that lakeside down in Rutton, neh?’ For a moment he smiled at that. ‘How would you win then, Red Kent?’ I called him Red to remind him of that day when he stood all a tremble with his wolf’s grin white in the

scarlet of other men's blood.

He bit his lip, staring past me into some other place. 'They're crowded in, Jorg. In those valleys. Crowded. One man against many, he's got to be fast, attacking, moving. Each man is your shield from the next.' He shook his head, seeing me again. 'But you can't use an army like one man.'

Red Kent had a point. Coddin had trained the army well, the units of Father's Forest Watch especially so, but in battle cohesion always slips away. Orders are lost, missed, go unheard or ignored, and sooner or later it's a bloody maul, each man for himself, and the numbers start to tell.

'Highness?' It was the woman from the royal wardrobe, some kind of robe in her hands.

'Mabel!' I threw my arms wide and gave her my dangerous smile.

'Maud, sire.'

I had to admit the old biddy had some stones. 'Maud it is,' I said. 'And I'm to be wed in this am I?'

'If it pleases you, sire.' She even curtsied a bit.

I took it from her. Heavy. 'Cats?' I asked. 'Looks like it took a lot of them.'

'Sable.' She pursed her lips. 'Sable and gold thread. Count—' She bit the words off.

'Count Renar married in it, did he?' I asked. 'Well if it was good enough for that bastard it'll do for me. At least it looks warm.' My uncle Renar owed me for the thorns, for a lost mother, a lost brother. I'd taken his life, his castle, and his crown, and still he owed me. A fur robe would not close our account.

'Best be quick about it, Highness,' Coddin said, eyes still roaming for assassins. 'We've got to double-check the defences. Plan out supply for the Kennish archers, and also consider terms.' To his credit he looked straight at me for that last bit.

I gave Maud back the robe and let her dress me with the patrol watching on. I made no reply to Coddin. He looked pale. I had always liked him, from the moment he tried to arrest me, even past the moment he dared to mention surrender. Brave, sensible, capable, honest. The better man. 'Let's get this done,' I said and started toward the chapel.

'Is it needed, this marriage?' Coddin again, doggedly playing the role I set him. Speak to me, I had said. Never think I cannot be wrong. 'As your wife things may go hard for her.' Rike sniggered at that. 'As a guest she would be



ransomed back to the Horse Coast.'

Sensible, honest. I don't even know how to pretend those things. 'It is needed.'

We came to the chapel by a winding stair, past table-knights in plate armour, Count Renar's marks still visible beneath mine on the breastplates as if I'd ruled here four months rather than four years. The noble-born too poor or stupid or loyal to have run yet would be lined up within. In the courtyard outside the peasantry waited. I could smell them.

I paused before the doors, lifting a finger to stop the knight with his hands upon the bar. 'Terms?'

I saw the child again, beneath crossed standards hanging on the wall. He'd grown with me. Years back he had been a baby, watching me with dead eyes. He looked about four now. I tapped my fingers against my forehead in a rapid tempo.

'Terms?' I said it again. I'd only said it twice but already the word sounded strange, losing meaning as they do when repeated over and over again. I thought of the copper box in my room. It made me sweat. 'There will be no terms.'

'Best have Father Gomst say his words swiftly then,' Coddin said. 'And look to our defences.'

'No,' I said. 'There will be no defence. We're going to attack.'

I pushed the knight aside and threw the doors wide. Bodies crowded the chapel hall from one side to the other. It seemed my nobles were poorer than I'd thought. And to the left, a splash of blues and violet, ladies-in-waiting and knights in armour, decked in the colours of the House Morrow, the colours of the Horse Coast.

And there at the altar, head bowed beneath a garland of lilies, my bride.

'Oh hell,' I said.

Small was right. She looked about twelve.

*In peace Brother Kent reverts to type, a peasant plagued by kindness, seeking God in the  
stone houses where the pious lament. Battle strikes loose such chains.  
In war Red Kent approaches the divine.*

## Wedding Day

Marriage was ever the glue that held the Hundred in some semblance of unity, the balm to induce scattered moments of peace, pauses in the crimson progress of the Hundred War. And this one had been hanging over me for close on four years.

I walked along the chapel aisle between the high and mighty of Renar, none of them so high or so mighty, truth be told. I've checked the records and half of them have goat-herders for grandparents. It surprised me that they had stayed. If I were them I would have acted on Red Kent's sentiment and been off across the Matteracks with whatever I could carry on my back.

Miana watched me, as fresh and perky as the lilies on her head. If the ruined left side of my face scared her she didn't show it. The need to trace the scarred ridges on my cheek itched in my fingertips. For an instant the heat of that fire ran in me, and the memory of pain tightened my jaw.

I joined my bride-to-be at the altar and looked back. And in a moment of clarity I understood. These people expected me to save them. They still thought that with my handful of soldiers I could hold this castle and win the day. I had half a mind to tell them, to just say what any who knew me knew. There is something brittle in me that will break before it bends. Perhaps if the Prince of Arrow had brought a smaller army I might have had the sense to run. But he overdid it.

Four musicians in full livery raised their bladder-pipes and sounded the fanfare.

'Best use the short version, Father Gomst,' I said in a low voice. 'Lots to do today.'

He frowned at that, grey brows rubbing up against each other. 'Princess Miana, I have the pleasure of introducing His Highness Honourous Jorg Ancrath, King of the Renar Highlands, heir to the lands of Ancrath and the protectorates thereof.'

'Charmed,' I said, inclining my head. A child. She didn't reach much above my ribs.

‘I can see why your miniature was in profile,’ she said, and sketched a curtsey.

That made me grin. It might be destined to be a short marriage but perhaps it wouldn’t be dull. ‘You’re not scared of me then, Miana?’

She reached to take my hand by way of answer. I pulled it back. ‘Best not.’ ‘Father?’ I nodded the priest on.

‘Dearly beloved,’ Gomst said. ‘We are gathered together here in the sign of God ...’

And so with old words from an old man and lacking anyone ‘here present’ with just reason, or at least with just reason and the balls to say so, little Jorgy Ancrath became a married man.

I led my bride from the chapel with the applause and hoorahs of the nobility ringing behind us, almost but not quite drowning out those awful pipes. The bladder-pipe, a local Highlands speciality, is to music what warthogs are to mathematics. Largely unconnected.

The main doors lead onto a stairway where you can look down into the Haunt’s largest courtyard, the place where I cut down the previous owner. Several hundred packed the space from the curtain wall to the stairs, more thronging out beyond the gateway, swarming beneath the portcullis, a light snow sifting down on all of them.

A cheer went up as we came into the light. I took Miana’s hand then, despite the necromancy lurking in my fingers, and lifted it high to acknowledge the crowd. The loyalty of subject to lord still amazed me. I lived fat and rich off these people year after year while they squeezed a mean life out of the mountainsides. And here they were ready to face pretty much certain death with me. I mean, even that blind faith in my ability to buck the odds had to allow a fairly big chunk of room for doubt.

I got my first proper insight into it a couple of years back. A lesson that life on the road hadn’t taught me or my Brothers. The power of place.

My royal presence was requested for a bit of justice-making in what they call in the Renar Highlands a ‘village’, though pretty much everywhere else people would call it three houses and a few sheds. The place lies way up in the peaks. They call it Gutting. I heard that there’s a Little Gutting slightly higher up the valley, though it can’t be much more than a particularly roomy barrel. Anyhow, the dispute was over where one scabby peasant’s rocks ended and another one’s started. I’d hauled myself and Makin up three thousand foot of mountain to show a bit of willing in the business of kinging

it. According to reports, several men of the village had been killed already in the feud, though on closer inspection casualties were limited to a pig and the loss of a woman's left ear. Not so long ago I would just have killed everyone and come down the mountain with their heads on a spear, but perhaps I just felt tired after the climb. In any event I let the scabby peasants state their cases and they did so with enthusiasm and at great length. It started to get dark and the fleas were biting so I cut it short.

'Gebbin is it?' I said to the plaintiff. He nodded. 'Basically, Gebbin, you just hate the hell out of this fellow here and I really can't see the reason for it. The thing is that I'm bored, I've got my breath back, and unless you tell me the real reason you hate ...'

'Borron,' Makin supplied.

'Yes, Borron. Tell me the real reason and make it honest, or it's a death sentence for everyone except this good woman with the one ear, and we'll be leaving her in charge of the remaining pig.'

It took him a few moments to realize that I really meant what I said, and then another couple mumbling before he finally came out with it and admitted it was because the fellow was a 'furner'. *Furner* turned out to mean *foreigner* and old Borron was a foreigner because he was born and lived on the east side of the valley.

The men cheering Miana and me, waving their swords, bashing their shields and hollering themselves hoarse, might have told anyone who asked how proud they were to fight for his Highness and his new queen. The truth, however, is that at the bottom of it all they simply didn't want the men of Arrow marching all over their rocks, eyeing up their goats, and maybe leering at their womenfolk.

'The Prince of Arrow has a much bigger army than you,' Miana said. No 'your highness', no 'my lord'.

'Yes he does.' I kept waving to the crowd, the big smile on my face.

'He's going to win, isn't he?' she said. She looked twelve but she didn't sound twelve.

'How old are you?' I asked, a quick glance down at her, still waving.

'Twelve.'

*Damn.*

'They might win. If each of my men doesn't kill twenty of theirs then there's a good chance. Especially if he surrounds us.'

'How far away are they?' she asked.

‘Their front lines are camped three miles off,’ I said.

‘You should attack now then,’ she said. ‘Before they surround us.’

‘I know.’ I was starting to like the girl. Even an experienced soldier like Coddin, a good soldier, wanted to hunker down behind the Haunt’s walls and let the castle earn its keep, if you’ll pardon the pun. The thing is, though, that no castle stands against odds like the ones we faced. Miana knew what Red Kent knew, Red Kent who cut down a patrol of seventeen men-at-arms on a hot August morning. Killing takes space. You need to move, to advance, to withdraw, and sometimes to just plain run for it.

One more wave and I turned my back on the crowds and strode into the chapel.

‘Makin! Are the Watch ready?’

‘They are.’ He nodded. ‘My king.’

I drew my sword.

The sudden appearance of four foot of razored builder-steel in the house of God resulted in a pleasing gasp.

‘Let’s go.’

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*October 6th, Year 98 Interregnum*

*Ancrath. The Tall Castle. Chapel. Midnight.*

*The Ancraths' chapel is small and draughty, as if they hadn't much time for the place. The candles dance and the shadows are never still. When I leave the friar's boy will snuff them.*

*Jorg Ancrath has been gone close on a week. He took Sir Makin with him from the dungeons. I was glad for that, I liked Sir Makin and I cannot truly blame him for what happened to Galen: that was Jorg again. A crossbow! He could never have bested Galen with a blade. There's no honour in the boy.*

*Friar Glen says Jorg near tore the dress off me after he hit me. I keep it at the back of the long closet in the bride chest Mother packed for me before we left Scorrion Halt. I keep it where the maids don't look, and my hands lead me back there. I run the tatters through my fingers. Blue satin. I touch it and I try to remember. I see him standing there, arms wide, daring the knife in my hand, weaving as though he were too tired to stand, his skin dead white and the black stain around his chest wound. He looked so young. A child almost. With those scars all across him where the thorns tore him. Sir Reilly says they found him hanging, near bloodless, after a night in the thorns with the storm around him and his mother lying dead.*

*And then he hit me.*

*I'm touching the spot now. It's still sore. Lumpy with scab. I wonder if they can see it through my hair. And then I wonder why I care.*

*I'm bruised down here too. Bruised black, like that stain. I can almost see the lines of fingers on my thigh, the print of a thumb.*

*He hit me and then he used me, raped me. It would have been nothing to him, a mercenary from the road, it would have meant nothing to him, just something else to take. It would rank small amongst his crimes. Maybe not the largest even against me, for I miss Hanna and I did cry when we put her in the ground, and I miss Galen for the fierceness of his smile and the heat he put in me whenever he came near.*

*He hit me, and then he used me? That sick boy, daring the knife, barely able to stand?*

*October 11th, Year 98 Interregnum*

Ancrath. The Tall Castle. My chambers.

*I saw Friar Glen in the Blue Hall today. I've stopped going to his services but I saw him in the hall. I watched his hands, his thick fingers and his thick thumbs. I watched them and I thought of those fading bruises, yellow now, and I came to the tall closet, and here I am with the torn satin in my hands.*



*Skin, bones, and mischief comprise Brother Gog. Monster born and monster bred but there's little to mark him from Adam save the stippled crimson-on-black of his hide, the dark wells of his eyes, ebony talons on hand and foot, and the thorny projections starting to grow along his spine. Watch him play and run and laugh, and he seems too at ease to be a crack in the world through which all the fires of hell might pour. Watch him burn though, and you will believe it.*

## 4

*Four years earlier*

*I took my uncle's throne in my fourteenth year and found it to my liking. I had a castle, and staff of serving maids, to explore, a court of nobles to suppress, or at least what counted as nobles in the Highlands, and a treasury to ransack. For the first three months I confined myself to these activities.*

I woke soaked with sweat. I normally wake suddenly with a clear head, but I felt as though I were drowning.

'Too hot ...'

I rolled and fell from the bed, landing heavy.

Smoke.

Shouting in the distance.

I uncovered the bed-lamp and turned up the wick. The smoke came from the doors, not seeping under or between but lifting from every inch of the charred wood and rising like a rippled curtain.

'Shit—' Burning to death has always been a worry of mine. Call it a personal foible. Some people are scared of spiders. I'm scared of immolation. Also spiders.

'Gog!' I bellowed.

He'd been out there in the antechamber when I retired. I moved toward the doors, coming at them from the side. An awful heat came off them. I could leave by the doorway or try to fit myself through the bars on any of three windows before negotiating the ninety-foot drop.

I took an axe from the wall display and stood with my back to the stone, next to the doors. My lungs hurt and I couldn't see straight. Swinging the axe felt like swinging a full-grown man. The blade bit and the doors exploded. Orange-white fire roared into the room, furnace-hot, in a thick tongue forking time and again. And, almost as suddenly, it died away like a cough ending, leaving nothing but scorched floor and a burning bed.

The antechamber felt hotter than my bedchamber, char-black from floor to ceiling, with a huge glowing coal at its centre. I staggered back toward my bed. The heat took the water from my eyes and for a moment my vision cleared. The coal was Gog, curled like a new-born, pulsing with flame.

Something vast broke from the doorway leading to the guards' room beyond. Gorgoth! He scooped the boy up in one three-fingered hand and slapped him with the other. Gog woke with a sharp cry and the fire went out of him in an instant, leaving nothing but a limp child, skin stippled red and black, and the stink of burned meat.

Without words I stumbled past them and let my guards help me away.

They practically had to drag me to the throne-room before I found my strength. 'Water,' I managed. And when I'd drunk and used my knife to trim away the burned ends of my hair, I coughed out, 'Bring the monsters.'

Makin clattered into the hall still pulling on a gauntlet. 'Again?' he asked. 'Another fire?'

'Bad this time. An inferno,' I said. 'At least I won't have to look at my uncle's furniture any more.'

'You can't let him sleep in the castle,' Makin said.

'I know that,' I said. 'Now.'

'Put a quick end to it, Jorg.' Makin pulled the gauntlet off. We weren't under attack after all.

'You can't let him go.' Coddin arrived, dark circles under his eyes. 'He's too dangerous. Someone will use him.'

And there it hung. Gog had to die.

Three clashes on the main doors and they swung open. Gorgoth entered the throne-room with Gog, flanked by four of my table-knights, who looked like children beside him. Seen in amongst men the leucrota looked every bit as monstrous as the day I found them under Mount Honas. Gorgoth's cat-eyes slitted despite the gloom, blood-red hide almost black, as if infected with the night.

'What are you, Gog, eight years now? And busy trying to burn down my castle.' I felt Gorgoth's eyes upon me. The great spars of his ribcage flexed back and forth with each breath.

'The big one will fight,' Coddin murmured at my shoulder. 'He will be hard to put down.'

'Eight years,' Gog repeated. He didn't know but he liked to agree with me. His voice had been high and sweet when we met beneath Mount Honas. Now

it came raw and carried the crackle of flame behind it as if he might start breathing the stuff out like a damned dragon.

‘I will take him away,’ Gorgoth said, almost too deep to hear. ‘Far.’

*Play your pieces, Jorg.* A silence stretched out.

I wouldn’t be sitting in this throne if Gorgoth hadn’t held the gate. Or sitting here if Gog hadn’t burned the Count’s men. The skin on my face still clung tight, my lungs still hurt, and the stink of burnt hair still filled my nostrils.

‘I’m sorry about your bed, Brother Jorg,’ Gog said. Gorgoth flicked his shoulder, one thick finger, enough to stagger him. ‘King Jorg,’ Gog corrected.

I wouldn’t be sitting on the throne but for a lot of people, a stack of chances, some improbable, some stolen, but for the sacrifice of many men, some better, some worse. A man cannot take on new burdens of debt at every turn or he will buckle beneath the weight and be unable to move.

‘You were ready to give this child to the necromancers, Gorgoth,’ I said. ‘Him and his brother both.’ I didn’t ask if he would die to protect Gog. That much was written in him.

‘Things change,’ Gorgoth said.

‘Better they find a quick death, you said.’ I stood. ‘The changes will come too fast in these ones. Too fast to be borne. The changes will turn them inside out, you said.’

‘Let him take his chance,’ Gorgoth said.

‘I nearly died in my bed tonight.’ I stepped down from the dais, Makin at my shoulder now. ‘The royal chambers are in ashes. And dying abed was never my plan. Unless t’were as emperor in my dotage beneath an over-energetic young concubine.’

‘It cannot be helped.’ Gorgoth’s hands closed into massive fists. ‘It’s in his dena.’

‘His dinner?’ My hand rested on the hilt of my sword. I remembered how Gog had fought to save his little brother. How pure that fury had been. I missed that purity in myself. Only yesterday every choice came easy. Black or white. Stab Gemt in the neck or don’t. And now? Shades of grey. A man can drown in shades of grey.

‘His dena. The story of every man, written at his core, what he is, what he will be, written in a coil in the core of us all,’ Gorgoth said.

I’d never heard the monster say so many words in a row. ‘I’ve opened up a

lot of men, Gorgoth, and if anything is written there then it's written red on red and smells bad.'

'The centre of a man isn't found by your geometry, Highness.' He held me with those cat's eyes. He'd never called me Highness before either. Probably the closest to begging he would ever come.

I stared at Gog, crouched now, looking from me to Gorgoth and back. I liked the boy. Plain and simple. Both of us with a dead brother that we couldn't save, both of us with something burning in us, some elemental force of destruction wanting out every moment of every day.

'Sire,' Coddin said, knowing my mind for once. 'These matters need not occupy the king. Take my chambers and we'll speak again in the morning.'

*Leave and we'll do your dirty work for you.* The message was clear enough. And Coddin didn't want to do it. If he could read me I surely could read him. He didn't want to slit his horse's throat when a loose rock lamed it. But he did. And he would now. The game of kings was never a clean game.

*Play your pieces.*

'It can't be helped, Jorg,' Makin set a hand to my shoulder, voice soft. 'He's too dangerous. There's no knowing what he'll become.'

*Play your pieces. Win the game. Take the hardest line.*

'Gog,' I said. He stood slowly, eyes on mine. 'They're telling me you're too dangerous. That I can't keep you. Or let you go. That you are a chance that can't be taken. A weapon that can't be wielded.' I turned, taking in the throne-room, the high vaults, dark windows, and faced Coddin, Makin, the knights of my table. 'I woke a Builders' Sun beneath Gelleth, and this child is too much for me?'

'Those were desperate times, Jorg,' Makin said, studying the floor.

'All times are desperate,' I said. 'You think we're safe here, on our mountainside? This castle might look big from the inside. From a mile off you can cover it with your thumb.'

I looked at Gorgoth. 'Maybe I need a new geometry. Maybe we need to find this dena and see if the story can't be rewritten.'

'The child's power is out of control, Jorg,' Coddin said, a brave man to interject when I'm in full flow. The kind of man I needed. 'It will only grow more wild.'

'I'm taking him to Heimrift,' I said. *Gog is a weapon and I will forge him there.*

'Heimrift?' Gorgoth relaxed his fists, knuckles cracking with loud retorts.

‘A place of demons and fire,’ Makin muttered.

‘A volcano,’ I said. ‘Four volcanoes actually. And a fire-mage. Or so my tutor told me. So let’s put the benefits of a royal education to the test shall we? At least Gog will like it there. Everything burns.’

## 5

*Four years earlier*

‘This is a bad idea, Jorg.’

‘It’s a dangerous idea, Coddin, but that doesn’t have to mean it’s bad.’ I laid my knife on the map to stop it rolling up again.

‘Whatever the chances of success, you’ll leave your kingdom without a king.’ He set a fingertip to the map, resting on the Haunt as if to show me my place. ‘It’s only been three months, Jorg. The people aren’t sure of you yet, the nobles will start to plot the moment you leave, and how many men-at-arms will you take with you? With an empty throne the Renar Highlands might look like an easy prize. Your royal father might even choose to call with the Army of the Gate. If it comes to defending this place I don’t know how many of your uncle’s troops will rally to your cry.’

‘My father didn’t send the Gate when my mother and brother were murdered.’ My fingers closed around the knife hilt of their own accord. ‘He’s unlikely to move against the Haunt now. Especially when his armies are busy acquiring what’s left of Gelleth.’

‘So how many soldiers will you take?’ Coddin asked. ‘The Watch will not be enough.’

‘I’m not going to take any,’ I said. ‘I could take the whole damn army and it would just get me into a war on somebody else’s lands.’ Coddin made to protest. I cut him off. ‘I’ll take my brothers. They’ll appreciate a spell on the road and we managed to traipse to and fro happily enough not so many years ago with nobody giving us much pause.’

Makin returned with several large map scrolls under his arm. ‘In disguise is it?’ he said and grinned. ‘Good. Truth be told, this place has given me itchy feet.’

‘You’re staying, Brother Makin,’ I told him. ‘I’ll take Red Kent, Row, Grumlow, Young Sim ... and Maical, why not? He may be a half-wit but he’s hard to kill. And of course Little Rike—’

‘Not him,’ Coddin said, face cold. ‘There’s no loyalty in that one. He’ll leave you dead in a hedgerow.’

‘I need him,’ I said.

Coddin frowned. ‘He might be handy in a fight, but there’s no subtlety in him, no discipline, he’s not clever, he—’

‘The way I’d put it,’ said Makin, ‘is that Rike can’t make an omelette without wading thigh deep in the blood of chickens and wearing their entrails as a necklace.’

‘He’s a survivor,’ I said. ‘And I need survivors.’

‘You need me,’ said Makin.

‘You can’t trust him.’ Coddin rubbed his forehead as he always did when the worry got in him.

‘I need you here, Makin,’ I said. ‘I want to have a kingdom to come back to. And I know I can’t trust Rike, but four years on the road taught me that he’s the right tool for the job.’

I lifted my knife and the map sprung back into its roll. ‘I’ve seen enough.’

Makin raised his eyes and tipped his maps unopened on to the table.

‘Mark me out a decent route will you, Coddin, and have that scribe lad copy it down.’ I stood straight and stretched. I’d need to find something to wear. One of the maids had burned my old rags and velvet’s no good for the road. It’s like a magnet for dust.

Father Gomst met Makin, Kent and me on our way to the stables. He’d hurried from chapel, red in the face, the heaviest bible under one arm and the altar cross in his other hand.

‘Jorg—’ He stopped to catch his breath. ‘King Jorg.’

‘You’re going to join us, Father Gomst?’ The way he paled made me smile.

‘The blessing,’ he said, still short of wind.

‘Ah, well bless away.’

Kent went to his knees in an instant, as pious a killer as I ever knew. Makin followed with unseemly haste for a man who’d sacked a cathedral in his time. Since Gomst walked out of Gelleth by the light of a Builders’ Sun, without so much as a tan to show for it, the Brothers seemed to think him touched by God. The fact we all did the same with far less time at our disposal didn’t register with them.

For my own part, for all the evils of the Roma church, I could no longer



bring myself to despise Gomst as I once had. His only true crime was to be a weak and impotent man, unable to deliver the promise of his lord, the love of his saviour, or even to put the yoke of Roma about the necks of his flock with any conviction.

I bowed my head and listened to the prayer. It never hurts to cover your bases.

In the west yard my motley band were assembled, checking over their gear. Rike had the biggest horse I'd ever seen.

'I could run faster than this monster, Rike.' I made a show of checking behind it. 'You didn't take the plough when you stole it, then?'

'It'll do,' he said. 'Big enough for loot.'

'Maical's not bringing the head-cart?' I looked around. 'Where is he anyway?'

'Gone for the grey,' Kent said. 'Idiot won't ride any other horse. Says he doesn't know how.'

'Now that's loyalty for you.' I shot Rike a look. 'So where's this new wife of yours, Brother Rikey? Not coming to see you off?'

'Busy ploughing.' He slapped his horse. 'Got a job of it now.'

Gorgoth came through the kitchen gate, looming behind Rike. It's unsettling to see something on two legs that's taller and wider than Rike. Gog popped out from behind him. He took my hand and I let him lead me. There's not many that will take my hand since the necromancy took root in me. There's a touch of death in my fingers, not just the coldness. Flowers wilt and die.

'Where we going, Brother Jorg?' Still a child's voice despite the crackle in it.

'To find us a fire-mage. Put an end to this bed-burning,' I told him.

'Will it hurt?' He watched me with big eyes, pools of black.

I shrugged. 'Might do.'

'Scared,' he said, clutching my hand tighter. I could feel heat rising from his fingers. Maybe it cancelled the cold from mine. 'Scared.'

'Well then,' I said. 'We're headed the right way.'

He frowned.

'You've got to hunt your fears, Gog. Beat them. They're your only true enemies.'

'You're not scared of anything, Brother Jorg,' he said. 'King J—'

‘I’m scared of burning,’ I said. ‘Especially in my bed.’ I looked back to the brothers, stowing weapons and supplies. ‘I had a cousin who liked to burn people up, did I not, Brother Row?’

‘Ayuh.’ He nodded.

‘My cousin Marclos,’ I said. ‘Tell Gog what happened to him.’

Row tested the point of an arrow with his thumb. ‘Went up to him all on your ownself, Jorg, and killed him in the middle of a hundred of his soldiers.’

I looked down at Gog. ‘I’m scared of spiders too. It’s the way that they move. And the way that they’re still. It’s that scurry.’ I mimicked it with my hand.

I called back to Row. ‘How am I with spiders, Row?’

‘Weird.’ Row spat and secured his last arrow. ‘You’ll like this tale, Gog, what with being a godless monster and all.’ He spat again. Brother Row liked to spit. ‘Spent a week holed up in some grain barns one time. Hiding. We didn’t go hungry. Grain and rats make for a good stew. Only Jorg here wasn’t having any of that. Place was stuffed full of spiders see. Big hairy fellows.’ He spread his fingers until the knuckles cracked. ‘For a whole week Jorg hunted them. Didn’t eat nothing but spider for a week. And not cooked mind. Not even dead.’

‘And rat stew always tasted good after that week,’ I said.

Gog frowned, then his eyes caught the glitter on my wrist. ‘What’s this?’ He pointed.

I pulled my sleeve back and held it up for all to see. ‘Two things I found in my uncle’s treasury that were worth more than the gold around them. Thought I’d bring them along in case of need.’ I made sure Rike caught sight of the silver on my wrist. ‘No need to be going through my saddle bags at night now, Little Rikey. The treasure’s here and if you think you can take it, try now.’

He sneered and tied off another strap.

‘Wossit?’ Gog stared entranced.

‘The Builders made it,’ I said. ‘It’s a thousand years old.’

Row and Red Kent came over to see.

‘I’m told they call it a watch,’ I said. ‘And you can see why.’

In truth, I’d been watching it a lot myself. It had a face on it behind crystal, with twelve hours marked and sixty minutes, and two black arms that moved, one slow, one slower still, to point out the time. Entranced, I had opened it up at the back with the point of my knife and gazed into the guts of the thing.

The hatch popped back on a minute hinge as if the Builders had known I would want to see inside. Wheels within wheels, tiny, toothed, and turning. How they made such things so small and so precise I cannot guess but to me it is a wonder past any man-made sun or glow-light.

‘What else you got, Jorg?’ Rike asked.

‘This.’ I took it from the deep pocket on my hip and set it down on the flagstones. A battered metal clown with traces of paint clinging to his jerkin, hair and nose.

Kent took a step back. ‘It looks evil.’

I knelt and released a catch behind the clown’s head. With a jerk and a whir he started to stamp his metal feet and bring his metal hands together, clashing the cymbals he held. He jittered in a loose circle, stamping and clashing, going nowhere.

Rike started to laugh. Not that ‘hur, hur, hur’ of his that sounds like another kind of anger, but a real laugh, from the belly. ‘It’s like ... It’s like ...’ He couldn’t get the words out.

The others couldn’t hold back. Sim and Maical cracked first. Grumlow snorting through the drowned-rat moustache he’d been working on. Then Red Kent and at last even Row, laughing like children. Gog looked on, astonished. Even Gorgoth couldn’t help but grin, showing back-teeth like tombstones.

The clown fell over and kept on stamping the air. Rike collapsed with it, thumping the ground with his fist, gasping for breath.

The clown slowed, then stopped. There’s a blue-steel spring inside that you wind tight with a key. And when it’s finished stamping and crashing, the spring is loose again.

‘Burlow ... Burlow should have seen this.’ Rike wiped the tears from his eyes. The first time I’d heard him mention any of the fallen.

‘Yes, Brother Rike,’ I said. ‘Yes he should.’ I imagined Brother Burlow laughing with us, his belly shaking.

We made our moment then, one of those waypoints by which a life is remembered, the Brotherhood remade and bound for the road. We made our moment – the last good one. ‘Time to go,’ I said.

Sometimes I wonder if we all don’t have a blue-steel spring inside us, like that dena of Gorgoth’s coiled tight at the core. I wonder if we don’t all go stamping and crashing, crashing and stamping in our own little circles going nowhere. And I wonder who it is that laughs at us.

## 6

*Four years earlier*

*Three months previously I had entered the Haunt alone, covered in blood that was not my own and swinging a stolen sword. My Brothers followed me in. Now I left the castle in the hands of another. I had wanted my uncle's blood. His crown I took because other men said I could not have it.*

If the Haunt reminds you of a skull, and it does me, then the scraps of town around the gates might be considered the dried vomit of its last heave. A tannery here, abattoir there, all the necessary but stinking evils of modern life, set out beyond the walls where the wind will scour them. We were barely clear of the last hovel before Makin caught us.

‘Missing me already?’

‘The Forest Watch tell me we have company coming,’ Makin said, catching his breath.

‘We really should rename the Watch,’ I said. The best the Highlands could offer by way of forest was the occasional clump of trees huddled miserably in a deep valley, all twisted and hunched against the wind.

‘Fifty knights,’ Makin said. ‘Carrying the banner of Arrow.’

‘Arrow?’ I frowned. ‘They’ve come a ways.’ The province lay on the edge of the map we had so recently rolled up.

‘They look fresh enough by all accounts.’

‘I think I’ll meet them on the road,’ I said. ‘We might get a more interesting story out of them as a band of road brothers.’ The truth was I didn’t want to change back into silks and ermine and go through the formalities. They would be heading for the castle. You don’t send fifty men in plate armour for a stealth mission.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Makin said. He wasn’t going to take ‘no’ this time.

‘You won’t pass as a road brother,’ I said. ‘You look like an actor who’s raided the props chest for all the best knight-gear.’

‘Roll him in some shit,’ Rike said. ‘He’ll pass then.’

We happened to be right by Jerring’s stables and a heap of manure lay close at hand. I pointed to it.

‘Not so different from life in court.’ Makin grimaced and threw his robe into the head-cart. Maical had hitched it to the grey out of habit.

When the captain of my guard looked more like a hedge-knight at the very bottom of his luck, we moved on. Gog rode with me, clutching tight. Gorgoth jogged along for no horse would take him, and not just because of his weight. Something in him scared them.

‘Ever been to Arrow, Makin?’ I asked, easing my horse up wind.

‘Never have,’ he said. ‘A small enough principality. They breed them tough down there though, by all accounts. Been giving their neighbours a headache for years now.’

We rode on without talk for a while, just the clatter of hooves and the creak of the head-cart to break the mountain silence. The road, or trail if I’m honest, for the Builders never worked their magic in the Highlands, wound its way down, snaking back and forth to tame the gradients. As we dropped I started to realize that in the low valleys it would be spring already. Even here a flash of green showed now and again and set the horses nosing the air.

We saw the knights’ outrider an hour later and the main column a mile further on. Row started to turn off the trail.

‘I’ll say when we turn aside and when we stand our ground, if it’s all the same to you, Brother Row.’ I gave him a look. The Brothers had started to forget the old Jorg – been too long lazing around the Haunt, left too long to their own wickednesses.

‘There’s a lot of them, Brother Jorg,’ said Young Sim, older than me of course but still with little use for a razor if you discounted the cutting of throats.

‘When you’re making for the king’s castle it’s bad manners to cut down travellers on the way,’ I said. ‘Even ones as disreputable as us.’

I rode on. A pause and the others followed.

The next rise showed them closer, two abreast, moving at a slow trot, a pair of narrow banners fluttering in the Renar wind. No rabble these, table-knights from a high court, a harmony to their arms and armour that put my own guard to shame.

‘This is a bad idea,’ Makin said. He stank of horse-shit.

‘If you ever stop saying that I’ll know it’s time to start worrying,’ I said.

The men of Arrow continued their advance. We could hear their hooves on the rock. I had an urge to rest in the middle of the trail and demand a toll. That would have made a tale, but perhaps too short a one. I settled for pulling to the side and watching as they drew closer. I cast an eye over our troop. An ugly lot, but the leucrotas won the prize.

‘See if you can’t hide behind Rike’s beast, Gorgoth,’ I said. ‘I knew that plough horse would come in useful.’

I took the knife from my belt and started to work the dirt from under my fingernails. Gog’s claws dug in beneath my breastplate as the first men reached us.

The knights slowed their horses to a walk as they came near. A few turned their heads but most passed without a glance, faces hidden behind visors. At the middle of the column were two men who caught the eye, or at least their armour did, polished to a brilliance, fluted in the Teuton style, and scintillating with rainbow hues where the oiled metal broke the light. A hound ran between their horses, short-haired, barrel-chested, long in the snout. The leftmost of the pair raised his hand and the column stopped, even the men in front of him, though there seemed no way they could have seen him.

‘Well now,’ he said, both words precise and tightly wrapped.

He took his helm off, which seemed a foolish thing to do when he might be the target of hidden crossbows, and shook his head. Sweat kept his blond hair plastered to his brow.

‘Good day, Sir Knight,’ I said and nodded him a quarter of a bow.

He looked me up and down with calm blue eyes. He reminded me of Katherine’s champion, Sir Galen. ‘How far to Renar’s castle, boy?’ he asked.

Something in me said that this man knew exactly how far it was, as crow flies and cripple crawls. ‘King Jorg’s castle lies a good ten miles yonder.’ I waved my knife along the trail. ‘About a mile of it up.’

‘A king is it?’ He smiled. Handsome like Galen too, in that square-jawed blond manner that will turn a girl’s head. ‘Old Renar didn’t count himself a king.’

I started to hate him. And not just for the pun. ‘Count Renar held only the Highlands. King Jorg is heir to Ancrath and the lands of Gelleth. That’s enough land to make a king, at least in these parts.’

I made show of peering at the fellow’s breastplate. He had dragons there, etched and enamelled in red, each rampant, clutching a vertical arrow taller

than itself. Nice work. 'Arrow is it you're from, my lord?' I asked. Not waiting for an answer I turned to Makin. 'Do you know why that land is named Arrow, Makin?'

He shook his head and studied the pommel of his saddle. The need to say 'this is a bad idea' twitched on his lips.

'They say it's called Arrow because you can shoot one from the north coast to the south,' I said. 'From what I hear they could have called it Sneeze. I wonder what they call the man who rules there.'

'You know a lot about heraldry, boy.' Eyes still calm. The man beside him moved his hand to his sword, gauntlet clicking against the hilt. 'They call the man who rules there the Prince of Arrow.' He smiled. 'But you may call me Prince Orrin.'

It seemed rash to be riding into another's realm with fifty men, even fifty such as these. The very thing I had decided against for my own travels.

'You're not worried that King Jorg will take the opportunity to thin the field in this Hundred War of ours?' I asked.

'If I were his neighbour, maybe,' the Prince said. 'But killing me or even ransoming me to my enemies would just make his own neighbours more secure and better able to harm him. And I hear the king has a good eye for his own chances. Besides, it would not be easy.'

'I thought you came looking for a count, but now it seems you already know about King Jorg and his good eye,' I said. He came prepared, this one.

The Prince shrugged. He looked young when he did it. Twenty maybe. Not much more. 'That's a handsome sword,' he said. 'Show it to me.'

I'd wrapped the hilt about with old leather and smeared that with dirt. The scabbard was older than me and shiny with the years. Whatever my uncle's sword had been it wasn't handsome now. Not until I drew it and showed its metal. I considered throwing my dagger. Old blondie might not see so clear with it jutting out of his eye socket. He might even have a brother at home who'd be pleased to be the new Prince of Arrow and owe me a favour hereafter. I could see it in my mind's eye. The handsome Prince with my dagger in his face, and us racing away across the slopes.

I'm not given to should haves. But I should have.

Instead I stowed the knife and drew my uncle's sword, an heirloom of his line, Builder-steel, the blade taking the light of the day and giving it back with an edge.

'Well now,' Prince Orrin said again. 'An uncommon sword you have

there, boy. From whom did you steal it?’

The mountain wind blew cold, finding every chink in my armour, and I shivered despite the heat pulsing from Gog at my back. ‘Why would the Prince of Arrow come all the way to the Renar Highlands with just fifty knights, I wonder?’ I dismounted. The Prince’s eyes widened at the sight of Gog left in the saddle, half naked and striped like a tiger.

I stood on one of the larger rocks by the roadside, on foot to show I had no running in me.

‘Perhaps such reasons are not for a bandit child by the roadside clutching a stolen sword,’ he said, still maddeningly calm.

I couldn’t argue with the ‘stolen’ so I took offence against the ‘child’. ‘Fourteen is a man’s age in these lands and I wield this sword better than any who held it before me.’

The Prince chuckled, gentle and unforced. If he had studied a book devoted to the art of infuriating me he could have done no better job. Pride has ever been my weakness, and occasionally my strength.

‘My apologies then, young man.’ I could see his champion frown at that, even behind his visor. ‘I travel to see the lands that I will rule as emperor, to know the people and the cities. And to speak with the nobles, the barons, counts ... and even kings, who will serve me when I sit upon the empire throne. I would win their service with wisdom, words and favour, rather than with sword and fire.’

A pompous enough speech perhaps, but he had a way with words this one. Oh my brothers, the way he spoke them. A magic of a new kind, this. More subtle than Sageous’s gentle traps – even that heathen witch with his dream-weaving would envy this kind of persuasion. I could see why the Prince had taken off his helm. The enchantment didn’t lie in the words alone but in the look, in the honesty and trust of it all, as if every man who heard them was worthy of his friendship. A talent to be wary of, maybe more potent even than the power Corion used to set me scurrying across empire and to steer my uncle from behind his throne.

The hound sat and licked the slobber from its chops. It looked big enough to swallow a small lamb.

‘And why would they listen to you, Prince of Arrow?’ I asked. I heard a petulance in my voice and hated it.

‘This Hundred War must end,’ he said. ‘It will end. But how many need drown in blood before the peace? Let the throne be claimed. The nobles can



keep their castles, rule their lands, collect their gold. Nothing will be lost; nothing will end but the war.'

And there it was again. The magic. I believed him. Even without him saying so I knew that he truly sought peace, that he would rule with a fair and even hand, that he cared about the people. He would let the farmers farm, the merchants trade, the scholars seek their secrets.

'If you were offered the empire throne,' he said, looking only at me, 'would you take it?'

'Yes.' Though I would rather take it without it being offered.

'Why?' he asked. 'Why do you want it?'

He shone a light into my dark corners, this storybook prince with his calm eyes. I wanted to win. The throne was just the token to demonstrate that victory. And I wanted to win because other men had said that I may not. I wanted to fight because fighting ran through me. I gave less for the people than for the dung heap we rolled Makin in.

'It's mine.' All the answer I could find.

'Is it?' he asked. 'Is it yours, Steward?'

And in one flourish he showed his hand. And showed my shame. You should know that the men who fight the Hundred War, and they are all men, save for the Queen of Red, fall from two sides of a great tree. The line of the Stewards, as our enemies call us, trace the clearest path to the throne, but it is to the Great Steward, Honourous, who served for fifty years when the seed of empire failed. And Honourous sat *before* the throne rather than on it. Still a strong claim to be heir to the man who served as emperor in all but name is a better case for taking that throne than a weak claim to be heir to the last emperor. At least that's how we Stewards see it. In any case I would cut myself a path to the throne even if some bastard-born herder had fathered me on a gutter-whore – genealogy can work for me or I can cut down the family tree and make a battering ram. Either way is good.

Many of the line of Stewards are cast in my mould: lean, tall, dark of hair and eye, quick of mind. Even our foes call us cunning. The line of the emperor is muddied, lost in burning libraries, tainted by madness and excess. And many of the line, or who claim it, are built like Prince Orrin: fair, thick of arm, sometimes giants big as Rike, though pleasing on the eye.

'Steward is it now?' I rolled my wrist and my sword danced. His hound stood up, sharp, without a growl.

'Put it away, Jorg,' he said. 'I know you. You have the look of the

Ancraths about you. As dark a branch of the Steward tree as ever grew. You're all still killing each other so I hear?'

'That's King Jorg to you,' I said, knowing I sounded like a spoiled child and unable to help it. Something in Orrin's calm humour, in the light of him, cast a shadow over me.

'King? Ah, yes, because of Ancrath, and Gelleth,' he said. 'But I'm told your father has named young Prince Degran his heir. So perhaps ...' He spread his hands and smiled.

The smile felt like a slap in the face. So Father had named the new son he'd made with his Scorrion whore. And gifted him my birthright. 'And you're thinking to give him the Highlands too?' I asked. Keeping the savage grin on my face however much it wanted to slide away. 'You should know that there are a hundred of my Watch hidden in the rocks ready to slot arrows through the gaps in that fancy armour, Prince.' It might even be true. I knew that at least some of the Watch would be tracking the knights.

'I'd say it was closer to twenty,' Prince Orrin said. 'I don't think they're mountain men, are they? Did you bring them out of Ancrath, Jorg, when you ran? They're skilled enough, but proper mountain men would be harder to spot.'

He knew too much, this prince. It was seriously starting to annoy. And as you know, being angry makes me angry.

'In any case,' he carried on as if I weren't about to explode, as if I weren't about to ram my sword entirely through his body, 'I won't kill you for the same reason you won't kill me. It would replace two weak kingdoms with a stronger one. When the road to the empire throne, to my throne, leads me here, I would rather find you and your colourful friends terrorizing the peasants and getting drunk, than find your father or Baron Kennick keeping order. And I hope that by the time I arrive you will have grown wiser as well as taller, and open your lands to me as emperor.'

I jumped from my rock and the hound stood in my path quicker than quick, still no growl but way too many teeth on display, all gleaming with slobber. I fixed its eyes, which is a good way to get your face bitten off, but I meant to threaten the beast. Holding my sword by hilt and blade, flat side forward, I took another step, a snarl rising in me. I had a hound once, a good one that I loved, before such soft words were taken from me, and I had no wish to kill this one. But I would. 'Back.' More growl than word. My eyes on his.

And with ears flat to its head the beast whimpered and skulked back

between the horses' legs. I think it sensed the death in me. A bitter meal, that necromancer's heart. Another step away from the world. It sometimes seems I stand three steps outside the lives of other men. One for the heart. One for the thorn bush. And perhaps the first for that dog I remember in dreams.

I call him mine but the hound belonged to my brother William and me. A wolf-hound of some kind, huger than the two of us, a charger fit for two young knights. He could take William on his back, Will being just four, but if I leapt on too he would shake us both off and nip my leg. We called him Justice.

'Impressive,' said Prince Orrin, looking anything but impressed. 'If you're finished with my dog then we'll be on our way. I plan to cross through to Orlanth via High Pass, or Blue Moon Pass if it's clear, and pay a call on Earl Samsar.'

'You'll be on your way when I say so,' I told him, still aching for ... something. Fear maybe? Perhaps just a measure of respect would do it. 'And by whatever route I allow.' I didn't like the way he seemed to know the lie of my land better than I did.

He raised an eyebrow at that, keeping a smile at bay and irking me more than smiling would have. 'And what then is your judgment in this matter, King Jorg?'

Every fibre of me ached to hurt him. In any other man his words would sound smug, arrogant, but here on this cold mountain slope they sounded honest and sincere. I hated him for being so openly the better man. I caught his eye and in that instant I knew. He pitied me.

'Cross swords with me, Brother Orrin,' I said. 'You're right to think of peace. Why should my goat-herders or your pig farmers suffer in a war to see which of our backsides polishes the empire throne? Cross swords with me and if I yield, then on the day you come to claim the empire I won't stand against you. Come, draw your blade. Or have your champion try his luck if you must.' I nodded to the man beside him.

'Ah,' Orrin said. 'You wouldn't want to fight him. That's my brother Egan. God made him to stand behind a sword. Scares me sometimes! And besides, the two of you are too alike. Egan thinks all this talk is a waste. He would set our farmers on your herders and drown the world in blood, would you not, Egan? I have a dream for the empire. For my empire. A bright dream. But I fear all Egan's dreams are red.'

Egan grunted as if bored.

The Prince dismounted. 'Clear the path and let no man interfere.'

'This is—'

'I know, Makin.' I cut across him. 'It's a bad idea.'

Makin climbed off his horse and stood beside me as Orrin's men pulled away. 'He could be good,' he said.

'Good is fine,' I said. 'I'm *great*.'

'I won't argue that you're world class at killing, Jorg,' Makin hissed. 'But this is swordplay and only swordplay.'

'Then I shall have to play the game,' I said. The Prince hadn't asked what I would demand of him when I won. That left a bitter taste.

We stepped together then, two of the hundred, the lines of emperor and steward met for battle.

'We could do this the clever way, Jorg,' Orrin said. He had enough of my measure not to say the easy way. 'Support me. The new emperor will need a new steward.'

I spat in the grit.

'You don't know what it is you want, or why you want it, Jorg,' he said. 'You've seen nothing of the empire you want to own. Have you been east, chasing the sun to the wall of Utter itself? Have you seen the shores of dark Afrique? Spoken with the jarls who sail from their northern fastness when the ice allows? If you had been spawned in the Arral wastes then all the miles you covered in those roaming years of yours would have shown you nothing but grassland. By ship, Jorg, by ship. That's the way to see the empire. Have you even seen the sea?'

The grey let out a long complacent fart, saving me from an answer. I always loved that horse.

We circled. Like much in life, a sword fight, especially a longsword fight, is about choosing your moment. A swing is a commitment, often a lifetime commitment. You wait for the best odds then bet your life on the chance offered. Against a man in plate armour you have to put muscle into it. All your strength. To put enough hurt through that metal so he won't be taking advantage as you draw back for the next attack. A lunge can be more tentative. It needs to be precise. To find and pierce that chink in the armour before he finds and pierces yours.

I swung, not to hit him but just to let our blades meet. His sword held a smoky look, something darker alloyed to the Builder-steel. The clash rang out harsh across the slopes. Somehow he rolled his blade in the instant they met

and almost took mine from my hands. I didn't like that at all. I pressed him, short swings to keep him busy, to numb his hands and stop them being so tricky. It felt like hacking at a stone pillar and left my palms aching, pain stabbing up my wrists.

'You're better than I expected,' he said.

He came at me then, lunge, half-swing, lunge. Combinations too fast to think about.

We train so that our muscles learn. So that our eyes talk to our arms and hands, skipping the brain and the need to bother with decision and judgment. It's like learning the notes for a piece on the harp. First you think it through, A, C, C, D ... and in time your fingers know it and you've forgotten the notes.

My sword arm made its moves without consulting me.

'Really not bad at all,' he said.

But when you try to play the piece faster, and then faster still, and quicker again, at some point your fingers falter. What comes next, they want to know? What's next?

A heavy metal bar to the side of the head is what's next, apparently. At least that's what the flat of his blade felt like. I said something that was half-curse, half-groan, and all blood, then fell over as if he'd cut all my strings.

'Yield.' It sounded as if he was calling from the far end of a long tunnel.

'Fuck that.' More blood, possibly some bits of tooth.

'Last chance, Jorg,' he said. The edge of his sword lay cold against my neck.

'He yields.' Makin at the far end of the same tunnel. 'He yields.'

'Like hell I do.' The difference between sky and ground had started to reassert itself. I focused on a dark blob that could well be Orrin.

'Yield,' he said again. Warmth down my neck where blood trickled from his shallow cut.

I managed a laugh. 'You've already said you won't kill me, Prince of Arrow. It's not in your interest. So why would I yield?' I spat again. 'If you ever get to my borders with an army, I'll decide what to do then.'

He turned away with a look of disgust.

'The High Pass,' I said. 'I'll give you free passage to the High Pass and you can bother the earl with your moralizing. You earned that much.' I tried to stand and failed. Makin helped me to my feet.

We watched them ride on. The brother, Prince Egan, gave me an evil stare

as he passed. Orrin didn't even turn his head.

We watched until the last horse vanished over the rise.

'We're going to need a bigger army,' I said.

*Sir Makin is almost the handsome knight of legend, dark locks curling, tall, a swordsman's build, darkest eyes, his armour always polished, blade keen. Only the thickness of his lips and the sharpness of his nose leave him shy of a maiden's dream. His mouth too expressive, his look too hawkish. In other matters too Sir Makin is 'almost'. Almost honourable, almost honest. About his friendship, though, there is no almost.*

## 7

*Four years earlier*

We'd ridden for two hours since the Prince of Arrow left for the High Pass. Two hours in a very different kind of silence to the one that kept us company for the first part of our journey. I had the sort of headache that makes decapitation seem like a good option. Any idiot could tell that it wouldn't take much for me to make their neck the practice run.

'Ouch.'

Well, not every idiot.

'Yes, Maical,' I said. 'Ouch.' I watched him through slitted eyes, teeth tight against the throb in my skull. Sometimes you couldn't tell old Maical was broken. Whatever piece was missing from him it didn't always show. For whole moments at a time he could look ready for anything, tough, dependable, even cunning. And then it came, that weakness about the mouth, the furrowing of the brow, and the empty eyes.

Maical had found his way back to the Brotherhood within weeks of our victory in the Highlands. Lord knows how, but I suppose even pigeons can find their way home with nothing but a drop of brain in their tiny skulls. In the months since I made the Haunt my home he'd served as stable-boy or assistant to the stable-boy, or dung-collector, or some such. I made it clear I wanted him fed and given a place to sleep. I'd killed his brother after all. Gemt hadn't cared much for him. He beat him and set him to both their tasks on the road. But he made sure Maical ate and he made sure he had a place to sleep. 'He banged you up, Jorg,' Maical said. He looked stupid when he spoke, lips always wet and glistening.

I saw Makin wince, Row exchange a bet with Grumlow.

'Yes, Maical, he surely did.'

I didn't feel bad for knifing Gemt. Not for a heartbeat. But it hurt me to think of Maical too broken to hate me, caught in whatever hooks snagged his mind, seeing but trapped. I thought of the watch a *tick tick ticking* on my



wrist. All that cleverness, those wheels within wheels, turning, being turned, teeth biting, and yet one tiny piece of grit, one human hair in the wrong place, and it would seize, ruined, worthless. I wondered what had got into Maical way back when. What had it been that stole his wits away?

‘Tell Makin to get himself up here,’ I said.

Maical pulled on his reins and the grey slowed. I saw Row’s scowl. He’d lost his bet.

The mountains pulsed from red to green as the pain washed from front to back, from behind my eyes to the base of my skull.

‘Sometimes I think you keep him around just to keep the grey happy,’ Makin said. I hadn’t noticed him draw level.

‘I want you to teach me how to use a sword,’ I said.

‘You know how—’

‘I thought I did,’ I said. ‘But now I’m going to take it seriously. What just happened ...’ I put my hand to my head and my fingers came away bloody. ‘... is not going to happen again.’

‘Well at least it’s a kingly way to pass the time,’ he said. ‘Help to keep your edge too. Have you even swung a sword since we took the Haunt?’

I shrugged and wished I hadn’t. My teeth made a nasty squeaking as they ground over each other.

‘I’m told you’ve been attempting to father a bastard on pretty much every serving girl in the castle.’ He grinned.

*It’s good to be the king.*

*Except when you get hit in the head with a sword.*

‘It’s an effort at repopulation,’ I said. ‘Quality and quantity.’ I clapped a hand to my head. ‘Arrrgh, damn and fuck it.’ Some pain you can distance yourself from, but a headache sits right where you live.

Makin kept grinning. I think he quite liked seeing me knocked down.

He reached into his saddlebag, dug deep, pulled out a tight wrap of leather and tossed it over. I almost missed it. Double vision will do that for you.

‘Clove-spice,’ he said.

‘Been hoarding that one, Sir Makin.’ You could trade a good horse and not get enough clove-spice to fill your hand. Wonderful stuff for pain. Too much and you die of course, but it’s like floating to your death, carried by a warm river. I almost opened the wrap. ‘Take it.’ I threw it back. Giving in to things becomes a habit. I made an enemy of the ache in my head and started to fight.

We rode on. I filled my mind with old venom, brought out the hate I kept

for the Count of Renar. I'd had little to exercise it on since he passed out of reach. The *throb throb throb* behind my eyes made the ache from my broken tooth feel like a tingle.

Rike caught up on that monster horse of his and kept pace. He watched me for a while. Makin might have enjoyed seeing me knocked on my arse; but Rike thought all his festival days had come at once.

'You know why I keep you around, Rike?' I asked.

'Why?'

'You're like the worst part of me.' That squeak of enamel on enamel again as I ground my teeth. 'Damn.' It slackened off. 'I don't have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. I got me a devil on both. But you're like the bad one. Like I'd be if I lost my charm, and my good looks.' I realized I was babbling and tried to grin.

'Lose yourself, Rike.' Makin again. I hadn't seen him come back.

'My father was right, Makin,' I said. 'Right to take his brother's money, for William and Mother. He would have lost half his army just getting to the Haunt.'

Makin frowned. He held the clove-spice out again. 'Take it.'

'My father knew about sacrifice. Corion too. The path he set me on. The right one. I just didn't like being pushed.'

I could hardly see Makin, eyes slitted against the pulse in my head.

Makin shook his head. 'Some crimes demand an answer. Corion tried to take that from you. I crossed three nations to find the men who killed my girl.' He sounded worried.

'Idiot.' Numb lips shaped the word.

'Jorg.' Makin kept his voice low. 'You're crying. Take the damn spice.'

'Going to need a bigger army.' Everything had gone black and I felt as if I was falling. And then I hit the ground.

*Four years earlier*

I woke in a darkened room. A fly buzzed. Someone somewhere was being sick. Light filtered in where the daub cracked from the wattle. More light through the shutters, warped in their frame. A peasant hut. The retching stopped, replaced by muted sobs. A child.

I sat up. A thin blanket slipped from me. Straw prickled. The ache in my head had gone. My tooth hurt like a bastard but it was nothing compared to how my head had been. I felt around for my sword and couldn't find it.

There's something magical about a departed headache. It's a shame the joy fades and you can't appreciate not having one every moment of your life. That hadn't been a regular headache of course. Old Jorgy got himself a bruised brain. I'd seen it before. When Brother Gains fell off his horse one time and hit his head he went crazier than Maical for the best part of two days. 'Did I fall off my horse?' He must have asked that a thousand times in a row. Crying one moment. Laughing the next. We're brittle things, us men.

I found my feet, still a little shaky. The door opened and the light came dazzling around the dark shape of a woman. 'I brought you soup,' she said.

I took it and sat again. 'Smells good.' It did. My stomach growled.

'Your friend, Makin, he brought a couple of rabbits for the pot,' she said. 'We hadn't had meat since the pigs got took.'

I raised the bowl to my lips: no spoons here. She left as I started slurping, burning my mouth and not caring too much. For a long time I just sipped and watched the dust dance where fingers of light reached in through the shutters. I munched on lumps of rabbit, chewed on the gristle, swallowed the fat. It's good to eat with an empty mind.

At last I got to my feet again, steadier now. I patted myself down. My old dagger was on my hip and there was a lump in my belt pouch which turned out to be Makin's clove-spice. One more glance around for my sword and I went to the door. The day seemed a little too bright, the wind chill and sharp

with the stink of old burning. I stretched and blinked. Apart from the hut I'd come from, a stall for animals by the look of it, the place lay in ruins. Two houses with tumbled walls and blackened spars, some broken fences, animal pens that looked to have been ridden through with heavy horse. I saw the woman crouched in the shell of the closer house, her back to me.

The sudden need for a piss bit hard. I went against the hut, a long hot acid flow never seeming to end. 'Jesu! Have I slept for a week?'

A wise man once said, 'Don't shit where you eat.' Aristotle perhaps. On the road that's a rule to live by. Find your relief where you will. Move on each day and leave the shit, all manner of shit, behind you. In the castle I have a garderobe. Which, let's face it, is a hole in the wall to crap through. In a castle you shit where you eat and you have to think a bit harder about what kind of shit is worth stirring up. That's what I've learned in three months of being king.

Finished at last. Had to be a week's worth.

I felt better. Good. A yawn cracked my face. The land lay flat to the north, the Matteracks a jagged line to the south. We'd left the Highlands or near as dammit. I stretched and ambled over to the woman. 'Did my men do this?' I frowned and glanced around again. 'Where in hell are they anyhow?'

She turned, face worn, haunted around the eyes. 'Soldiers from Ancrath did it.' A child hung in her arms, limp and grey, a girl, six years maybe seven.

'Ancrath?' I arched a brow. My eyes kept returning to the girl. 'We're close to the border?'

'Five miles,' she said. 'They told us we couldn't live here. The land was annexed. They started to fire the buildings.'

Annexed. That rang a small bell at the back of my mind. Some dispute about the border. The oldest maps had it that Lord Nossar's estate reached out this far.

I could smell the vomit now, sour on the morning air. The girl had a blood-black smear of it in her hair.

'They killed your man?' I asked. I surprised myself. I don't care enough about such things to waste words on them. I blamed the bang on the head.

'They killed our boy,' she said, staring past the black timbers, past me, past the sky. 'Davie came out screaming and choking, blind with the smoke. Got too close to a soldier. Just a quick swing, like he was cutting down bindweed, and my boy was open. His guts ...' She blinked and looked down at the girl.

‘He kept screaming. He wouldn’t stop. Another soldier put an arrow through his neck.’

‘And your man?’ I hadn’t asked about her boy. I hadn’t wanted that story. And the girl kept watching me, without interest, without hope.

‘I don’t know.’ She had a grey voice. The way it goes when emotions have burned out. ‘He didn’t go to Davie, didn’t hold him, too scared the soldiers would cut him down too.’ The girl coughed, a wet sound. ‘Now he cries all the time or stares at the ground.’

‘And the child?’ I cursed my empty head. I had only to think a question today and it came spilling out of me.

‘Sick,’ she said. ‘In her stomach. But I think it’s in her blood too. I think it’s the waste.’ She pulled the girl to her. ‘Does it hurt, Janey?’

‘Yes.’ A dry whisper.

‘A little or a lot?’

‘A lot.’ Still a whisper.

Why ask such questions if there’s nothing to be done? ‘He did right,’ I said. ‘Your man. Sometimes you need to hold back. Bide your time.’ The thorns had held me back when it mattered, made the decision for me. ‘He did right.’ The words that rang so true before I fell off my horse seemed empty beside the shell of their home. A blow to the skull can knock a deal of sense out of a man.

I saw horsemen across the meadow. Two men, three horses. Makin and Rike rode up, keeping an easy pace.

‘Good to have you on your feet, Jorg.’ Makin gave me his grin. Rike just scowled. ‘Mistress Sara and Master Marten have been looking after you I see.’ And that was Makin for you, always with the making friends, remembering names, jolly along.

‘Sara is it?’ I said. I supposed these were my people after all. ‘And little Janey.’ For a moment I saw a different Jane, crushed and broken under rocks, the light dying out of her. That Jane once told me I needed better reasons. Better reasons if I wanted to win, but maybe just better reasons for everything.

‘Take her inside,’ I said. ‘It’s too cold here.’ A vague guilt crept over me, for pissing on one of the only four walls they had left.

Sara stood and carried the girl indoors.

‘So you left me for dead then, Makin?’ I asked. ‘Where are the others?’

‘Camped a mile down the road.’ He nodded north. ‘Watching for any more

raiding parties.'

Odd to think of jolly old Nossar standing behind the raids. It put a sour edge on sweet memories. I remembered him in his feasting hall, with the faded maps stretched out across the table, how he pored over them. Nossar in his oak chair in the fort of Elm, grey beard and warm eyes. We played in that hall, Will and I, when we were no bigger than the child Sara carried past me. Nossar and his lines on the map. Gruff talk of 'his boys' giving Renar's boys a hiding.

'Are you ready to ride?' Makin asked.

'Soon.' I went to my horse. 'Brath' the stablemaster called him and I'd not seen fit to change the name. Sturdy enough but not a patch on Gerrod who fell under that mountain I pushed over in Gelleth. I fished a few necessities from my saddlebags and followed Sara.

The light had blinded me on the way out. The gloom left me blind on the way in. The stall stank. I hadn't noticed it when I woke but it hit me now. Old vomit, sweat, animal dung. I believed the Prince of Arrow when he said he would protect the people, give them peace. I believed Jane when she said I needed better reasons for the things I made fate give me. I believed it all. Everything except that it meant anything to me.

I crouched by the woman. Already I had to reach for her name. 'The new king didn't protect you then?'

'There's a king?' she said without interest, wanting me gone.

'Hello Janey,' I said, turning the charm onto the girl instead. 'Did you see I brought the biggest, ugliest man in the world to show you?'

Half a smile twitched on her lips.

'So what do you want, little Janey?' I asked. I didn't know what I was doing here, crouched in the stink with the peasants. Maybe I just wanted to beat the Prince of Arrow at something. Or maybe it was just the echoes of that knock on the head. Perhaps Maical was knocked on the head as a baby and that knock had been echoing through his whole life.

'I want Davie.' She kept unnaturally still. Only her mouth moved. And her eyes.

'What do you want to be? To do?' I thought of my childhood. I wanted to be death on wings. I wanted to break the world open until it gave me what was mine.

'A princess,' Janey said. She paused, 'Or a mermaid.'

'I tell her stories, sir,' the mother said, half-fearful even now, ruined and

on the edge of despair. I wondered what she thought I might take from her. 'My grandmother read,' she said. 'And my family keeps the tales.' She stroked Janey's hair. 'I speak them when she's hurting. To keep her mind from it. Fill her head with nonsense. She don't rightly know what a mermaid is even.'

I bit my tongue then. Three impossible requests in as many moments. I'd followed them in thinking to be the king. Thinking of my crown and throne, my armies, gold and walls.

She wants her brother, she wants to be a princess, she wants to be a mermaid. And the waste will take her, screaming from her mother's arms, to a cold slot in the ground. And all the king's horses and all the king's men can't do a thing about it.

I touched her then, Janey, just a light touch on the forehead. She had enough death in her already and didn't need me adding to it. But I touched her, with my fingers, just to feel it pulsing under the skin, eating at the marrow of her bones. The sickness in her called out to the necromancy lying in me, making a link. I could feel her heartbeat flutter under mine.

'Ready to ride, Jorg?'

'Yes.' I swung up into Brath's saddle.

We set off at slow walk.

'Any of that spice left, Brother Jorg?' Makin asked.

'I must have swallowed it all for the pain,' I said, patting my belt pouch.

Makin rolled his eyes. He glanced back at the ruined farmstead. 'Christ bleeding. There was enough—'

The faint sound of cymbals cut him off. The clash of cymbals, the whirr of cogs, stamping, and a child laughing.

'Leave anything else behind, Jorg?' he asked.

'Red Kent was right,' I said. 'It was cursed. Evil. Better the hurt fall on the peasants, neh?'

On the plains the winds can make your eyes sting.

Rike pulled on his reins and started back.

'Don't,' I said.

And he didn't.

Sleep came hard that night. Perhaps soft months in the Haunt had left me wanting the comfort of a bed. Sleep came hard and the dreams came harder,

dragging me under.

I lay in a dark room, a dark room sour with the stink of vomit and animals, and saw nothing but the glitter of her eyes, child's eyes. Heard only the *tick tick* of the watch on my wrist and the *rasp rasp rasp* of her breath, hot and dry and quick.

I lay for the longest time with the tick and the rasp and the glitter of her eyes.

We lay and a warm river carried us, thick with the scent of cloves.

*Tick, breath, tick, breath, tick, breath.*

And then I woke, sudden and with a gasp.

'What?' someone murmured. Perhaps Kent in his blankets.

'Nothing,' I said. The dream still tangled me. 'I thought my watch stopped.'

But it wasn't the watch.

In the grey dawn Makin rose beside me cracking his face with a yawn, spitting, and rubbing his back. 'Jesu but I'm sore.' He cast a bleary glance my way. 'Nothing a pinch of clove-spice wouldn't fix.'

'The child died last night,' I told him. 'Easy rather than hard.'

Makin pursed those thick lips of his and said no more about it. Perhaps thinking of his own child lost back among the years. He didn't even ask how I knew.



*The years never seem to weigh on Brother Maical, as if his inability to count their passing protects him from their passage. He watches the world through calm grey eyes, broad-chested, thick limbed. Brother Grumlow cuts Maical's hair close, with a tail at the rear, and shaves his beard leaving him clean-cheeked and sharp. And if no one told you that his thoughts rattle in an empty head you might think Brother Maical as capable a rogue as rides among the Brothers. In battle though his hands grow clever, and you'd think him whole, until the din fades, the dying fall, and Maical wanders the field weeping.*

## 9

*Four years earlier*

*The Highlands has lowland, though precious little of it and what there is lies stony and grows yet more stones when farmed. In my three months as king I had stuck to the mountains. Only now, when the road led me north to Heimrift, did I discover the fringes of my kingdom where it brushed against Ancrath and the Ken Marshes.*

We rode from the ruined farm, from the peasants, Marten and Sara, whose names had stayed with me this once, and from their dead girl, Janey, whose breath stopped one night on the edge of spring before we'd gone twenty miles down the trail. We kept to the border lands where road-brothers are wont to travel and opportunity abounds. The further into a kingdom a bandit-troop can venture without serious resistance is a measure of that kingdom's softness. Thurtan was always soft around the edges, the Ken Marshes softer still. Ancrath, we would say, was hard. Hard enough to break your teeth on.

'Why have we stopped?' Makin wanted to know.

The road forked. An unmarked junction, a dirt road scored through dreary hills where Ancrath met the Marshes met the Highlands. The wind rippled through the long grass. Any place three nations touch will grow well given half a chance. Blood makes for rich soil.

'There's two choices. Take the one that's not Ancrath,' he said.

I closed my eyes. 'Do you hear that, Makin?'

'What?'

'Listen,' I said.

'To what?' He cocked his head. 'Birds?'

'Harder.'

'Mosquitoes?' Makin asked, a frown on him now.

'Gog hears it,' I said. 'Don't you, lad?'

I felt him move behind me. 'A bell?'

‘The bell at Jessop where the marsh-tide brings the dead. It’s got a voice so deep it just crawls over the bogs, mile after mile,’ I said.

That bell had called me back home once before. That bell had let me know I had a new brother lurking in a stranger’s belly, being put together piece by piece by piece beneath dresses fit for a queen. Under silk and lace. And now it reminded me of the Prince of Arrow’s words. Words his sword nearly knocked clean out of my head. That my little brother had come out to play, and the cradle toys my father first gave him were the rights to my inheritance.

‘We’ll go this way,’ I said, and turned along the harder path.

‘The Heimrift is *that* way,’ Makin said. He pointed to be clear. ‘I’m not arguing. I just don’t want anyone saying I didn’t mention it, you know, when we’re all lying on the ground bleeding to death.’

He *was* arguing as it happened, but he had a case and I didn’t stop him.

We rode for an hour or so, leaving the sourness of the boglands behind us. Spring races through Ancrath before it starts to struggle up the slopes into the Highlands. We came to woodlands, with leaves unfurling on every branch, as if one blow of spring’s green hammer had set them exploding from the bud. I took the Brothers from the road and we followed trails into the woods. If you don’t want to meet anyone, take the forest path, especially in Ancrath since I stole Father’s Forest Watch from him.

Spring warmth, the luminous green of new leaves, the song of thrush and lark, the richness of the forest breathed in and slowly out ... Ancrath has charms unknown in the Renar Highlands, but I’d started to appreciate the wildness in my new kingdom, the raw rock, unobtainable peaks, even the endless wind scouring east to west.

Grumlow leaned over and snagged something from Young Sim’s hair. ‘Woodtick.’ He cracked it between his nails. Even Eden had a snake problem.

The head-cart started to snag on bushes and dead-fall as the trails grew narrow. Rike’s cursing came more frequent and more dire, prompted by repeated slaps in the face from branch after branch.

‘Shouldn’t ride so high, Little Rikey,’ I told him.

Makin came up, behind him Kent and Row chuckling over some joke he’d left them with. ‘We’ll be walking soon then?’ He ducked under low-hanging greenery.

I pulled up at a stream crossed by a small clapper bridge that must have been old when Christ first learned to walk. I remembered the bridge, possibly the furthest I’d ever ventured alone before I left the Tall Castle for good.

‘We’ll leave the horses here,’ I said. ‘You can watch them, Grumlow, you being the man with the sharp eyes today.’

And that wasn’t all that was sharp about Grumlow. That moustache might make him look stupid but he had a clever way with daggers, and a clever number of them stashed about his person.

I thought about leaving Gog and Gorgoth. Especially Gorgoth, for he wasn’t one to be taken places unobserved. When I first brought him into the Haunt, after sitting my arse on the throne for a day or two, he caused quite a stir. Even lame, from the arrows he’d taken for me holding open that gate, he looked like a monster to reckon with. I had Coddin bring him up through the west-yard on a market day. You’d have thought someone dropped a hornets’ nest for all the commotion. One old biddy screamed, clutched her chest, and fell over. That made me laugh. And when they told me she never did get back up ... well that seemed funny too at the time. Maybe I’m getting too old, for it doesn’t strike me quite so merrily any more. Let truth be told though, she did fall funny.

In the end I took them both. Gorgoth is the kind you need in a tough spot, and Gog, well he makes lighting the campfire less of a chore.

Making your way through the greenwood without people seeing you isn’t too hard if you know your way and don’t count charcoal burners as people. They’re a lonely breed and not wont to gossip. So Rike didn’t have to kill them.

And so we sliced into Ancrath easily enough, tramping along the deer paths. Even hard kingdoms have their fault lines.

‘It shouldn’t be this easy,’ Makin said. ‘It wasn’t in my day. Damned if Coddin and his fellows would have let bandits wander so carelessly.’ He shook his head, though it seemed an odd thing to complain about.

‘Your father’s army has grown weak?’ Gorgoth asked, demolishing the undergrowth as he walked.

I shrugged. ‘Half his forces are out in the marsh or barracked in the bog towns. Dead things keep hauling themselves out of the muck these days. There’s others having similar problems. I had a merchant at court telling me the Drowned Isles have fallen to the Dead King. All of them. Given over to corpse men, marsh ghouls, necromancers, lich-kin.’

Makin just crossed his chest and picked up the pace.

We travelled light, locating good shelter in the woods, and good eating. Young Sim had a way with the finding of rabbits, and I could knock the odd

squirrel or wood-pigeon off its branch with a handy stone. Animals in spring are easy, too full of the new warmth, too taken with new possibilities, and not enough of watching for rocks winging their way out of the shadows.

Ancrath casts a spell on you, and nowhere more so than in the greenwood where the day trickles like honey and the sun falls golden amid pools of shade. We walked in single file with the song of the thrush and sparrow, and the scent of may and wild onions. The day set me dreaming as I walked and my nose led me back through the years to memories of William. There was a night when my brother lay sick, when my mother wept, and the table-knights would not turn their stern faces to me. I remembered the prayers I had whispered in the dark chapel when all the holy men were in their beds, the promises I made. No threats back then. I barely even bargained with the Almighty in those days. And when I crept back to our chambers I climbed in beside William and held his head. The friar had given him bitter potions and cut his leg to release the bad blood. My mother had set an ointment of honey and onion on his chest. That at least seemed to ease his breathing a little. We lay with the night sounds, William's dry wheeze, our hound Justice snoring by the doors, the click of the maid's needles in the hall, and the cry of bats, almost too high for hearing as they swung around the Tall Castle in the moonless dark.

'A penny for them,' Makin said.

I snapped my head up with a start, almost tripping. 'My thoughts are worth less than that today.' I had been a foolish child.

Sometimes I wished I could cut away old memories and let the wind take them. If a sharp knife could pare away the weakness of those days I would slice until nothing but the hard lessons remained.

We made our way without problem until we ran out of forest. The land around the Tall Castle is clear of trees and set to farming, to feed the king, and so that he may see his enemies advance.

I leaned against the trunk of a massive copper beech, one of the last great trees before the woods gave over to a two-acre field of ploughed earth peeping with green that might have been anything from carrots to kale for all I knew. More fields to the left and right, more beyond. A lone scarecrow watched us.

'I'll go on alone,' I said. I started to unbuckle my breastplate.

'Go where?' Makin asked. 'You can't get in there, Jorg. Nobody could.'

And what for? What are you possibly going to achieve?’

‘A man’s got a right to call in on his family now and again, Brother Makin,’ I said.

I stripped the vambraces from my forearms, my breastplate, and finally the gorget. I like to have iron around my neck, kept it from a slitting once or twice, but armour wouldn’t save me where I was aimed.

I took the scabbard off my belt. ‘Kent, look after this for me.’ His eyes widened, almost as if he didn’t know that’s how a leader binds his men, with trust.

‘A sword like this ... Sir Makin—’

‘I gave it to you.’ I cut him off.

‘You need a sword, Jorg,’ Maical said, confusion in his eyes. Behind him Sim watched me without comment, unwrapping his harp. He at least knew enough to settle down for a wait.

I magicked my old knife into my hand, a trick I learned off Grumlow. ‘This will do for what I have in mind, Brother Maical.’

‘Give me two days,’ I said. ‘If I’m not back by then, send Rike to take the castle by storm.’

And with a bow I left them to watch the carrots grow. Or the kale.

I made my way along the margins of the forest toward the Roma Road. They say you can put foot on that road and never leave it till you reach the pope’s front door. I planned to walk the other way.

There’s a cemetery near the Roma Road, mostly eaten by the forest, mostly forgotten. I hunted through it as a child, crumbled mausoleums choked with ivy, smothered with moss, cracked by trees. The cemetery covers acre upon hidden acre, a lost necropolis. Perechaise they call it in dusty books. The legends mean nothing to me, *Beloved, 1845. Dearly departed, 1710. My heart lies here, 1908*. Barely legible. So long ago even their calendar loses meaning.

The stones are set with a clear resin, harder than glass, which wards them in a skin no thicker than a hair. It took years before I noticed it. The weathering they’d suffered happened in the distant long ago. Now not even a hammer blow will mar them. The Builders held these old markers precious and kept them from the centuries.

I found my way through toppled gravestones close to the road where some of it is kept clear. Much has been robbed out. There’s a peasant’s cottage, a

little to the west, entirely built from headstones, weathered granite markers with time-blurred legends remembering the dead for illiterate field-men. A house built of stories, to shelter a man who cannot read.

I found her by the road's edge, hair pink with fallen blossom. The cycle of seasons has worn the definition from her features. But the beauty remains, the sharpness of her cheekbones, the grace in long limbs, the gentle swell of a child's breast, a freckling of lichen. She needs no deep-carved runes to spell out her life. Here I buried my child. A message for which reading is not required. She died in the winter of a lost year, the daughter of a wealthy man who would have given all his wealth, and more, to buy her into spring.

I saw her first in autumn, long ago, when the leaves fell so thick they hid the stone dog she chases. Whilst I watched her other travellers hurried past on the road, clenched against the sharp-fingered wind. Some paused to wonder what she chased, hugging themselves, squinting into the rain. They moved on. I stayed. Maybe they wondered what *they* were chasing.

She's after her dog. A little terrier, remembered in stone, lost that autumn in a drift of wet ochre. A centuries'-old chase that has seen the death of everyone who cared, the end of every soul that knew the terrier's name. A chase that saw the stilling of each hand to touch this child, the loss of every life that shared her world.

I came again with the snows on the first day of winter, to see my statue girl. My first love maybe. I watched and the snow fell, tiny crystals, the kind so perfect they almost chime against the ground. The light failed early and a wildness infected the wind, swirling the snow into rivulets of milk across the Roma Road, ice hissing over stone. A frost came and etched silver tracery across her dress, with only me to see.

The seasons turn, and here I am again, and still she waits for spring.

They buried high lords and high ladies here. Poets and bards. Now it's a place for servant corpses. Close enough to the Tall Castle for sentimental ladies to visit their wet-nurses, far enough away to be seemly. They bury old servants, sometimes even faithful dogs, around my girl who waits for spring. Soft-hearted ladies from court come with their perfumed toys that have ceased to yap. And one time a boy of six, soaked and half frozen, dragging something that might once have been a wolf.

'Hello, Jorg.'

I turned and between the old graves walked Katherine, the sun making magic of her hair.

## 10

*Four years earlier*

Hello, Jorg. *Was that all she said to me? Katherine, there in the Rennat Forest, among the gravestones.* Hello, Jorg?

*I'm trying to wake up from something. Maybe I've always been trying. I'm drowning in confusion, somewhere high above me light dances on a surface, and past that the air is waiting. Waiting for me to draw breath.*

I hardly know Katherine but I want her, with unreasonable ferocity. Like a sickness, like the need for water. Like Paris for Helen, I am laid low by irresistible longing.

In memory I study the light on her face, beneath the glow-bulbs of the Tall Castle, beneath the cemetery trees. I envy those patches of sunlight, sliding over her hair, moving unopposed the length of her body, across her cheekbones. I remember everything. I recall the pattern of her breath. In the heat of Drane's kitchen I remember a single bead of sweat and the slow roll of it, down her neck, along the tendon, across her throat. I've killed men and forgotten them. Misaid the act of taking a life. But that drop of sweat is a diamond in my mind's eye.

'Hello, Jorg.' And my clever words desert me. She makes me feel my fourteen summers, more boy than man.

I want her beyond reason. I need to own, consume, worship, devour. What I've made of her in my mind cannot live in flesh. She's just a person, just a girl, but she stands at the door to an old world, and although I can't go back ... she can come through, and maybe bring with her a scent of it, a taste of that lost warmth.

These feelings are too fierce to last. They can only burn, making us ash and char.

I see her in dreams. I see her against the mountains. High, snow-cold, snow-pure, unobtainable. I climb, and on the empty peak I speak her name to



the wind, but the wind takes my words. It takes me too. Tumbling through void.

‘Hello, Jorg.’

My flesh prickles. I rub at my cheek and my fingers come away bloody, sliced open. Every part of me burns with pins and needles. Real pins, real needles. I scream and like buds on the branch each prickle erupts, a hundred thorns sliding from my skin, growing from the bone. There are animals impaled, stabbed through like exhibits on a gamekeeper’s board. Rat, stoat, ferret, fox, dog ... baby. Limp and watching.

I scream again and rotate into darkness. A night with only a whisper to give it form. A whispered chant, growing louder.

Topology, tautology, torsion, torture, taunt, taut, tight, taken, taking ... taking ... take ... what’s he trying to take?

Somebody fumbling at my arm, fingers too stupid for the clever catch on the watch. A quick move and I had his wrist, impossibly thick, strong. I dug my thumb into the necessary pressure point. Lundist showed it to me in a book.

‘Arrg!’ Rike’s voice. ‘Pax!’

I sat up sharp, breaking the surface, drawing that long-awaited breath, and shaking the darkness from my mind. Topology, tautology, torsion ... meaningless webs of words falling from me.

‘Rike!’ Crouched over me, blocking the too bright sun.

He sneered and sat back. ‘Pax.’

Pax. Road-speak. *Peace, it’s in my nature*. An excuse for any crime you’re caught in the middle of. Sometimes I think I should wear the word on my forehead. ‘Where in hell are we?’ I asked. An empty feeling ran through me, welling from my stomach and behind my eyes.

‘Hell’s the word.’ Red Kent walked over.

I lifted my hand. Sand all over. Sand everywhere in fact. ‘A desert?’

Two of the fingernails on my right hand were torn away. Gone. It started to hurt. My other nails were torn and split. I had bruises all over.

Gog came out from behind a lone thorn bush, slow as if he thought I might bite.

‘I—’ I pressed my hand to the side of my head, sand gritty on the skin. ‘I was with Katherine ...’

‘And then what?’ Makin’s voice from behind.

‘I ...’ Nothing. And then nothing. As if little Jorgy had been too full of the

spring's warmth and possibilities, and then a stone looped out of the shadows and took him off the bough.

I remembered the thorns. The itch and sting of them stayed with me. I lifted my arms. No wounds, but the skin lay red and scabbed. In fact Kent had it too, red as his name suggests. I turned to find Makin, also scabby, leading his horse. The beast looked worse than him, ropes of mucus around its muzzle, blisters on its tongue.

'This is not a good place to be, I'm thinking.' I reached for my knife and found it gone. 'What are we doing here?'

'We came to see a man named Luntar,' Makin said. 'An alchemist from the Utter East. He lives here.'

'And here is?'

'Thar.'

I knew the name. On the map scroll the word had sat along the edge of the Thurtan grasslands. There had been a burn mark on the map obscuring whatever the name labelled. But perhaps the scorch mark hadn't been an accident.

'Poisoned land,' Makin said. 'Some call them promised.'

A Builder's Sun had burned here, many centuries ago. The promise was that one day the land would be safe again. I thrust my fingers back into the sand. Not the ones missing fingernails. I could touch the death there. I could roll it between fingertip and thumb. Hot. Death and fire together.

'He lives here?' I asked. 'Doesn't he burn?'

Makin shuddered. 'Yes,' he said. 'He does.' It takes a lot to make Makin shudder.

The empty feeling gnawed at me, eating away at the questions I most wanted to ask.

'And what,' I said, 'did we want from this east-mage?'

Makin held out what he had been holding all along. 'This.'

A box. A copper box, thorn-patterned, no lock or latch. A copper box. Not big enough to hold a head. A child's fist would fit.

'What's in the box?' I didn't want to know.

Makin shook his head. 'There was a madness in you, Jorg. When you came back.'

'What's in it?'

'Luntar put the madness in there.' Makin thrust the box back into his saddlebag. 'It was killing you.'

‘He put my memory in that box?’ I asked, incredulous. ‘You let him take my memory!’

‘You begged him to do it, Jorg.’ Makin wouldn’t look at me. Rike on the other hand couldn’t stop.

‘Give it to me.’ I would have reached for it but my hand didn’t want to.

‘He told me not to,’ Makin said, unhappy. ‘He told me to make you wait for a day. If you still wanted it after that, you could take it.’ Makin bit his lip. He chewed on it too much. ‘Trust me in this, Jorg, you don’t want to go back to how you were.’

I shrugged. ‘Tomorrow, then.’ Because trust is how a leader binds his men. And because my hands didn’t want that box. They’d rather burn. ‘Now, where’s my fucking dagger?’

Makin would only look at the horizon. ‘Best forgotten.’

We moved on, leading the horses, all of us reunited. We headed east, and when the wind blew, the sand stung like nettles. Only Gog and Gorgoth seemed unaffected.

Gog hung back, as if he didn’t want to be near me. ‘Is it all like this?’ I asked him, just to make him look at me. ‘Even where Luntar lives?’

He shook his head. ‘The sand turns to glass around his hut. Black glass. It cuts your feet.’

We walked on. Rike marched beside me, sparing the occasional glance. Something had changed in the way he looked at me. As if we were equals now.

I kept my head down and tried to remember. I teased at the hole in my mind. ‘Hello, Jorg,’ she had said.

Memory is all we are. Moments and feelings, captured in amber, strung on filaments of reason. Take a man’s memories and you take all of him. Chip away a memory at a time and you destroy him as surely as if you hammered nail after nail through his skull. I would have back what was mine. I would open the box.

‘Hello, Jorg,’ she had said. We were by the statue of the girl and her dog, by her grave where sentimental ladies and foolish children bury their animals. Nothing.

I learned a time ago that if you can’t get what you want by going in the front door, find a back way. I know a back way to that cemetery. Not by a path I wanted to tread, but I would take it even so.

When I was very young, six maybe, a duke called on my father, a man from the north with white-blond hair and a beard down his chest. Alaric of Maladon. The Duke brought a gift for my mother, a wonder of the old world. Something bright and moving, swirling within glass, first lost in the hugeness of the Duke's hand and then in the folds of Mother's dress.

I wanted that thing, half-seen and not understood. But such gifts were not for tiny princes. My father took it and set it in the treasury to gather dust. I learned this much from quiet listening.

The treasury in the Tall Castle lies behind an iron door, triple-locked. Not a Builder-made door, but a work of the Turkmen, black iron set with a hundred studs. When you're six, most locked doors present a problem. This one presented several.

Of all memories, the first I have is of leaning from a high parapet into the teeth of a gale, with the rain lashing and me laughing. The next is of hands pulling me back.

If you're determined, if you set your mind, there are never enough hands to pull you back. By the time I reached six I knew the outside of the Tall Castle as well as I knew the inside. The Builders left little for a climber to use, but centuries of tinkering by the Ancraths, and the House of Or before us, had provided plenty of footholds, at least plenty of ones deep enough for a child.

There is a single high window in the royal treasury, set in a plain wall a hundred feet above the ground, too narrow for a man and blocked by a forest of bars set so close as to give a snake quite a wriggle of it. On the far side of the castle, close to the throne-room, is a hole that leads to a gargoyle's head on the outer wall. If the treasury door opens, then the movement of air through the castle makes the gargoyle speak. On a still day he moans and when the wind is up he howls. He will also speak if the wind is hard in the east and a particular window in the kitchen stores is left unshuttered. When that happens there's a fuss and somebody gets whipped with rope and wire. Without the treasury's high window the gargoyle would not speak and the king would never know when the door to his treasures stood open.

I left my bed one moonless night. William lay sleeping in his little bed. No one saw me leave, only our great-hound, Justice. He gave a whine of reproach then tried to follow. I cursed him to silence and closed the door on him.

Those bars look strong but like so much we depend upon in life they are rotten to the core. Rust has eaten them. Even those with steel left at the centre

will bend given sufficient leverage. One night when my nurse lay sleeping and three guards on wall-duty argued over the ownership of a silver coin found on the steps at change-over, I climbed down a knotted rope and set foot amidst my father's wealth. I brushed the rust from my tunic, shook great flakes of it from my hair, and set my lantern, now unhooded, upon the floor.

The Ancrath loot, robbed from almost every corner of empire, lay on stone shelves, belched from coffers, stood stacked in careless piles. Armour, swords, gold coin in wooden tubs, mechanisms that looked like parts of insects, gleaming in the lantern light and tainting the air with alien scents, almost citrus, almost metal. I found my prize beside a helmet full of cogs and ash.

The Duke's gift didn't disappoint. Beneath a glass dome that wasn't glass, sealed by an ivory disk that wasn't ivory, lay a tiny scene, a church in miniature set around with tiny houses, and there a person, and another. And as I held it to the light, and turned its surprising weight this way and that to see the detail, a snowstorm grew, swirling up from the ground until whirling flakes obliterated the view leaving nothing but a blizzard in a half-globe. I set the snow-globe back, worried for a moment that I had somehow broken it. And miracle of miracles, the snow began to settle.

There's no magic to it now. I know that the right collection of artisans could make something similar in just a few weeks. They would use glass and ivory, and I don't know what the snow would be, but as ancient wonders go, there's little wonder in such things if you're much past six. But at the time it was magic, of the best kind. Stolen magic.

I shook the snow-globe again, and once more the all-encompassing blizzard rose, chaos, followed by calm, by settling snows, and a return to the world before. I shook it again. It seemed wrong. All that storm and fury signifying nothing. The whole world upheaved, and for what? The same man trudged toward the same church, the same woman waited at the same cottage door. I held a world in my hand and however I shook it, however the pieces fell, in whatever new patterns, nothing changed. The man would never reach the church.

Even at six I knew the Hundred War. I marched wooden soldiers across Father's maps. I saw the troops return through the Tall Gate, bloody and fewer, and the women weeping in the shadows as others threw themselves at their men. I read the tales of battle, of advance and retreat, of victory and defeat, in books I would not have been allowed to open if my father knew

me. I understood all this and I knew that I held my whole world in my right hand. Not some play land, some toy church and tiny men crafted by ancients. *My whole world*. And no amount of shaking would change it. We would swirl against each other, battle, kill, and fall, and settle, and as the haze cleared, the war would still be there, unchanged, waiting, for me, for my brother, for my mother.

When a game cannot be won, change the game. I read that in the book of Kirk. Without thought I brought the snow-globe overhead and smashed it on the ground. From the wet fragments I picked out the man, barely a wheat-grain between my thumb and finger.

‘You’re free now,’ I said, then flicked him into a corner to find his own way home, because I didn’t have *all* the answers, not then, and not now.

I left the treasury, taking nothing, almost defeated by the rope climb even so. I felt tired but content. What I had done seemed so right that I somehow thought others would see it too and that my crime would not follow me. With aching arms, and covered with rust and scratches, I hauled myself back over the parapet.

‘What’s this now?’ A big hand took me by the neck and lifted me off my feet. It seemed that the wall guards had been less argumentative over my coin than I had hoped.

It didn’t take long before I stood in my father’s throne-room with a sleepy page lighting torches. No whale oil in silver lamps for this night’s business, just pitch-torches crackling, painting more smoke on the black ceiling. Sir Reilly held my shoulder, his gauntlet too heavy and digging in. We waited in the empty room and watched the shadows dance. The page left.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. Though I wasn’t.

Sir Reilly looked grim. ‘I’m sorry too, Jorg.’

‘I won’t do it again,’ I said. Though I would.

‘I know,’ Sir Reilly said, almost tender. ‘But now we must wait for your father, and he is not a gentle man.’

It seemed that we waited half the night, and when the doors boomed open, I jumped despite the promises I made myself.

My father, in his purple robe and iron crown, with not a trace of sleep in him, strode alone to the throne. He sat and spread his hands across the arms of his chair.

‘I want Justice,’ he said. Loud enough for a whole court though Reilly and I were his only audience.

Again. 'I want Justice.' Eyes on the great doors.

'I'm sorry.' And this time I meant it. 'I can pay—'

'Justice!' He didn't even glance at me.

The doors opened again and on a cart such as they use to bring prisoners up from the dungeon came my great-hound, mine and Will's, chained at each leg and pushed by mild-faced servant named Inch, a broad-armed man who had once slipped me a sugar-twist on a fete day.

I started forward but Reilly's hand kept me where I was.

Justice trembled on the cart, eyes wide, shivering so bad he could barely stand, though he had four legs to my two. He looked wet and as Inch pushed him nearer I caught the stink of rock-oil, the kind they burn in servant's lamps. Inch reached into the cart and lifted an ugly lump hammer, a big one used for breaking coal into smaller pieces for the fire.

'Go,' Father said.

The look in Inch's mild eyes said he would prefer to stay, but he set the hammer on the floor and left without protest.

'There are lessons to be learned today,' Father said.

'Have you ever burned yourself, Jorg?' Father asked.

I had. I once picked up a poker that had been left with one end in the fire. The pain had taken my breath. I couldn't scream. Not until the blisters started to rise could I make any sound above hissing, and when I could I howled so loud my mother came running from her tower, arriving as the maids and nurse burst from the next room. My hand had burned for a week, weeping and oozing, sending bursts of horrific pain along my arm at the slightest wiggle of fingers. The skin fell away and the flesh beneath lay raw and wet, hurt by even a breath of air.

'You took from me, Jorg,' Father said. 'You stole what was mine.'

I knew enough not to say that it was Mother's.

'I've noticed that you love this dog,' Father said.

I wondered at that, even in my fear. I thought it more likely that he had been told.

'That's a weakness, Jorg,' Father said. 'Loving anything is a weakness. Loving a hound is stupidity.'

I said nothing.

'Shall I burn the dog?' Father reached for the nearest torch.

'No!' It burst from me, a horrified scream.

He sat back. 'See how weak this dog has made you?' He glanced at Sir

Reilly. 'How will he rule Ancrath if he cannot rule himself?'

'Don't burn him.' My voice trembled, pleading, but somehow it was a threat too, even if none of us recognized it.

'Perhaps there is another way?' Father said. 'A middle ground.' He looked at the hammer.

I didn't understand. I didn't want to.

'Break the dog's leg,' he said. 'One quick blow and Justice will be served.'

'No,' I swallowed, almost choking, 'I can't.'

Father shrugged and leaned from his throne, reaching for the torch again.

I remembered the pain that poker had seared into me. Horror reached for me and I knew I could let it take me, down into hysteria, crying, raging, and I could stay there until the deed was done. I could run and hide in tears and leave Justice to burn.

I picked up the hammer before Father's hand closed on the torch. It took effort just to lift it, heavy in too many ways. Justice just trembled and watched me, whining, his tail hooked between his legs, no understanding in him, only fear.

'Swing hard,' Father said. 'Or you'll just have to swing again.'

I looked at Justice's leg, his long quick leg, the fur plastered down with oil over bone and tendon, the iron shackle, some kind of vice from the Question Chamber, biting into his ankle, blood on the metal.

'I'm sorry, Father, I won't ever steal again.' And I meant it.

'Don't try my patience, boy.' I saw the coldness in his eyes and wondered if he had always hated me.

I lifted the hammer, my arms almost too weak, shaking almost as much as the dog. I raised it slowly, waiting, waiting for Father to say it, to say: 'Enough, you've proved yourself.'

The words never came. 'Break or burn,' he said. And with a scream I let the hammer swing.

Justice's leg broke with a loud snap. For a heartbeat there was no other sound. The limb looked wrong, upper and lower parts at sick-making angles, white bone in a slather of red blood and black fur. Then came the howling, the snarling fury, the straining at his bonds as he looked for something to fight, some battle to keep away the pain.

'One more, Jorg,' Father said. He spoke softly but I heard him above the howls. For the longest moment his words made no sense to me.

I said 'No,' but I didn't make him reach for the torch. If I made him reach



again he wouldn't draw back. I knew that much.

This time Justice understood the raising of the hammer. He whimpered, whined, begged as only dogs can beg. I swung hard and missed, blinded with tears. The cart rattled and Justice jumped and howled, bleeding from all his shackles now, the broken leg stretching with tendons exposed. I hit him on my second stroke and shattered his other foreleg.

Vomit took me by surprise, hot, sour, spurting from my mouth. I crawled in it, gagging and gasping. Almost not hearing Father's: 'One more.'

With his third leg smashed, Justice couldn't stand. He flopped, broken in the cart, stinking in his own mess. Strangely he didn't snarl or whine now. Instead as I lay wracked with sobs, heaving in the air in gulps, he nuzzled me as he used to nuzzle William when he cried with a grazed knee or thwarted ambition. That's how stupid dogs are, my brothers. And that's how stupid I was at six, letting weakness take hold of me, giving the world a lever with which to bend whatever iron lies in my soul.

'One more,' Father said. 'He has a leg left to stand on, does he not, Sir Reilly?'

And for once Sir Reilly would not answer his king.

'One more, Jorg.'

I looked at Justice, broken and licking the tears and snot from my hand. 'No.'

And with that Father took the torch and tossed it into the cart.

I rolled back from the sudden bloom of flame. Whatever my heart told me to do, my body remembered the lesson of the poker and would not let me stay. The howling from the cart made all that had gone before seem as nothing. I call it howling but it was screaming. Man, dog, horse. With enough hurt we all sound the same.

In that moment, rolling clear, even though I was six and my hands were unclever, I took the hammer that had seemed so heavy and threw it without effort, hard and straight. If my father had moved but a little more slowly I might be king of two lands now. Instead it touched his crown just enough to turn it a quarter circle, then hit the wall behind his chair and fell to the ground, leaving a shallow scar on the Builder-stone.

Father was right of course. There were lessons to be learned that night. The dog was a weakness and the Hundred War cannot be won by a man with such weaknesses. Nor can it be won by a man who yields to the lesser evil. Give an inch, give any single man any single inch and the next thing you hear will

be, 'One more, Jorg, one more.' And in the end what you love will burn. Father's lesson was a true one, but knowing that can't make me forgive the means by which he taught it.

For a time there on the road I followed Father's teaching: strength in all things, no quarter. On the road I had known with the utter conviction of a child that the Empire throne would be mine only if I kept true to the hard lessons of Justice and the thorns. Weakness is a contagion, one breath of it can corrupt a man whole and entire. Now though, even with all the evil in me, I don't know if I could teach such lessons to a son of mine.

William never needed such teaching. He had iron in him from the start, always the more clever, the more sure, the fiercest of us, despite my two extra years. He said I should have thrown the hammer as soon as I lifted it, and should not have missed. I would be king then, and we would still have our dog.

Two days later I stole away from both nurse and guard and found my way to the rubbish pits behind the table-knights' stable. A north wind carried the last of winter, laced with rain that was almost ice. I found my dog's remains, a reeking mess, black, dripping, limp but heavy. I had to drag him, but I had told William I would bury him not leave him to rot on the pile. I dragged him two miles in the freezing rain, along the Roma Road, empty save for a merchant with his wagon lashed closed and his head down. I took Justice to the girl with the dog, and I buried him there beside her, in the mud, my hands numb and the rest of me wishing I were numb.

'Hello, Jorg,' Katherine said. And then nothing.

*Nothing?* If I could remember all that. If I could remember that dark path to the cemetery of Perechaise, and live with it these many years ... what in hell lay in that box, and how could I ever want it back?

*Many men do not look their part. Wisdom may wait behind a foolish smile, bravery can gaze from eyes that cry fright. Brother Rike however is that rarest of creatures, a man whose face tells the whole story. Blunt features beneath a heavy brow, the ugly puckering of old scar tissue, small black eyes that watch the world with impersonal malice, dark hair, short and thick with dirt, bristling across the thickest of skulls. And had God given him a smaller frame in place of a giant's packed with unreasonable helpings of muscle, weakness in place of an ox team's stamina, still Rike would be the meanest dwarf in Christendom.*



## Wedding Day

Mountains are a great leveller. They don't care who you are or how many.

Some have it that the Builders made the Matteracks, drinking the red blood of the earth to steal its power, and that the peaks were thrown up when the rocks themselves revolted and shrugged the Builders off. Gomst tells it that the Lord God set the mountains here, ripples in the wet clay as he formed the world with both hands. Whoever it was that did the work, they have my thanks. It's the Matteracks that put the 'high' into the Renar Highlands. They march on east to west, wrinkling the map through other kingdoms, but it's in the Highlands that they do their best work. Here it's the Matteracks that say where you can and can't go.

It's been said once or twice that I have a stubborn streak. In any case I have never subscribed to the idea that a king can be told where he can't go in his own kingdom. And so in the years since arriving as a callow youth, in between learning the sword song, mastering the art of shaving, and dispensing justice with a sharp edge, I took to mountain climbing.

Climbing, it turned out, was as new to the people of the Highlands as it was to me. They knew all about getting up to places they needed to be. High pastures for the wool-goats, the summer passes for trade, the Eiger cliff for hunting opals. But about getting to places they didn't need to go ... well who has time for that when their belly grumbles or there's money to be made?

'What in hell are you doing, Jorg?' Coddin asked me once when I came back bloody, with my wrist grinding bone at every move.

'You should come out with me,' I told him, just to see him wince. I climb alone. In truth there's never room for two on a mountaintop.

'I'll rephrase,' said Coddin. I could see the grey starting in his hair. Threads of it at his temples. 'Why are you doing it?'

I pursed my lips at that, then grinned at the answer. 'The mountains told me I couldn't.'

'You're familiar with King Canute?' he asked. 'It's not a path I advise for you – since you pay me for advising these days.'

‘Heh.’ I wondered if Katherine would climb mountains. I thought she would, given half a chance. ‘I’ve seen the sea, Coddin. The sea can eat mountains whole. I might have the occasional difference of opinion with the odd mountain or two, but if you catch me challenging the ocean you have my permission to drop an ox on me.’

I told Coddin that stubbornness led me to climb, and perhaps it did, but there’s more to it. Mountains have no memory, no judgments to offer. There’s a purity in the struggle to reach a peak. You leave your world behind and take only what you need. For a creature like me there is nothing closer to redemption.

‘Attack,’ Miana had said, and surely a man shouldn’t refuse his wife on their wedding day. Of course it helped that I had planned to attack all along. I led the way myself, for the sally ports and the tunnels that lead to them are known to few. Or rather many know of them but, like an honest priest, few would be able to show you one.

We walked four abreast, the tallest men hunched to save scraping their heads on rough-hewn stone. Every tenth man held a pitch torch and at the back of our column they almost choked on the smoke. My own torch showed little more than the ten yards of tunnel ahead, twisting to take advantage of natural voids and fissures. The *tramp tramp* of many feet, at first hypnotic, faded to background noise, unnoticed until without warning it stopped. I turned and flames showed nothing but my swinging shadow. Not a man of my command, not a whisper of them.

‘What is it that you think you’re doing here, Jorg?’ The dream-witch’s words flowed around me, a river of soft cadence, carrying only hints of his Saracen heritage. ‘I watch you from one moment to the next. Your plans are known before you so much as unfold them.’

‘Then you’ll know what it is I think I’m doing here, Sageous.’ I cast about for a sign of him.

‘You know we joke about you, Jorg?’ Sageous asked. ‘The pawn who thinks he’s playing his own game. Even Ferrakind laughs about it behind the fire, and Kelem, still preserved in his salt mines. Lady Blue has you on her sapphire board, Skilfar sees your future patterned on the ice, at the Mathema they factor you into their equations, a small term approximated to nothing. In the shadows behind thrones you count for little, Jorg, they laugh at how you serve me and know it not. The Silent Sister only smiles when your name is

spoken.'

'I'm pleased to be of some service then.' To my left the shadows on the wall moved with reluctance, slow to respond to the swing of my torch. I stepped forward and thrust the flames into the darkest spot, scraping embers over the stone.

'This is your last day, Jorg.' Sageous hissed as flame ate shadow and darkness peeled from stone like layers of skin. It pleased me no end to hear his pain. 'I'll watch you die.' And he was gone.

Makin nearly walked into me from behind. 'Problem?'

I shook the off the daydream's tatters and picked up my pace. 'No problems.' Sageous liked to pull the strings so gently that a man would never suspect himself steered. To make Sageous angry, to make him hate, only eroded the subtle powers he used. My first victory of the day. And if he felt the need to taunt me then I must have worried him somehow. He must think I had some kind of chance – which made him a hell of a lot more optimistic than I was.

'No problems. In fact the morning is just starting to look up!'

Another fifty yards and a stair took us onto the slopes via a crawl space beneath a vast rock known as Old Bill.

When you leave the Haunt you are immediately among mountains. They dwarf you in a way that high walls and tall towers cannot. In the midst of the heave and thrust of the Matteracks all of us, the Haunt itself, even the Prince of Arrow's twenty thousands, were as nothing. Ants fighting on the carcass of an elephant.

Out on those slopes in the coldness of the wind, with the mountains high and silent on all sides, it felt good to be alive, and if it had to be, it was a good day to die.

'Have Marten take his troops and hold the Runyard for me,' I said.

'The Runyard?' Makin said, wrapping his cloak tight against the wind. 'You want our best captain to secure a dead end valley?'

'We need those men, Jorg,' Coddin said, straightening from his crawl. 'We can't spare ten soldiers, let alone a hundred of our best.' Even as he argued he beckoned a man to carry my orders.

'You don't think he can hold it?' I asked.

And that set Makin running in a new direction. 'Hold it? He'd hold the gates of heaven for you, that man; or hell. Lord knows why.'

I shrugged. Marten would hold because I'd given him what he called salvation. A second chance to stand, to protect his family. For four years he had studied nothing but war, from arrow to army, the four years since he came to the castle with Sara at his side. In the end he would hold because years ago in the ruins of his farm I had given his little girl a wind-up clown and Makin's clove-spice. A Builder toy to make her smile and the clove-spice to take her pain, and her life. The drug stole her away rather than the waste, and she died smiling at sweet dreams instead of choking on her own blood.

'Why the Runyard?' Coddin wanted to know. Coddin couldn't be put off the scent so easily.

'The Prince of Arrow doesn't have assassins in my castle, Coddin, but he has spies. I tell you what you need to know, what will make a difference to your actions. The rest, the long shots, the hunches, it's safe to keep locked away.' I tapped the side of my head. For a moment though the copper box burned against my hip and its thorn pattern filled my vision.

'I'd be happier on a horse,' Makin said.

'I'd be happier on a giant mountain goat,' I said. 'One that shat diamonds. Until we find some, we're walking.'

Three hundred men walked behind us. Armies are wont to march, but marching in the Highlands is a short trip to a broken ankle. Three hundred men of the Watch in mountain grey. Exiting the sally port amid the boulder field west of the Haunt where the tunnel rose through the bedrock. No crimson tabards here, or gold braiding, no rampant lions or displayed dragons or crowned feckin' frogs, just tatter-ropes in rock shades. I hadn't come out for a uniform competition. I came out to win.

Behind us rockets took flight, lacing the dull morning with trails of sparks, and leaving a loose pall of sulphurous smoke above the castle. Wedding celebrations to amuse the Highlanders, but also a convenient draw for the eyes to the north of us, the uninvited guests.

The Prince's army had started to move, units massed in their attack formations, Normardy pike-men to the fore, rank upon rank of archers on the far side, men of Belpa with their longbows near tall as them, crossbow units out of Ken, beards braided, brown pennants fluttering above the drummers, each man with a shield boy hurrying before him. The archers stood ready to peel off and find their places on the ridges to our east, the useless Orlanth cavalry at the rear. Their day would come later, after wintering in the ruins of my home, after the high passes cleared and the Prince moved on to increase



his tally of fallen kingdoms. The Thurtans next no doubt. And on to Germania and the dozen Teuton realms.

We came down the slopes west of the Haunt in a grey wave, swords, daggers, shortbows. I'd spent most of dear uncle's gold on those bows. The men of the Forest Watch knew the shortbow, and the Highland recruits learned it fast enough. Three hundred recurved composite shortbows, Scythian made. Ten gold apiece. I could have sat every man on a half-decent nag for that.

The Prince's scouts saw us. That had never been in doubt. A sharp-eyed observer on their front lines might have seen us across the mile or so that remained. But why would they be looking? They had scouts.

I picked up the pace. There's nothing like mountains for making you fit to run. At first when you come to the mountains everything is hard. Even the air feels too thin to breathe. Years pass and your muscles become iron. Especially if you climb.

We moved quickly. Speed on the slopes is an art. The Prince of Arrow wasn't stupid. The commanders he had picked had chosen officers who had selected scouts who knew mountains. They moved fast, but the few men that fell didn't get up again before we caught them.

It's always nice to surprise someone. The Prince of Arrow hadn't expected me to charge his tens of thousands with my three hundred. That's probably why we were able to arrive only seconds behind the first word of our advance, and long before that word could be acted on.

Three hundred is a magic number. King Leonidas held back a Persian ocean at the Hot Gates with just three hundred. I would have liked to meet the Spartans. That story has outlived empires by the score. King Leonidas held back an ocean, and Canute did not.

I could feel the burn in my legs, the cool breath hauled in and the hot breath out. Sweat inside my armour, a river of it under the breastplate. Hard leathers these, cured and boiled in oil, padded linen underneath, no plate or chain today. Today we needed to move.

When I gave the shout, we stopped on the rock field, scattered on the slope, two hundred yards from their lines, no more, close enough to smell them. On this flank, far from the archers bound for the ridge, men of Arrow formed the largest contingent, units of spearmen in light ringmail, swordsmen in heavier chain, among them the landed knights who had levied the soldiers from farm and village or emptied their castle guard in service of their prince.

And all of them, at least the ones we could see before the roll of the mountains hid the vast expanse of their advance, marched without haste, confident, some joking, watching the sparks and smoke above the Haunt. The great siege engines creaked amongst them, drawn by many mules.

I didn't need to tell the Watch. They started to loose their shafts immediately. The first screams carried the message of our attack far more effectively than scouts still hunting for their breath.

Aiming at the thickest knots of men made it hard not to find flesh.

We managed a second volley before the first of the enemy started to charge. The Prince's archers, massed on the far side of the army column a quarter mile off and more, could make no reply. *Know thyself*, Pythagoras said. But he was a man of numbers and you can't count on those. Sun Tzu tells us: *Know thy enemies*. I had lost men I could ill afford patrolling these slopes, but I knew my enemy and I knew the disposition of his forces.

The Prince's archers would have found us hard targets in any case, loose amongst the rocks and the long morning shadows.

Another volley and another. Hundreds killed or wounded with each flight. Wounded is good. Sometimes wounded is better than dead. The wounded cause trouble. If you let them.

The foot-soldiers came at us in ones and twos, then handfuls, and behind that a flood, like a wave breaking and racing across sand.

'Pick your targets,' I shouted.

Another volley. A single man amongst the forerunners fell, skewered through his thigh.

'Dammit! Pick your targets.'

Another volley and none of the runners fell. The dying happened back in the masses still milling in confusion, caught in the press of bodies. One of mine for every twenty of theirs. Stiff odds. If we'd managed ten volleys before they reached us we might have slain three thousand men. We managed six.



## Wedding Day

‘Be ready to run,’ I shouted.

‘That’s your plan, Jorg?’ Makin’s face could take surprise to a whole new level. Something in the eyebrows did it.

‘Be ready,’ I repeated. In truth if I had a plan I held no more than a thread of it, teasing it out inch by inch. And the thread I held told me, *Be ready to run*. Sun Tzu instructs: *If in all respects your foe exceeds you, be ready to elude him*.

‘If that were the fucking plan,’ said Makin, shouldering his bow, ‘we should have started two weeks ago.’

The first of Arrow’s soldiers reached me, purple-faced from the race up the mountain.

Katherine Ap Scorrion fills my nights. More than is healthy. And all of those dreams are dark. Chella walks in some of them, stepping direct from the necromancers’ halls beneath Mount Honas, wicked and delicious. Her smile says she knows me to my rotten core, and Katherine’s face will writhe across hers as firm flesh turns to corrupt undulation.

The dead child will wander in and out of many dreams, holding the thorn-patterned box in crimson hands. He takes different names. William most often, though he is not the brother I knew. But he follows Katherine whenever I call her to my bed; fresh killed in some, the blood still running, and in others grey with rot.

The telling of dreams is a dull business, but experiencing a stranger’s dreams at first hand may be another matter. Crafting nightmares as weapons or shackles and setting them loose to hunt your victims could very well be entertaining. It seems to keep a certain dream-witch busy.

My father thought Sageous to be his creature. Perhaps he thinks he sent the witch away after I broke his power in the Tall Castle, and maybe the Prince of Arrow now thinks he owns Sageous’s services. Like Corion, though, and the Silent Sister and others scattered across the empire, Sageous sees himself

as a player behind the thrones, pushing kings and counts, earls and princes across the board. I have never liked to be pushed. The Prince of Arrow also struck me as a man who would prove hard for the dream-witch to move, but we will see.

Sageous learned twice over not to send his creatures out to snare me in my sleep. I think each failure takes something vital from him. Certainly he did not persist. The child is not his creation. I would know if it were.

The heathen watches though. He stands on the edge of my dreaming, silent, hoping not to be seen. I have chased him to the edge of waking and fallen from my bed choking the pillow. Once my sleeping hand found a dagger. Feathers everywhere. He seeks to steer me with the most gentle of prods. Even a soft touch, if it is made sufficiently far ahead of the crucial event, can have a great impact. Sageous seeks to steer me, to steer us all, his fingers swift and light as spiders, pulling delicate threads, until the power he wants is delivered into his lap as if by accident.

Tutor Lundist said Sun Tzu should be my guide in war. My father may have executed Lundist a week after I fled the Tall Castle but what the tutor taught will stay with me longer than any lesson Olidan Ancrath inflicted on his son.

*All war is deception*, Sun Tzu tells me on pages yellow as jaundice, dry as sand. All war is deception but where are my chances to deceive? I have spies in my halls, watchers in my dreams. The grave's a fine and private place they say, but I suspect even there secrets can be hard to hold in these broken days.

And so I use what I have. A copper box that holds memories. One that stores a memory so terrible I couldn't keep it in me. I have the box and I use it. Long ago I learned that pressed to the forehead, hard enough to leave its thorn print marked upon the skin, it will steal a memory, a thought, a plan, whatever is foremost in your thinking. The plan is lost but safe from Sageous' kind, and all that remains is the recollection that you had a good idea, and the memory of where to find it again when needed.

Hold the box tight in your hand and you can feel the dark edges of horror inside, cutting, burning. The pain leaks out, robbed of its context, raw and cold, and with it, if you're clever, if the fingers of your mind are deft, you can draw the thread of a previously stored stratagem from a place beyond all spies. And if you can surprise your enemy, then surprising yourself is small price to pay.



## Wedding Day

The first man I killed in my eighteenth year had done most of the job for me. Running two hundred yards up a steep and rocky slope in chain armour is hard work. The soldier looked about ready to keel over, like the old woman in the market who never got up after seeing Gorgoth for the first and last time. I let him run onto my sword and that was the end of it.

The next man went pretty much the same way, only I had to be a little faster and thrust at him rather than just let him impale himself. In battle the thrust is a much cleaner death than the cut. Unless of course it's the guts where you get it and then you're going to have a long hard time of it before the rot sets in and carries you off screaming days later.

The third man, tall and bearded, took the two bodies at my feet as a hint and slowed down to face me. He should have waited for his friends behind him on the slope, but instead he came in swinging his broadsword, still huffing and puffing from his run. I stepped back to avoid the sweep of his blade then swung my own and took his throat. He turned, spraying arterial blood over the friends he should have waited for, then tripped and fell amongst the rocks. Until you've seen it you won't believe how far blood will spurt from the right cut. It's a wonder we don't feel that pressure inside us all the time, a wonder that we don't just explode sometimes.

I should have turned and run at that point. It was the plan after all. My plan. And the men of the Watch were already in full retreat behind me. Instead I advanced, moving quickly between the two blood-spattered soldiers who leapt out of Beardy's way as he fell. I made a figure-eight cut, lashing out from one side to the other, and both of them fell, their mail torn, a shattered collarbone on the right, sliced chest muscle on the left. It shouldn't have taken them both down, but it did, and I felt that four years' hard practice with the blade hadn't been entirely wasted.

Both men were flopping on the ground, calling out about their wounds, as I cut the sixth down, another staggerer, exhausted from his charge. That done, I turned and fled, outpacing the pursuit and working hard to catch the Watch.

The men of Arrow were never going to outrun us, but they could hardly stop the chase and let us come back to practise our archery again, so they kept at it. The captains driving them were making the right choices given what they had to work with. What they should have done, however, was to withdraw to the main force and rely on their commander's battle sense to deploy his archers as a defence against us. Though perhaps the Prince of Arrow was happy enough sending a few thousand soldiers up the mountain to contain the threat and to keep his army focused on the Haunt.

I caught Makin up a few minutes later, threading my path past Watch men with less go in their legs than I had that day. Watch-master Hobbs ran with him, his captains beside him, Harold, Stodd, and old Keppen who'd made the wise choice and refused to jump for a previous watch-master back at Rulow Falls years ago. I say the Watch-master ran but by that point 'brisk walk' would cover it.

'Set four squads on those ridges,' I said. 'Let's shoot a few more Arrows.'

'And when the enemy reaches them?' Hobbs asked.

'Time to run again,' I said.

'At least they'll get a rest,' Keppen said, and spat a wad of phlegm on the rock.

'You'll get one too, old man.' I grinned. 'It's your squads I'm thinking should stay.'

'I should have jumped,' he muttered. He shook his head and raised his shortbow high, its red marker ribbon snapping in the wind. His men started to converge behind him as he jogged off toward the ridges.

'Running's all very well,' Hobbs said, striding on, 'but we'll run out of mountain in the end, or be chased out of the Highlands entirely.'

'Which sounds like—' Makin heaved in a breath '—the best option when all's said and done.' Of all of them he looked the worst off. Too many years letting a horse do the running. He clambered up a large boulder and stood on top looking back down the valley. 'Must be three thousand of the bastards after us. Maybe four.'

'Likes to keep the odds in his favour does the Prince,' Hobbs said. He scratched his head where the grey grew thickest and the hair thinned. 'I hope you've got a hell of a plan, King Jorg.'

I hoped so too. If not for Norwood and Gelleth these Watch men would have fled an age ago. How quickly fact turns into fiction, and strangely when fact becomes legend, folk seem more ready to believe it. And maybe they



were right to have faith, for I did reduce the Lord of Gelleth, his mighty castle, and his armies all to dust. Maybe they were right and I was wrong, but I found it hard to believe in whatever tricks I might have stowed in a small copper box.

Believer or not, the box was all I had. So I pressed it to my forehead, hard, as if I could push the memory I needed through the bone. The feeling is like that misremembered name appearing without preamble on your tongue, ready to be spoken, after so long dancing beyond reach on its tip. Except that instead of one word, there are many, images with them, and touches and tastes. A piece of your life returned to you.

The memory flooded me, taking me from the cold slopes, back across years. Gone the crowded Watch men, gone the shouting and the screams.

I lunged for the next hold, throwing my body after my arm and hand, loosing the last hold before my fingers had found a grip on the next, before I lost momentum. Climbing is a form of faith, there's no holding back, no reserve. My fingers jammed into the crack, the sharp edge biting, toes scrabbling on rough rock, the soft leather finding traction as I started to slip.

There's a spire of stone in the Matteracks that points at the sky as though it were God's own index finger. How it came to be, who carved it from the fastness of the mountains, I can't say. One book I own speaks of wind and rivers and ice sculpting the world in the misty long ago, but that sounds like a story for children, and a dull one at that. Better to talk of wind demons, river gods, and ice giants out of Jotenheim. It's a more interesting tale and just as likely.

Arm aching, leg straining, curved in an awkward pose across the fractured stone, I gasped for air, stealing a cold lungful from the wind. They say don't look down, but I like to. I like to see the loose pieces fall away and become lost in the distance. My muscles burned, the heat stolen by the wind. It felt as though I were trapped between ice and fire.

The spire stands clear of a vast spur where one of the mountains' roots divides two deep valleys. From the scree slopes at the spire's base to the flat top of it where a small cottage might squeeze, there are four hundred feet of shattered rock, vertical in the main, in places leaning out.

A hundred feet below I could see the ledge where had I met the goat. The heights a mountain goat will scale for the possibility of a green mouthful never cease to amaze me. They must use their own kind of magic to climb

without the cleverness of fingers or toes. I'd pulled myself up and come eyeball to eyeball with the beast, its long face framed by two curling horns. There's something alien in a goat's eye, something not seen in dog or horse or bird. It's the rectangular pupil. As if they've climbed out of hell or fallen from the moon. We sat together in mutual distrust while I caught my breath and waited for life to find its way back into limbs and extremities.

I found the rock pillar in my first year as King of Renar and in all my time on the throne it was perhaps that spare needle of mountain that came closest to killing me. I failed to climb it seven times, and I am not a man who gives up any attempt easily.

Coddin once asked me why I climb and I spun him some pretty lies. The truth – at least for today – is that back when I hadn't many years on me, my mother would play for William and me on an instrument from the vaults of the tall castle. A piano. A thing of magic and many keys in black and white. We were trouble, Will and I, it has to be said. Fighting, scheming, digging out mischief of any kind that might be had – but when she played we fell silent and just listened. I remember every moment, her long fingers moving on the keys so fast they blurred together, the sway of her body, her hair hanging in a single long plait between her shoulders, the light falling across the wooden body of the instrument. But I can't hear it. She plays behind glass, walled behind too many years, lost when I walked away from it all, from her, from that damn carriage and the thorns.

I see, but I can't hear.

When I climb, and only then, on the very edge of everything, I catch stray notes. Like words robbed of meaning on the cusp of hearing ... the music almost reaches me. And for that I would dare any height.

I made an eighth assault on the Spire at the start of the summer in which the Prince of Arrow crossed my borders with his armies new laden with loot from conquests in Normardy and Orlanth. Loot and, it must be said, recruits, for the lords of those lands were not well loved and the Prince won the people's hearts almost before their dead were boxed and buried.

Climbing is about commitment. On the Spire there are places so sheer that one hold must be wholly relinquished before the next can be obtained, and sometimes then only by hurling yourself up an open expanse of rock that offers no purchase. In such moments you are falling, albeit upwards, and if the next hold escapes you then that fall will carry you to the ground. There are no half measures in such ascents: you place everything you are or will be

on each decision. Lives can be lived in this manner, but I do not recommend it. In the end though, everybody dies, but not everybody lives – the climber, though he may die young, will have lived.

There comes a point on a long climb when you know you have to surrender or die. There's no quarter given. I hung to cold stone fifty feet beneath the summit, weak as a child, aching with hunger, blistered hands and feet, arms screaming. The art of survival in the mountains is knowing when to give up. The art of reaching the top is knowing when not to.

'If I die here,' I whispered to the stone. 'If I fall and die, I will count it a life lived, maybe not well, but fully. No book will know my end, but I will have died in battle none the less.' And summoning my strength I started to climb again.

Like the Scots king and his famous spider, my eighth attempt proved the charm.

Retching, slobbering on the rock, I crawled over the final corner, horizontal at long last. I lay trembling, gasping, half sobbing, as close to the end of my endurance as I had ever come.

When you're climbing you take nothing with you that you do not absolutely need. That's a good discipline to acquire, and the mountains teach it to you for free. They say that time is a great teacher but unfortunately it kills all its pupils. The mountains are also great teachers and better still, they let the occasional star pupil live.

The mountains teach you to be prepared for change. Amongst the peaks the weather can shift from fair to foul quick as blinking. One moment you might be clambering up a forgiving slope and the next you could be clinging to it as though it were your mother, whilst an east wind tries to carry your frozen corpse off with it.

Climbing God's Finger I learned a lot about holding on by my fingertips. By the time I finally hauled myself weak and trembling onto the very top of the spire, I had come to realize that I've been holding on by my fingertips my entire life.

I flopped to my back. I lay there on the rock with nothing to see between me and a relentless blue sky. I had climbed light, taking nothing unneeded with me, no room on that narrow peak for anyone else, ghosts or otherwise, no Katherine, no William, my mother and father four hundred feet below, too far away to hear. Not even the shadow of a child on the rock or the glimmer of a copper box in memory. It isn't the danger or the challenge that keeps me

climbing, it's the purity and focus. When you're a five-second drop from being a smear of guts and pulverized bone, when your whole weight is on eight fingers, then seven, then five, your choices are black and white, made on instinct without baggage.

When you climb hard and reach an impossible peak or ledge, you gain a new perspective, you see the world differently. It's not just the angle you're looking from that changes. You change too. They say you can't go back, and I learned that when I returned to the Tall Castle after four years on the road. I walked the same halls, saw the same people, but I hadn't gone back, I'd come to a new castle, seen with new eyes. The same is true if you climb high enough, only with climbing you don't need to stay away for years. Climb a mountain, see the world from its highest point, and a new man will climb down to a world of subtle differences the next day.

Metaphysics aside, there is plenty to be seen from a high point in the mountains. If you sit with your legs dangling over the biggest drop in the world, with the wind streaming your hair behind you, and your shadow falling so far it might never hit the ground ... you notice new things.

On the road we have our sayings. 'Pax,' we say if we're caught with our hands in another man's saddlebags. 'Visiting the locals,' we say when a brother is off about dark business after a battle. Where's Brother Rike? Visiting the locals. In the Renar Highlands there's a saying that I didn't hear until I struggled up to the village of Gutting with Sir Makin in tow. 'E was taking a rock for a walk, yer worship.' At the time I paid it no attention, a bit of local colour, a streak of green in the manure. I heard the expression a few more times in the years that followed, generally when somebody was off on mysterious business. Taking a rock for a walk. Once you've noticed a phrase or word it starts to crop up everywhere. 'Lost his flock,' was another one. I'd hear these things on the parade ground in main, from the local recruits. 'That John of Bryn had my bowstrings while I was on wall watch.' 'What you gonna do about that?' 'Don't you worry none, already happened. Lost his flock he did.'

Up in a high place, especially one hard-reached, you gain a fresh perspective. Looking out over the peaks and cliffs and slopes I'd come to know, I noticed something new. The shadows gave it away, leading the eye here and there to places where the land didn't lie quite right. It took a time of empty watching, of idle legs dangling, and thought-stuff swirling behind my eyes before, like the snow in the globe, everything settled and I saw clear, the

same scene but with new detail.

High on the sides of almost every valley, of all but the highest gorges, the loose rocks gathered too thickly, perched too precariously. At first the eye buys into the deception. It has to be natural. To move that much stone would take a thousand lifetimes, and to what end?

Taking a rock for a walk turns out to be a genuine national pastime in the Highlands, so deep grained, so known, that nobody seems to feel the need to say more. For generations the men going up to tend their goats have filled any idle moment with the business of carrying loose stones from one part of the slope to another higher part, slowly building up the same piles that their father and grandfather built upon.

If a Renar man takes the ultimate liberty and decides to graze his goats on another man's land, chances are that there'll be a sudden rockslide and the man will have lost his flock. If it weren't a Renar man then he might lose even more than that.

It's hard to tease out a thread when you're running, especially when that thread is a plan and you're teasing it from a memory box, and you're running uphill with thousands of soldiers in pursuit. But even our enemies call the Ancraths cunning, and I call us clever. So I pulled a little more and all of a sudden I saw the slopes we were running up with a whole new perspective. Or rather, an older one that I had forgotten.

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*October 25th, Year 98 Interregnum*

Ancrath. The Tall Castle. In my rooms again. I'm always in my rooms. *I had that dream again. The one with Jorg. I have the knife as always, twelve inches and thin as a finger. He's standing there with his arms open and he's laughing at me. Laughing. I'm standing there in my torn dress with the knife and him laughing, and I thrust it into him, like he thrust ... and I stab it into him. And old Hanna watches and she smiles. But her smile isn't right and when Jorg falls there are bruises on him too. On his neck. Long dark bruises. And I can almost see the fingers and the thumb print.*

*I'm running this torn satin through my fingers and it's me that feels torn. My memories fight my dreams. Every single day. And I don't know who is winning and who is losing. I don't remember.*

*November 7th, Year 98 Interregnum*

Ancrath. The Tall Castle. Bell-tower – keep-top. *I've found a place to be alone, the tallest point on the Tall Castle, just me and the crows and the wind. The tower holds only one bell, huge and made of iron. They never ring it. At least now it's serving a purpose by sheltering me from the wind.*

*I find myself wanting to be alone. All the ladies grate on me, even the ones that mean well. There's no peace in the castle – only the feeling that something is wrong, something I can't name or touch.*

*I found initials up here, H.J.A, you can see them out on the far side of the tower where it leans over the outer wall of the keep. I can see no way to reach the spot. It says something about Honourous Jorg Ancrath that even his name is out of reach.*

*Sageous came to my chamber today. Just to the door. The Prince of Arrow has come again. The Prince and his brother, Orrin and Egan. Sareth said they would come back. She said they would come back to sniff around me again. That's just how she said it. As if they were dogs and I was a bitch in heat.*

*I don't think I am. In heat that is. I can be a bitch. I can be a bitch every day. I made Maery Coddin cry today and I hardly meant to.*

*Even so, there's something about Orrin and something else about Egan.*

*Grandmother would say they both burn too bright. Too bright for regular folks, she'd say. But I've never counted myself regular. And if they do burn bright – if they do put heat in me – or me in heat – what of it? I fancy I put some heat in them. Or why would they both be back at the Tall Castle a moon after their first visit? I don't think it's for the pleasure of King Olidan's company. I don't think Orrin's charm or Egan's threat had much impact on that scary old man. I don't think the devil would make Olidan pause. I don't think he'd bow his head even if God himself sent an angel to his doors.*

*Sareth says both the Arrows are pointed my way. She has a dirty mouth. She says they'll both ask for my hand. Even though I'm not Scorrion's first daughter and Father promised alliance and land to Olidan already. She says they'll both ask for my hand but it's not my hand they're interested in, or my dowry. She said more, but her mouth is dirtier than my quill, black with ink though it is. And if they did ask, what would I say? It hardly seems that they can be brothers, one as bright and good as my Sir Galen, the other as dark and tempting as Jorg who killed him.*

*I dreamed again last night. I woke up speaking the words of that dream and now I can't even remember the shape of it. I can remember a knife, a long knife. I know I need to use it. I remember Jorg hurt me. I should go back and read my journal, but somehow my hands don't want to turn the pages back, only forward. I had a dream about that too.*

*Sageous is at the door again. The princes are waiting.  
I don't like that man's eyes.*

*Gorgoth is like no other. There is no mould for the leucrota. Twisted by the Builders' poisons they fall broken from the womb and follow strange paths as they grow. The ribs that pierce his flesh and reach from each side are black and thick, his hide more red than blood, and the muscle beneath surges as he moves. And though he is shaped for war and for horror, there are few men in Adam's image whose approval would mean as much to me – and most of them lie dead.*



*Four years earlier*

A day after we left the sands of Thar and started to ride through the Thurtan grasslands I took the box from Makin. I felt the sharp edges of the lost memory through the copper walls and sensed the poison held there. Makin once told me that a man who's got no fear is missing a friend. With the thorn-patterned copper clutched uneasy in my fist I thought perhaps I had found that friend at last. I turned it one way, then the other. It held nothing good – only me. And a man should be a little scared of himself surely? Of what he might do. To know thyself must be terribly dull. I put the box at the bottom of my saddlebag and left it unopened. I didn't ask after Katherine. I took a new knife from Grumlow and rode toward our business in Heimrift.

We rode north across wide acres where the wind whipped the spring grass into a thrashing sea and green ripples raced one after the other. A land made for horse, for galloping, for chasing between the dark borders of one forest and the next. I let Brath have his head and exhausted both of us as if all hell were at our heels. The Brothers kept pace as best they could, all of us wanting to leave Thar many miles behind. Old fires still burned there, unseen. In a thousand years Mount Honas, the place where I lit a Builders' Sun, might be like Thar, a Promised Land that would return to man in time but for the now loved us not.

That night as we settled to sleep I saw the baby for the first time, lying dead in the long grass by our camp. I threw off my blanket and walked across to it, watched by Gorgoth, and by Gog who slept beside him now. The spot where the child had lain was empty. I caught a whiff of perfume, white musk maybe. With a shrug I returned to my bed. Some things are best forgotten.

We travelled the next day and the next along the banks of the River Rhyme that flows between Thurtan and its neighbours to the east. The Rhyme lands were once the Empire's garden, farmed with exquisite care. Push a nation's

borders back and forth across a garden a dozen times and all that's left is mud and ruin.

At one point we rode through a field of old-stones, hundreds upon hundreds in marching lines, single blocks a little taller than a man, a little wider, all set on end, lichen covered, knee-deep grass swaying around them. Ancient before the Builders came, ancient before the Greeks, Lundist told me. An uncomfortable power throbbed between the monoliths and I led the Brothers faster than was prudent to clear the field.

On the fourth day a soft rain wrapped us and fell without pause from dawn till dusk. I rode for a while beside Maical, rolling gently in the grey's saddle. He always rode as if he were at sea, did Maical, slumping forward, rolling back, not an ounce of grace in him.

'Do you like dogs, Maical?' I asked him.

'Beef's better,' he said, 'or mutton.'

I set a grin on my face. 'Well, that's a new perspective. I thought you might like them on account of their stupidity.' Why I was baiting Maical I had no idea. Part of me even liked Maical, almost.

I remembered a time when I came back to camp having scouted out the town of Mabberton down on the soft edge of the Ken Marshes. I'd come up from the bog path, with Gerrod picking his way through the tufts and cotton-grass. At first I thought the shrieking was a village girl foolish enough to get snagged by the Brothers, but it turned out just to be two of the lads bent over a tied dog, poking it with something sharp to get a song out of it.

I had slipped off Gerrod and grabbed them by the hair, one black handful, one red, and hauled back, throwing my weight into the motion. Both took to shouting and one even reached for me in his anger. I sliced his palm open for him nice and quick.

'You shouldn't a-done that, Brother Jorg,' Gemt said, cradling his cut hand with the blood dripping free and fast. 'You shouldn't ah.'

'No?' I had asked, as the Brothers started to gather around us. 'And where have I been, Brother Gemt, whilst you hone your battle skills on this useless mutt?'

Jobe stood beside Gemt, rubbing at the spot I'd yanked his hair from. I looked pointedly at the dog and he knelt to cut it free.

'You been watching on that town,' Gemt said, his face a hot red now.

'I've been scouting that town, Mabberton, yes,' I said. 'So we could come at it with what your idiot brother has been known to call the elephant of

surprise. And all I told you lot to do was lie low.'

Gemt had spat and used his left hand to hold closed the cut on his right.

'Lie low, I said, not wake the whole fecking marsh from tadpole to toad with a howling fecking dog. Besides,' I'd said, making a slow turn to see the whole of my little band, 'everyone knows that tormenting a dumb dog is bad luck. You'd all know that if you weren't too damn stupid to read.'

Makin had been one of the first to join the show and a big grin he had on him. 'I know my letters,' he said, surprising not a few of the Brothers. 'So which book is it that says that then, Brother Jorg?'

'The big book of Go Fuck Yourself,' I told him.

'So hurting dogs is bad luck now is it?' Still with that grin on him.

'It is near me,' I had said.

Blinking now, I found the rain still rolling down my face on our long trek beside the Rhyme. I shook off the memory. 'Do you recall that dog your brother found before we hit Mabberton, Brother Maical?' I asked. He wouldn't of course. Maical recalled very little about anything.

He looked at me, lips pursed, spitting out the rain. 'Putting the hurt on dogs is bad luck,' he said.

'It was for your brother,' I said. 'Had himself an accident the next day.'

Maical frowned, confused, and made a slow nod. 'Everyone knows not to put the hurt on your food,' he said. 'It sours the meat.'

'Another new perspective, Brother Maical,' I sighed. 'I knew I kept you around for a reason.'

That dog came back the next morning, just before we hit Mabberton, as if I was its friend or something. Wouldn't leave until I gave it a good kicking, a free lesson in how the world works, if you like.

Maical just offered a vacant smile and kept on riding.

Heimrift lies in the dukedom of Maladon, a land where the hungry seas washed up what little of the Danelands they couldn't swallow. From the Renar Highlands it's a fair old trek by any standards, and given the tortuous routes we had to take it would be a journey of weeks. On the road you fall into routine. Mine involved a hard hour at sword with Sir Makin every evening before the light failed. I took to the art with new interest. A fresh challenge is often the way to keep from brooding on the past.

I had seen the sword as a means of carrying death through a crowd. With the Brothers I often found myself amongst an unskilled foe, one more

interested in running than fighting, and I used my blade for slaughter. I had met more skilful opponents of course, soldiers sent to stop us, well-trained mercenaries set to guard merchants' wagons, and other bandits with their own brothers on the road, wanting what we had.

When I saw Katherine's champion fight Sir Makin, and later when I set myself against the Prince of Arrow, I understood the difference between the workman and the artist. Of course there's time to be an artist when you're not having to worry about a farmer sneaking up behind you and sticking a pitchfork through your neck whilst you're showing off your feints and parries.

So I worked with Makin, day after day, building up the right kind of muscle, learning to feel the subtle differences through the blade even when it's being pounded so hard all you want to do is let go. And every time I got a bit better, he turned on the skill a little more. I started to hate him, just a piece.

When you swing a sword enough, put yourself through enough fights, there's a kind of rhythm you start to detect. Not the rhythm of your opponent, but a kind of necessary beat to the business of cut and thrust, as if your eyes read the very first hints of each action and lay it out as music to dance to. I heard just whispers of the refrain but every time I caught them it made Makin pay sudden attention and start to sweat to hold me back. I heard only murmured phrases of the song, but just knowing it was there at all was enough to keep me striving.

If you keep heading north and east from the Renar Highlands then eventually you have to cross the River Rhyme. Given that the river is at least four hundred yards across at all of the points where one might reach it without an invading army, the exercise of crossing it is one that normally requires a ferryman.

There is one alternative. A bridge at the free-town of Remagen. How any bridge could span such an expanse of water is a wonder and one that I decided to see for myself rather than dicker with the owner of some rickety barge further upstream.

We closed on Remagen through the Kentrow hills, winding through endless narrow valleys – rock-choked gullies in the main of the kind where horses are apt to go lame. The boredom of the trail never bothered me when we used to range mile after mile in search of mischief or loot, or hopefully both. Since Thar though I found the long silences a trial. My mind wandered

along dark paths. I don't know how many ways there are to put Katherine together with a missing knife and a dead baby but I think I must have considered most of them, and at length. I knew where the answer lay, and kept finding that I didn't want to know it. At least not badly enough to open that box.

*Brother Maical's wisdom lies in knowing he is not clever and letting himself be led. The foolishness of mankind is that we do not do the same.*

*Four years earlier*

Gog had a bad dream in the dry canyons of the Kentrow hills. So bad a dream that it chased us out of there, tripping over our smouldering blankets as the fire guttered and spat around us. While we hunted the horses in the dark, stumbling over every rock and bush, the far end of the canyon glowed with a fierce red heat.

‘Going to find us a crispy little monster when we go back up there,’ Rike said, the fire picking out the raw bones of his face in demonic tones.

‘Never burned hisself before,’ Grumlow said, tiny beside Rike.

Ahead of us, closer than we wanted to get to the heat, closer than we *could* get to it, Gorgoth waited to return. His silhouette against the glow had a disturbingly arachnid shape to it, the splayed ribs like legs reaching from his sides.

Young Sim came back leading Brath and his own nag. ‘Be more use on a winter trip.’ He nodded toward the flames, shrugged and led the horses off. Sim had a way with horses. He’d been a stable lad for some lord once upon a time. Spent time in a brothel too as a child, earning rather than spending.

We made a new camp and waited to see what was left of our old one.

When I went back with Gorgoth the sky had started shading into pearl. The rocks creaked as they cooled and I could feel the heat through the soles of my boots. Maical came with us. He seemed to like the leucrota.

We found Gog sleeping peacefully in a blackened area that resembled a burned-out campfire. I shone the only lantern we had left on the boy and he screwed his eyes tighter before rolling over. ‘Sorry to disturb.’ I snorted and sat down, standing up again sharpish with a scorched arse.

‘He’s changing,’ Gorgoth said.

I’d noticed it too. The stippled red-and-black of his skin had taken on fiercer scarlet-on-grey tones and a more flamelike form as if the fire had somehow frozen into his hide.

We slept then, us back at the new camp and Gorgoth with Gog in the ruins of the old. In the morning they joined us and Gog ran to the breakfast fire as though it were a new thing he'd not seen before. The flames flushed scarlet as he approached and the water in Row's pots started to boil even though it was fresh in from the stream.

'Can't you see them?' he asked as Gorgoth pulled him back.

'No,' I said following them away from the camp. 'And best you don't see "them"' either. We'll be meeting with a man who knows all about these things soon enough. Until then, just keep ... cool.'

I sat with them further down the canyon. We played throw-stones and cross-sticks. It seems that when you're eight you can shake anything off, at least for the short term. Gog laughed when he won and smiled when he lost. I can't remember a time when I didn't play to win but I didn't grate on him for his easy ways. When ambition gets its teeth into you it's hard to know how to just enjoy what's in front of you.

'Good boy.' Maical passed Gog the cross-sticks he'd gathered back up, a small bundle in his callused hand. 'Bad dreams.'

I frowned at that. Gorgoth rumbled.

'We were all slow to wake ...' I said. 'Could have ended badly.' I remembered feeling the heat, the smell of char, and the slow struggle free of my own nightmares.

Gorgoth and I found the answer in the same moment, but he spoke first: 'Sageous.'

I nodded, slow as the realization of just how stupid I'd been crept over me. Coddin had been right: many hands would seek to wield a weapon like Gog. Twice now the dream-witch had turned that power against me. He might not be able to kill me with my own dreams, but he'd had a good try with Gog's.

'All the more reason to press on.' I might have said, Third time's the charm, but there's no point tempting the fates – unless you've got a big enough sword to kill them too.

After breaking fast we rode on, closing now on Remagen. There's a small fort on a ridge not far from the river as you come out of the Kentrow hills. It commands a view of the road approaching the town. We could see the Rhyme as a bright ribbon behind the fort, and a hint of the bridge towers.

Kent and Maical flanked me at the front of our band and we approached the fort at a trot, Gog clutching my back, Gorgoth jogging close by. Makin



and Rike rode behind, chuckling. Makin could even get a laugh out of Rike when he put his mind to it. Then Grumlow, then Sim and Row. I guess it could have been Gorgoth that spooked the fort-men, though at that distance they couldn't have had a clear view of him. Either way, one moment I had Kent to my right and Maical to my left, and the next moment the grey had an empty saddle.

I pulled Brath in a tight circle and jumped down quick-smart even as the others rode past in confusion. It had to be a lucky shot. At the range between us and the fort walls a good archer would be hard-pressed to hit a house using a longbow. But there it was, one feathered end hard against his neck, the sharp end red and dripping and jutting a foot from the other side. Maical looked at me with unusual focus as I dropped to one knee beside him.

'Time to die, Brother Maical.' I didn't want to lie to him. I took his hand.

He watched me, holding my eyes as the others wheeled their horses and started to shout.

'King Jorg,' he said, only without sound, blood running from the corners of his mouth. He looked strange with his helmet off to one side and a light in him, as if what had been broken all his life was fixed by a simple fall off his horse. He'd never called me 'king' before, as if 'brother' was all he could get hold of.

'Brother Maical,' I said. I've lost a lot of brothers but not many while I watched their eyes. The strength went from his hand. He coughed blood and went his way.

'What in hell?' Makin jumped down from his horse.

The glistening arrowhead kept my attention. A bead of blood hung from the point, a baby's reflection distorting across its curve. I saw a red knife and Katherine walking amongst the graves.

*'Hello Jorg,' she had said.*

'He dead.' Kent joined me on his knees beside Maical. 'How?' The arrow was plain enough but it didn't seem to answer the question.

I stood and walked past Makin's horse, pulling the shield from over his saddlebags. I kept walking. A coldness crawled through me, tingling on my cheeks. I took the Nuban's bow from its place on Brath's back, checked its double load.

'Jorg?' Kent clambered to his feet.

'I'm going in,' I said. 'Nobody gets out alive. Is that understood? Any man follows me, I'll kill them.' Without waiting for answer I moved on.

I walked a hundred yards before another arrow fell, sailing far to the left. The shot that killed Maical had to have been a freak, loosed with no real hope of hitting its target. I slung the Nuban's crossbow over my shoulder. Thin ties held the bolts in their channels.

I could see four men on the battlements now. Fifty yards on and they loosed a volley. I raised the shield. One arrow hit it, the point just visible on my side, the others clattered on the rocks.

It wasn't a big fort, more of a watch point. Thirty men would have filled it elbow to elbow, and it looked to have been many years since it was fully garrisoned.

By the time I stood properly in range the men on the walls had found their courage. A single warrior approached them at a steady walk, and he didn't look much above sixteen. Three more joined them behind the battlements, not soldiers, no uniform, just a ragtag bunch, more of them looking out through the portcullis.

'You're not going to let me in then?' I called to them.

'How's your friend?' A fat one called from the wall. The others laughed.

'He's fine,' I said. 'Something spooked his horse and he fell. He'll be up and about as soon as he gets his breath.' I peered over my shield and pulled the arrow from it. 'Somebody want this back?' I felt utterly calm, serene, and yet at the same time with the sense of something rushing toward me like a squall racing across the grasslands beneath a darkening sky.

'Surely.' One of the half dozen behind the gate snorted and started to turn the wheel, raising the portcullis notch by notch while the chain ratcheted through its housings. The thick muscle on his arms gleamed white through the dirt as he strained.

I saw two of those on the wall exchange glances. I don't think the arrow was all they planned to take from me. I started forward so that I would reach the gate just as it drew high enough for me to pass below without bending. The stink of the place after so many nights in the open made my eyes sting.

The storm that had been racing toward me across some hidden wasteland in my mind hit as I entered the fort. I offered the arrow to the closest man, a thin fellow with, of all things, a headman's axe in hand. He reached for it and I stuck it through his eye.

There's a still moment when something like that happens, when an arrow juts from a gleaming eyeball and the owner has yet to scream. The men who act in such still moments tend to live longer. Of the crowd behind the gate

only one moved before the man's scream, and I moved quicker. I caught his wrist as he reached for me and drove Makin's shield against his elbow joint. With his arm held straight I pivoted him so his body struck another man before his head hit the wall. The quick men tend to live longer, but sometimes they just get themselves first in the queue.

I stepped back, almost to the portcullis that had started to fall, and shrugged the Nuban's bow from my shoulder letting its weight swing it under my arm. Bringing it up I pulled both triggers without bothering to aim. Both bolts hit the same man, which was a bit of a waste, but of all of them he had the most armour on and the Nuban's crossbow put two big holes in it.

The portcullis slammed down behind me. The wind of it tickled on my neck as it sliced past. Four left in view. The big man at the gate-wheel hunting for his sword, another unhurt on the floor climbing to his feet. Two who could be brothers, both wide with straggly hair and rotting teeth, reaching for me. They made the right choice. When the numbers are on your side, grapple your foe before he gets his steel clear.

I pushed off the gate, using it to accelerate my charge. The pair before me both had the weight advantage but if you hurl yourself hard behind a shield, especially if you ensure the iron edge of it hits somewhere useful, like the throat, you can get yourself a little advantage of your own, whatever you weigh.

I had no fear in me, just the need to kill, just something crawling on me, in me, that might be washed away with enough blood.

One of the two uglies went down beneath me, blood, spit and teeth spattering my face. The other loomed above us as I pulled Grumlow's knife from my boot.

Knife-work is a red business, Brothers. With the knife you slice meat up close, lay it to the bone, and swim in what gushes out. The screams are in your ear, the hurting trembles through your short blade. I could say I remember all of it but I don't. A fury took me, painting the world in scarlet and I howled as I killed. I have a vision of the moment I left the gate-yard, drawing my sword for the first time as the remainder of the garrison hurried down two sets of narrow stairs to the right and left. The men coming into view first tried to back off, with the others crowding behind, pushing.

It wasn't for Maical that I killed those men, or for the joy of slaughter, or the proud legend of King Jorg. Like Gog I have my own fires banked and burning, and on some days the right spark can set them blazing beyond my

control. Perhaps that was the true reason I had come traipsing over half a dozen realms to find this fire-mage for my pet monster. Perhaps I wanted to know that such fires could be contained. That they didn't have to kill us both.

I survived my foolishness, though fourteen men did not, and I walked, half-drunk with exhaustion, from the gate once more. The Brothers left their posts on their perimeter around the fort and followed me back toward the horses.

'Jorg,' Makin said.

I turned and they stopped.

'Red Jorg,' said Red Kent, and he clapped his hand across his chest.

'Red Jorg,' Rike grunted. He stamped.

Gorgoth stamped his great foot. Makin drew sword and clashed it against his breastplate. The others took up the chant. I looked down and saw that no part of me was without gore. I dripped with the blood of others, as red as Kent on the day we found him. And I knew then why he wouldn't speak of it.

I went to Maical and took his head-axe from the grey's harness. 'We'll make him a cairn,' I said. 'And put the heads of the fort-men around to watch over it.' I threw the axe to Rike. He caught it and set off for the fort without complaint. For once I believed the taking of loot was not at the front of his thinking.

We built the cairn. Gorgoth brought rocks that no single man would be able to roll away. I don't know that Maical would have wanted the heads, or cared, or have held any opinion on the matter, but we set them as his honour guard in any case. I don't know what Maical would have wanted. I never really met him until those last seconds when he lay dying. It surprised me that I cared, but I found that I did.

*Four years earlier*

You can cut seven shades from a man. Scarlet arterial blood, purple from the veins, bile like fresh-cut grass, browns from the gut, but it all dries to somewhere between rust and tar. Time for Red Jorg to take himself to a stream and clean off the fort-men. I watched the dirt swirl away, pinkish in the water.

‘So what was that about?’ Makin asked, striding up behind.

‘They shot my idiot,’ I said.

A pause. It seemed that Makin always had that pause with me, as if I were a puzzle to him. ‘We told you he was dead back in Norwood and you didn’t spare him a moment,’ Makin said. ‘So why now? The truth, Jorg.’

‘What is truth?’ I asked, washing the last of the blood from my hands. ‘Pilate said that, you know? “What is truth?”’

‘Fine, don’t tell me then,’ Makin said. ‘But we have to cross that bridge in a hurry now, before this gets out.’

I stood, shaking water from my hair. ‘I’m ready. Let’s go.’

With the Brothers saddled and on the road I took a moment to revisit the cairn. Necromancy pulsed in my chest as I approached, an echo of the pain when Father’s knife cut in. An echo of all the flavours of pain that filled me in that moment, stabbed, betrayed, the strength running from me, hot and red. Ravens fluttered away from the heads as I drew close. I stood mute before the mound of dry rocks, mind empty, not knowing what I felt. My eye took in the spatters of yellowed lichen, a quartz vein through a large boulder, the black trickles of blood on stone. It seemed that the heads watched me, as if their raven-pecked eyes were turned toward me. And then, there was no ‘seemed’ about it. As I made a slow circle of the cairn each head in turn swivelled its gaze to follow me. I had killed the first man with an arrow in the eye. It twitched as he tried to turn that eye my way. I held the gaze of the single eye he could watch me with.

‘Jorg,’ his lips formed my name.

‘Chella?’ I asked. Who else could it be? ‘I thought I buried you deep enough.’ For a moment I saw her toppling into that shaft, dragging the Nuban, after I’d shot them both with his bow.

The same smile twisted each man’s lips.

‘I’ll find you, bitch,’ I spoke low. She had enough ears to hear me.

The heads broadened their smiles to show teeth. Lips moved. It looked like ‘Dead King’ that they mouthed.

I shrugged. ‘Enjoy the ravens.’ And I left them. Whatever power worked here I doubted it would trouble Maical under such a weight of stone.

We moved on, resupplied from the fort, with replacements for what Gog had burned in the night. Remagen huddled around both shores of the Rhyme, a modest walled town, smoke rising from scores of chimneys lined along well-ordered streets. The bridge held my attention though. I’d not thought of bridges as graceful before, but this one hung glittering between two silver towers taller than the Haunt, suspended on what looked like gleaming wire but must have been cables thick as a man.

Within half an hour we were lined at the town gates, waiting our turn behind pedlars, merchants with their wagons, farmers leading cows or carting ducks and hens. We stowed our weapons out of sight on the horses, but we still looked a rough crowd.

Gorgoth drew looks aplenty, but none of the normal screaming and the running.

‘You’ll be with the circus then,’ said the farmer with the ducks in wicker cages. He nodded as if agreeing with his statement.

‘So we are,’ I said before Rike could grumble. ‘I juggle,’ I added, and gave him my smile.

The men at the gates were of the same rag-tag crowd that we found at the fort. The free-town had no soldiers, according to Row, just a loose militia drawn from the population, at the service of the mayor for a month or two then free to go back to their livelihoods.

‘Well met.’ I clapped my hands to the shoulders of what should have been the gate captain in any decent town. I grinned as if we’d been best friends all our lives. ‘Jorg the Red and his travelling players, catching up with our colleagues at the circus. I juggle. Would you like to see?’

‘No,’ he said, trying to shake free. A good answer in the main since I don’t

juggle.

‘You’re sure?’ I asked, finally letting him go. ‘My friend here does knife tricks. And Little Rikey is famously ugly?’

‘Move on,’ he said and turned to the tinker behind us.

I passed between the guardsmen – ‘Care to see some juggling? No?’ – and through the gates.

‘The bridge is that way,’ Makin said, pointing again as he did at the crossroads, as if it weren’t two hundred feet tall and glittering in the morning sunshine.

‘Indeed,’ I said. ‘But we’re with the circus.’ And I led off to the right, not pointing at the multi-coloured pavilion rising above the rooftops. ‘I juggle!’

We had to start with the elbows to make a path before we got within clear sight of the pavilion. The people of Remagen were out in their hundreds, packing the streets around the circus, spilling from the taverns and crowding the smaller tents and stalls around the main attraction.

‘Must be Sunday,’ Sim said, grinning like a boy, which I suppose he was by most accountings.

Rike moved to the front, pushing his way toward the big top. Like Sim he had an eager look on him, the kind of light that toy clown put in him back at the Haunt. I wasn’t the only one who remembered.

‘It’s Taproot?’ Makin asked, frowning.

I nodded. ‘Got to be.’

‘Excellent,’ said Kent. He’d swiped himself three sugar sticks from somewhere and was trying to get all of them in his mouth at once.

We got to the pavilion entrance, laced up all the way down and staked, with the smaller entrance to the side also tagged down. A man and a boy sat in the dust before the door bent over a wooden board with black and white markers arrayed across it in various depressions.

‘Show’s not until sundown,’ the man said as my shadow fell across the board. He didn’t look up.

‘You’ve got mancala in three if you play from the end pit then the eye pit,’ I said.

He looked up sharp enough at that, lifting his bald head on the thickest of necks. ‘By Christ Jesu! It’s little Jorg!’

He stood and took me under the arms, throwing me a yard in the air before executing a neat catch.

‘Ron,’ I said. ‘You used to be strong!’

‘Be fair.’ He grinned. ‘You’ve doubled in height.’

I shrugged. ‘The armour weighs a bit too. Saved my ribs though!’ I waved the others forward. ‘You remember Little Rikey?’

‘Of course. Makin, good to see you. Grumlow.’ Ron caught sight of Gorgoth. ‘And who’s the big fellow?’

‘Show him the thing,’ said Rike, bubbling like a child, ‘show him the thing.’

‘Later.’ Ron smiled. ‘The weights are all stowed now. Besides, looks like your friend could put me out of business.’

Ron, or to do him justice, the amazing Ronaldo, did the circus strongman act. He earned Rike’s undying respect by the simple act of lifting a heavier weight than Rike could. It’s true that nature treated Ron to an unreasonable helping of muscle, but I think that Little Rike might be the stronger even so. Certainly I’d bet on Rike before Ron in a tavern brawl. But with the lifting of weights there’s grip and timing and commitment, and Rike faltered where Ron pressed on.

‘So, where might we find the good Doctor Taproot?’ I asked.

Ronaldo led us through the side flap, leaving the boy, who turned out to be a midget old enough to be going grey, to watch our horses. I took the Nuban’s bow. I didn’t trust the midget to be able to run down any thieves, and besides, I might want to shoot a circus clown or two. Just for laughs.

We skirted around the centre ring, kicking sawdust and watching three acrobats practice their tumbles out where the sun struck down through the high opening. Toward the back of the big-top, canvas divisions spaced out several rooms. Here the heavy stink from the animal cages reached in and you could hear a growl or two above the thumps and shouts of the tumblers.

Taproot had his back to me as I followed Ron in. Two of the dancer girls stood before him in slack poses, bored and rolling their eyes.

‘Watch me!’ Taproot said. ‘Hips and tits. That sells seats. And look as if you’re enjoying it, for God’s sake. Watch me.’

He talked with his hands did Taproot, long-fingered hands always flying about his head.

‘I am watching you,’ I said. They say Taproot got that habit from his days at the three cup game. *Watch me!* And the boy will dip your pockets.

He turned at that, hands plucking at the air. ‘And who have you brought to see me, Ronaldo? A handsome young fellow indeed, with friends outside.’

Taproot knew me. Taproot never forgot a face, or a fact, or a weakness.



‘Jorg the Red,’ I said. ‘I juggle.’

‘Do you now?’ He drew fingers down his jaw to the point of his chin. ‘And what do you juggle, Jorg the Red?’

I grinned. ‘What have you got?’

‘Watch me!’ He fished a dark bottle from the depths of his cloak of many faded colours. ‘Come take a seat, bring your brothers in if they’ll fit.’ He dismissed the dancers with a flutter of hands.

Taproot retreated behind a desk in the corner, finding glasses from its drawer. I took the only other chair as the others filed in behind Makin.

‘I’m guessing you still juggle lives, Jorg,’ Taproot said. ‘Though in more salubrious surroundings these days.’ He poured a green measure into five glasses, all of a motion without a drop lost.

‘You’ve heard about my change in circumstances?’ I took the glass. Its contents looked like urine, a little greener.

‘Absinthe. Ambrosia of the gods,’ Taproot said. ‘Watch me.’ And he knocked his back with a slight grimace.

‘Absinthe? Isn’t that Greek for undrinkable?’ I sniffed it.

‘Two gold a bottle,’ he said. ‘Has to be good at that price, no?’

I sipped. It had the kind of bitterness that takes layers off your tongue. I coughed despite myself.

‘You should have told me you were a prince, Jorg; I always knew there was something about you.’ He pointed two fingers to his eyes. ‘Watch me.’

More Brothers followed on in. Gorgoth ducked in under the flap, Gog scurrying in front. Taproot took his gaze from me and rocked back in his chair. ‘Now these two fellows I could employ,’ he said. ‘Even if they don’t juggle.’ He waved to the three spare glasses. ‘Help yourselves, gentlemen.’

There’s a pecking order on the road and it helps to know how it runs. On the surface Taproot’s business might be sawdust and somersaults, dancing girls and dancing bears, but he dealt in more than entertainment. Dr Taproot liked to know things.

A beat passed. Most would miss it, but not Taproot. The beat let the Brothers know that Makin wasn’t interested. Rike took the first glass, Red Kent the next, another beat, then Row snatched the last. Row threw his down and smacked his lips. Row could drink acid without complaint.

‘Ron, why don’t you take Rike and Gorgoth and show them the thing with the barrel?’ I asked.

Rike gulped his drink, made a sour face, and followed Ron out, the

leucrotas next, Gog tagging behind.

‘The rest of you can lose yourselves too. See if you can’t learn some new tricks in the ring.’ I sipped again. ‘It’d be foul at twenty gold a bottle.

‘Makin, perhaps you could be finding out about that rather fine bridge for us,’ I said.

And they filed out, leaving me and Taproot watching each other across the desk in the dim glow of the sun through canvass.

‘A prince, Jorg? Watch me!’ Taproot smiled, a crescent of teeth in his thin face. ‘And now a king?’

‘I would have cut myself a throne whatever woman I fell from,’ I said. ‘Had I been a carpenter’s son, stable-born, I’d have cut one.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’ Again the smile, that mix of warmth and calculation. ‘Remember the times we had, Jorg?’

I did. Happy days are rare on the road. The days we had ridden with the circus troop had been golden for a wild boy of twelve.

‘Tell me about the Prince of Arrow,’ I said.

‘A great man by all accounts,’ Taproot said. He made a steeple of his fingers, pressed to his lips.

‘And by your account?’ I asked. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve not met the man.’

‘I’ve met everyone, Jorg,’ he said. ‘You know that. Watch me.’

I never knew if I liked Taproot.

‘I’ve even met your father,’ he said.

I am rarely uncertain in such matters, but Taproot, with his ‘watch me’ and his talking hands, with his whole life a performance, and his secret ways? It’s hard to know a man who knows too much. ‘The Prince of Arrow,’ I said.

‘He is a good man,’ Taproot said at last. ‘He means what he says and what he says is good.’

‘The world eats good men for breakfast,’ I said.

‘Perhaps.’ Taproot shrugged. ‘But the Prince is a thinker, a planner. And he has funds. The Florentine banking clans love him well. Peace is good business. He is setting his pieces. The Fenlands fell to him before winter set in. He’ll add more thrones to his tally soon enough. Watch me. He’ll be at your gates in a few years if nobody stops him. And at your father’s gates.’

‘Let him call on Ancrath first,’ I said. I wondered what my father would make of this ‘good man’.

‘His brother,’ said Taproot, ‘Egan?’

Taproot knew, he just wanted to know if I knew. I just watched him. He

kept telling me to after all.

‘His brother is a killer. A swordsman like the legends talk of, and vicious with it. A year younger than Orrin, and always will be, thank the Lord. More absinthe?’

‘And how much support is there for the Good Prince among the Hundred?’ I waved the bottle away. You needed a clear head with Taproot.

‘Well they’d all murder him for half a florin,’ Taproot said.

‘Of course.’

‘But he’s merciful and that can be a powerful thing.’ Taproot stroked his chest as though he imagined a little of that mercy for himself. ‘There’s not a lord out there who doesn’t know that if he opened his gates to Arrow he’d get to keep his head and most of what was behind his gates too. By the next Congression his friends could vote him to the empire throne. And if he keeps going the way he is, he could vote himself to the throne at the Congression after next.’

‘It’s a clever ploy,’ I said. Mercy as a weapon.

‘More than that, watch me.’ Taproot sipped and ran his tongue over his teeth. ‘It’s who he is. And he won’t need too many more victories before more gates are opened to him than stand closed.’ He looked at me then, dark and shrewd. ‘How will your gates stand, Jorg of Ancrath?’

‘We’ll have to see, won’t we?’ I ran a wet finger around the rim of my glass and made it sing. ‘I’m a little young to be giving up on ambition though, neh?’ Besides, sometimes an open gate just means you’d rather *they* did the walking. ‘What about the others?’ I asked.

‘Others?’ Taproot’s innocent look was a work of art, perfected over years.

I watched him. Taproot kept his frozen innocence a moment longer. I scratched my ear and watched him.

‘Oh ... the others.’ He offered a quick smile. ‘There’s support for Orrin of Arrow there. He’s foretold, the Prince of Arrow. Prophecy aplenty. Too much for the wise to ignore. The Silent Sister is of course—’

‘Silent?’ I asked.

‘Even so. But others are interested. Sageous, the Blue Lady, Luntar of Thar, even Skilfar.’ He studied me as he spoke each name, knowing in a moment if I knew them. I put little enough on my face at such times, but a man like Taproot needs less than little to know your mind.

‘Skilfar?’ He already knew I didn’t know.

‘Ice-witch,’ Taproot said. ‘Plays the jarls off against each other. There are

plenty of eyes on this Prince of Arrow, Jorg. His star is not yet risen, but be sure it's in ascendance! Who knows how high and how bright it might become Congression?'

If anyone knew it would be the circus master before me. I turned Taproot's words over in my head. The next Congression stood two years away, four more again before the one after that. As lord of Renar I had my place booked, a single vote in hand, and the Gilden Guard would escort me to Vyene. I couldn't see the Hundred electing an emperor to sit over them though. Not even Orrin of Arrow. If I went, if I let the Gilden Guard drag me five hundred miles to throw my vote into the pot, I'd vote for me.

'I'm sorry about Kashta,' Taproot said. He filled his glass and raised it.

'Who?'

Taproot dropped his gaze to the bow beside me. 'The Nuban.'

'Oh.' Taproot knew stuff. Kashta. I let him fill my glass again and we drank to the Nuban.

'Another good man,' Taproot said. 'I liked him.'

'You like everyone, Taproot,' I said. I licked my lips. 'But he was a good man. I'm taking the monsters to Heimrift. Tell me about the mage there.'

'Ferrakind,' Taproot said. 'A dangerous man, watch me! I've had pyromancers that trained with him. Not magicians, not much more than fire-eaters, flame-blowers, you could do as much with this stuff and a candle.' He raised his glass again. 'Smoke-and-spark men. I don't think he lets the good ones go. But all the ones I had were terrified of the man. You could end any argument with them just by saying his name. He's the real thing. Flame-sworn.'

'Flame-sworn?' I asked.

'The fire is in him. In the end it will take him. He used to be a player. You know what I speak of, a player of men and thrones. But the fire took too much from him and we no longer interest him.'

'I want his help,' I said.

'And this is your offer?' Taproot tapped his wrist. I hadn't seen him so much as glance at my watch but it seemed he knew all about it.

'Perhaps. What else might interest him?' I asked.

Taproot pursed his lips. 'He likes rubies. But I think he'll prefer your fire-patterned child. He may want to keep him, Jorg.'

'I may want to keep him myself,' I said.

'Going soft in your old age, Jorg?' Taproot asked. 'Watch me! I knew a

twelve year old hard as nails and twice as sharp. Perhaps you should leave the monsters with me. There's a good enough living to be made in the freak tent.'

I stood. I hefted up the Nuban's bow. 'Kashta, eh?'

'Even so,' Taproot said.

'I must be on my way, Dr.,' I said. 'I have a bridge to cross.'

'Stay,' he said. 'Learn to juggle?'

'I'll look around once more for old times,' I said.

Taproot raised his hands. 'A king knows his mind.'

And I left.

'Good hunting.' He said it to my back.

I wondered if he'd taken enough from me to sell at profit. I wondered at what some men can fit between their ears.

I walked past the dancers. They hadn't gone far.

'Remember me, Jorg?' Cherri smiled. The other struck a pose. They both followed Taproot's advice. Hips and tits.

'Of course I do.' I sketched a bow. 'But sadly, ladies, I'm not here to dance.'

Cherri I remembered, lithe and pert, hair lightened with lemon and curled around hot tongs every morning, a snub nose and wicked eyes. They both closed on me, half-playful, half-serious, hands straying, warm breath and that gyration in the pelvis that speaks of want. Her friend, dark-haired, pale-skinned and sculpted from fantasy, I did not recall, but wished I did.

'Come and play?' the friend murmured. She smelled money. Sometimes, though, reasons don't matter.

It's hard to pass up an offer like that when you're young and full of juice, but fourteen heads around a rock cairn were telling me to get a move on and I had taken what I needed here, almost.

I left them and slipped through an exit to the rear of the tent. In a clearing to the left I could see Thomas swallowing a sword, watched by a scatter of circus urchins. He hardly needed the practice but that was Thomas, a crowd pleaser. An odd breed, the gypsies and the talent, needing to live in the torch ring, only alive in grease-paint. I swear, some of them would fade and die given a week without applause.

Rumbles from the cages drew me. A stack of them on the east side of the camp where the wind would take some of the stink away. They still had the two bears I remembered, pacing their madness in tight circles, dull shaggy fur, the bronze nose-rings big enough to fit an arm. The huge turtle – Taproot

claimed it to be two hundred years old – statue-still and as interesting as a big stone, not caged but tethered to a stake. The two-headed goat was a new addition, a sickly-looking thing, but then again it should have been a still-birth, so it was more healthy than anyone had a right to expect. Every now and then the heads would sight each other and startle as if surprised.

‘See anything you like?’ A soft voice behind me.

‘I do now.’ I turned to face her. She looked good.

‘Jorg,’ Serra said. ‘My sweet Jorg. A king no less.’

I shrugged. ‘I never did know when to stop.’

She smiled. ‘No.’ Dark and delicious.

‘I saw Thomas back there, putting on a show,’ I said.

Serra pouted at the mention of her husband. ‘It never stops amazing me, how people want to watch that.’

‘That’s why the circus keeps on moving,’ I said. ‘Everything gets old quick enough. The swallowing of swords, the blowing of fire, they’re wonders for an evening or two ...’

‘And did I get old quick enough?’ she asked. ‘King Jorg of the Highlands?’

‘Never,’ I said. If the sins of the flesh ever got old I didn’t ever want enough years on me to know it. ‘I’ve not found a girl to compare.’

‘Girl’ may have been pushing it but she was a good ten years younger than Thomas, and who better than a circus contortionist to deliver a boy’s first lessons in carnality?

Serra stepped closer, shawl tight around her shoulders against the chill of the breeze. She moved in that fluid way that reminds every watcher she can cross her ankles behind her head. Even so, on her cheeks, here and there, the white powder cracked, and around her eyes the unkind morning light found tiny wrinkles. She wore her hair still in ribbons and bunches, but now it looked wrong on her and a thread or two of silver laced the blackness of it.

‘How many rooms does your palace have, Jorg?’ A husk in her voice. A hint of something desperate at the back of her smile.

‘Lots,’ I said. ‘Most of them cold, stony, and damp.’ I didn’t want her to go begging and dirty up my golden memories. I didn’t know what I’d come looking for around the circus camp; Taproot’s stories for sure, but not now, not here in the messy reality behind the show-ring mask. I didn’t know what I’d come for, but not this, not Serra showing her years and her need.

A moment’s silence, then a growl came, too deep and throaty for a bear,

like a giant rasp drawn across timber.

‘What the—’

‘Lion,’ Serra said. She twirled, brightening, and took my hand. ‘See?’

And around the corner, at the bottom of the cage stack, Dr Taproot did indeed have himself a lion. I hefted the Nuban’s bow to see the ironwork around the trigger guard. The beast in the cage might be a bit threadbare, showing too many ribs, but his dirty mane remembered the one framing the snarling face on the Nuban’s bow.

‘Well there’s a thing,’ I said. The Nuban had told me in his youth he walked scorched grasslands where lions hunted in packs, and even though the Nuban never lied, I only half-believed him. ‘There’s a thing.’ Words failed me for once.

‘He’s called Macedon,’ Serra said, leaning into me. ‘The crowds love him.’

‘What else has Taproot got caged? I expect a griffin next, then a unicorn and a dragon, a full heraldic set!’

‘Silly,’ she husked. Old or not that magic of hers had started to work on me. ‘Dragons aren’t real.’ The twitch of a smile in her painted lips, her small and kissable mouth.

I shook it off – the circus was too full of distractions. Distractions I wanted to make a full and thorough examination of. But I had ghosts at my heels and Gog about to burst into flame at any moment ...

‘He looks hungry,’ I said. ‘The circus can’t feed its main attraction?’

‘He won’t eat,’ Serra said. ‘Taproot’s tearing his hair about it. Doesn’t know how long he’ll last.’

The lion watched us, sat sphinx-like with his massive paws spread in the straw before him. I met his huge amber eyes and wondered what he saw. Probably a hunk of meat on two legs not meant for running.

‘He wants to hunt,’ I said.

‘We give him meat,’ Serra said. ‘Ron cuts him big hunks of cow, still bleeding. He barely sniffs it.’

‘He needs to take it,’ I said. ‘Not be given it.’

‘That’s silly.’ Her fingers ran along mine, starting fires.

‘It’s in his nature.’ I looked away. I didn’t think I could win a staring competition with Macedon even if I had time to try.

‘You should let him go,’ I said.

Serra laughed, a note too shrill for comfort. ‘And what would he hunt? We

should let him eat children?’

A distant scream saved me answering. A distant scream and a tongue of flame reaching up above the tent tops. A dead cook-fire close by suddenly lit. The flame flared, sucked in like a drawn breath, and became a little man made all of fire, a homunculus no taller than a chicken. It glanced around for a heartbeat then tore off in the direction of the scream leaving the fire-pit black and smoking and a line of charred footprints behind it.

Serra opened her mouth, ready to scream or shout, decided on neither, and took off after the flame-man.

My gaze returned to the lion, who seemed wholly unmoved by the excitement.

‘Do you think Taproot will still want Gog in his freak-show now?’ I asked.

The lion gave no answer, just watched me with those amber eyes.

The lions the Nuban had told me of were magnificent beasts, lords of the plains. He understood why men who had never seen one might fight beneath their likeness on a banner. When he spoke of lions on cold nights camped along the roadside I had sworn to walk those same sun-scarred plains and see them for myself. I hadn’t imagined them caged, mangy, hopping with fleas beside a two-headed goat.

A single nail pinned the cage door, secured with a twist of wire.

I had pulled a single pin to set the Nuban free years ago, worlds ago. I pulled a pin and he took two lives in as many moments.

That Jorg would have pulled this pin too. That Jorg would have pulled this pin and not given a moment’s thought to children clustered around a sword-swallower, to the livelihoods of dancers and tumblers. To townsfolk or to Taproot’s revenge. But I’m not him. I’m not him because we die a little every day and by degrees we’re reborn into different men, older men in the same clothes, with the same scars.

I didn’t forget the children or the dancers or the tumblers. But I pulled the pin. Because it’s in my nature.

‘For Kashta,’ I said.

I swung the door open and walked away. The lion would stay or leave, hunt or die, it didn’t matter, but at least he had a choice. As for me, I had a bridge to cross.

I set off after Serra to see what damage Gog had done.



*Brother Sim looks pleasing enough, a touch pretty, a touch delicate, but sharp with it. Under the dyes his hair is a blond that takes the sun, under the drugs his eyes are blue, under the sky I know no one more private in their ways, more secret in their opinions, more deadly in a quiet moment.*

*Four years earlier*

*When you journey north, past the River Rhyme, you start into the Danelands, those regions still unclaimed by the sea where the Vikings of old came ashore to conquer and then settle among the peoples who bowed before the axe. There are few Danes who will not claim Viking blood, but it's not until the sea bars your path that such claims take on weight and you start to feel yourself truly among the men of the wild and frozen north.*

We crossed the bridge at Remagen leading our horses, for in places the metal weave of the deck had holes punched up through it, some the width of a spear, some wide enough to swallow a man. Nowhere did rust have a hold on the silver metal and what had made the holes no one could say. I remembered the peasant in his house of gravestones back by Perechaise, unable to read a single legend from them. I shouldn't have sneered. We live in a world made from the Builders' graves and can read almost none of the messages they carry, and understand fewer still.

We left Remagen without trouble and rode hard along the North Way so that trouble wouldn't catch us up if it followed. Farms, forests, villages untouched by war, good land to ride through with the sun on your back. It set me in mind of Ancrath, cottages golden with thatch, orchards in bloom, all so fragile, so easy to erase.

'Thank you for not burning up too much of the circus, Gog,' I said.

'I'm sorry for the fire, Jorg,' Gog said behind me.

'No great harm done,' I said. 'Besides, the stories they tell about it will bring more people to the show.'

'Did you see the little men?' Gog asked.

'The midgets?' I asked.

His claws dug in. 'My little men, from the fire.'

'I saw them,' I said. 'It looked like they were trying to pull you in.'

‘Gorgoth stopped them,’ Gog said. I couldn’t tell if he was happy or sad about that.

‘You shouldn’t go,’ I said. ‘You need to learn more. To know how to be safe. To know that you can come back. That’s why we’re going to Ferrakind. He can teach you these things.’

‘I think I’ve seen him,’ Gog said. At first I didn’t think I’d heard right above the thud and clatter of hooves.

‘I can look into one fire and see out of another,’ Gog said. ‘All sorts of things.’ He giggled at that and for a moment he sounded like William, laughing on the morning we climbed into that carriage.

‘Did *he* see *you*?’ I asked.

I felt him nod against my back.

‘We’d best go on then,’ I said. ‘There’s no hiding from him now. Best find out what he has to say.’

We rode on and the rain started to fall, the kind of rain that comes and goes in the spring, cold and sudden and leaving the world fresh.

Heimrift lies in the Danelore, a hard ride from the Rhyme-lands. We made good speed and paced the season, caught in an unending wave of wakening, as if we carried the May with us.

Gorgoth ran beside me as often as not, tireless, pounding the road with great feet that seemed almost hooves. He spoke so seldom that it made you want him to, as if by storing each word he made it precious. I found him to be a deep thinker though he had never read a book or been taught by anyone.

‘Why do you ask so much?’ he asked once, his arms punching in and out like the great engine at York as he ran.

‘The unexamined life is not worth living,’ I said.

‘Socrates?’

‘How in hell do you know that?’ I asked.

‘Jane,’ he said.

I grunted. She could have reached out from the dark halls of the leucrotas, that child, even without taking a step from the entrance caves. I had walked some of the paths she took, and the paths of the mind can take you anywhere.

‘Who was she to you anyhow?’ I asked.

‘My eldest sister,’ he said. ‘Only two of us lived from my mother’s line. The rest.’ He glanced at Gog. ‘Too strong.’

‘She was fire-sworn too?’ I remembered the ghost-fire dancing across her.

‘Fire-sworn, light-sworn, mind-sworn.’ Gorgoth’s eyes narrowed to slits as

he watched me. Jane died because of my actions, because of me, because I hadn't cared if she lived or not. Mount Honas had fallen on Jane and the necromancer both. The wrong one survived. I still owed Chella for the Nuban and other Brothers besides, but even my thirst for vengeance wouldn't see me digging in the burning wastes of Gelleth for her any time soon.

'Damnation!' It suddenly struck me that I should have asked Taproot about the Dead King. The excitement of the circus had somehow put him out of my mind. Given that a dozen and more severed heads had mouthed the Dead King's name at me, it's a tribute to the power of sawdust and greasepaint that they could push it out.

Gorgoth turned his head but didn't ask.

'Who's the Dead King?' I asked him. Gorgoth had enough dealings with the necromancers, and who better than necromancers to know about someone who speaks through corpses.

'*Who* he is I can't say.' Gorgoth spoke in the rhythm of his running. 'I can tell you something of *what* he is.'

'Yes?'

'A new power, risen in the dry places beyond the veil, in the deadlands. He speaks to those that draw their strength there.'

'He spoke to Chella?' I asked.

'To all the necromancers.' A nod. 'They did not want to listen, but he made them.'

'How?' Chella struck me as a hard person to coerce.

'Fear.'

I sat back in the saddle and chewed that one over. Gorgoth ran in silence, matching Brath's trot, and for the longest time I thought he wouldn't speak again. But then he said, 'The Dead King talks to all who reach past death.'

'So what should I do when he talks to me?'

'Run.'

Gorgoth's sister had once given me the same advice. I resolved to take it this time.

We made good time and each evening I fought Makin, learning at every turn and occasionally teaching him a new trick. I taught him a new trick the very first day I met him, training squires in the Tall Castle. Since then, though, the process had seen a slow reversal. Somewhere along the line Makin turned from my rescuer, sent out by Father to recover me, into a follower, and ever

since he decided to follow my lead the man had been teaching me. Not with books and charts like Tutor Lundist but in that sneaky, indirect way the Nuban had, the kind of way that gets under your skin and turns you slowly by example.

Four days out from Remagen a storm found us on the plains, a fierce cold squall carrying all the cruelty that spring can muster. Lashed by rain we found our way to the town of Endless by tracks turned to swollen streams. Some lordling undoubtedly calls Endless his own but whatever men he set to watch over it had found better things to watch that night. We clattered unopposed along the cobbled main street and found a stable by the glow of a single lantern hung behind the torrent spilling from its eaves. The stable-keep allowed that Gog and Gorgoth could stay with the horses. Taking the pair among the good folk of Endless would be an invitation to carnage.

‘We’ll be out of here at dawn,’ I told the stable-keep, a lean fellow, pockmarked, but along one side only as if the pox had found no foothold on his right half. ‘Let me return to find gawkers here staring at my monsters and I’ll have the big one twist your legs off. Understand?’

He understood.

We shed our sodden cloaks in some nameless tavern and sat steaming before a cold hearth while a serving girl fetched our ales. The place was packed with wet and sweating bodies, lumbermen in the main, some stinking drunk, others just stinking. We drew looks, not a few of them hostile, but none that lasted long when offered back.

Sim had his harp with him, a battered thing but quality, stolen from a very rich home once upon a time. He’d pulled it from his saddlebag and unwrapped it with the kind of care he usually reserved for weapons. As our drinks arrived he started to pluck a tune from it. He had quick fingers did Sim, quick and clever, and the notes rolled out fast enough to make a river.

By the time I left for my bed, in the inn across the road, the storm had passed. Sim and Makin had half the locals bawling out ‘Ten Kings’, and Sim’s voice, high and clear, followed me out of the door, rising over the deeper refrain and Makin’s enthusiastic baritone. Strains of ‘The Shallow Lady’ reached up through the window as I poked my way in under crawling blankets and let the bugs set to. At least it was dry. I fell asleep to the faint sounds of the nonsense doggerel ‘Merican Pie’.

I woke much later in the calm dead hours of the night, still tangled in the

song though all lay quiet save for the brothers' snoring.

*Chevylevy was dry.*

Moonlight reached across the room and offered me two figures in the doorway, one supporting the other. Makin stopped to close the door behind him. Sim hobbled on, something broken about his walking.

'Trouble?' I sat up, the ale still spinning in me.

*My, my, missamerican pie.*

Why two drunk brothers staggering in should spell trouble I couldn't have said, but I knew trouble was what we had.

Makin turned, pulling aside the hood on the lantern he'd brought up with him. 'I found him in the street,' he said. 'Left him an hour ago with five locals, the last in the tavern.'

Sim looked up. They'd given him a hell of a beating, lips split and swollen, half a tooth gone, one eye full of blood. From the way he moved I guessed he'd be pissing pink for a week. In fact something in the way he moved suggested other kinds of hurt had been done to him.

'They took my harp, Brother.' He turned out his empty hands. It had been a time and a half since Sim had called me Brother. I wondered what else had been taken.

I kicked Rike in the head. 'Up!' Kent and Grumlow were already rising from the floor. 'Get up,' I said again.

'Trouble?' Kent asked, echoing my own question. He sat still in the dark, moonlight making black pits of his eyes. Always ready for trouble was Red Kent, though he never sought it out.

Grumlow found his feet quick enough and took Sim's arm. The boy flinched him off but Grumlow took firmer hold and led him to the window. 'Bring the lantern, Makin, some stitches needed here.'

'Five of them?' I asked.

Sim nodded as he passed me.

'I can't let this stand,' I said.

Makin let the lantern drop an inch or two at that. 'Jorg—'

'They took the harp,' I said. 'That's an insult to the Brotherhood.' I let the pride of the Brotherhood take the slur: it would shame Sim to have this be for him.

Makin shrugged. 'Sim cut at least one of them. There's a trail of blood in the street.'

'Were they armed?' I asked. Know thy enemy.

Makin shook his head. ‘Knives. Probably have their wood-axes to hand by now. Oh, and the short one, he had a bow. Likes to do a bit of hunting he said.’

*My, my.*

I threw the bundle of my blankets at Rike and made for the door. ‘Let’s be about it then. You too, Brother Sim, you’ll want to see this.’

I let Rike go first into the street and followed, watching the dark windows, the lines of the rooftops. Makin found the trail of blood drops again, black in the cold light of the moon, and we followed, past the church, past the well, along the alley between tannery and stables, the dull rumble of Gorgoth’s snore from within deeper than the snort of horses. Past a warehouse, a low wall, and out into the rough pasture between town and forest. We gathered with our backs to a barn, the last building before the woods took over. No one had to be told – your enemy has a bow, you keep a building at your back and don’t let the light silhouette you.

‘They’re in the forest,’ Grumlow said.

‘They won’t be far in.’ Makin set the lantern to one side, its light hidden.

‘Why not?’ Grumlow asked, eyes on the black line of the trees.

‘The moon won’t reach in there. Not a place to walk blind.’ I lifted my voice loud enough for the men in the woods. ‘Why don’t you come out? We only want to talk.’

An arrow hammered into the barn wall yards above my head, laughter followed. ‘Send your girlfriend in after us if she wants some more.’

Grumlow took a step forward at that, but he wasn’t dumb enough to take another. Rike on the other hand took two and would have taken more if I hadn’t barked his name. It was Rike’s true brother, Price, who took young Sim from that Belpan brothel in the long ago. Why he picked one child to save and made red slaughter of the rest, along with the grown whores and their master, none of the brothers could ever tell me, but it seemed to matter to Rike that he had. And there it is, proof if proof were needed, that though God may mould the clay and fashion some of us hale, some strong, some beautiful, inside we make ourselves, from foolish things, breakable, fragile things: the thorns, that dog, the hope that Katherine might make me better than I am. Even Rike’s blunt wants were born of losses he probably remembered only in dreams. All of us fractured, awkward collages of experience wrapped tight to present a defensible face to the world. And what makes us human is that sometimes we snap. And in that moment of release

we're closer to gods than we know. I told Rike no, but hardly a part of me didn't want to charge those woods.

'It'll have to keep for morning,' Makin said.

I didn't like to admit it but he was right. I would have left it there save for Gorgoth coming along the alley beside the barn. A strange mix of clever and stupid, that one. He made a nice target with the moon bright behind him, a big one too. I heard the hiss of an arrow and then his deep grunt.

'Here, idiot!' I called out to him and he lumbered to my side, Gog scampering around his legs. Makin lifted the lantern but I kept him from opening the hood. 'He's not dead. He can wait.'

'Take more than an arrow,' Rike muttered.

Even so, light blossomed and we saw the shaft jutting from Gorgoth's shoulder, the head buried only an inch deep or so as if the leucrota's flesh were oak.

'Makin! I said no—'

But it wasn't Makin. The light bled from Gog's eyes, hot and yellow.

I could have told Gog no, bundled him around a corner and left the woodsmen till morning, but the fire that burned in Gog at seeing Gorgoth harmed echoed a colder fire that lit in me when Sim hobbled through that door. I'd grown tired of saying no. Instead I took Gog's hand, though the ghosts of flame whispered across his skin.

He looked up at me, eyes white like stars. 'Let it burn,' I told him.

Something hot ran through me, up my arm, along the marrow of my bones, hot like a promise, anger made liquid and set running.

'What's cooking?' The taunt rang out from the tree-line, somewhere out past an old cowshed sagging in its beams.

Gog and I walked toward the sound, slow footsteps, the ground sizzling where his bare feet touched wet grass.

'The hell?' Voices raised in concern in the dark of the woods. An arrow zipped through the night, wide of its mark, the glowing child a disconcerting target, fooling the eye.

We heard the hissing before we'd gone ten yards, a thousand snakes hissing in the darkness ... or perhaps just steam escaping the trees as their sap started to boil. A laugh bubbled from me in the same way, escaping my heat. The anger I brought with me ignited, becoming too large for my body, detaching from the men who hurt Sim and becoming an end in and of itself, all-consuming, a glorious laughing ecstasy of rage.



A skin of flame lifted from Gog, washing over me in a warm wave. Back in the forest the first of the trees exploded, its fragments bursting into incandescent flame as they found air. Fire lifted around the intact trunks, rising through the spring foliage, making each leaf a momentary shadow. More trees exploded, then more, until the blasts became a continuous rumble of brilliant detonation. The cattle-shed ignited though it stood twenty yards back from the closest flame, one side of it just snapping into liquid orange fire. I saw a lone archer running from the edge of the forest, clothes alight. Further back human torches staggered and fell.

That power, Brothers, is a drug. A fiercer joy than poppy-spice, and more sure to hollow you out. If Gorgoth hadn't knocked me aside and snatched up Gog we neither of us would have stopped until no tree remained, no board or beam of Endless. Maybe not even then.

Dawn found us still in the wet grass behind that barn, a smoking hole in the forest before us, acres wide. Gog went hunting amid the embers and returned with a twitching tangle, Sim's harp strings fused together and twisted by the heat. He took them with a curious smile, lopsided from his beating. 'My thanks, Gog.' He held them up and shook them so they rattled one against the next. 'A simpler song, but still sweet.'

And that was Endless.

We saw the smoke days from our goal, still skirting the borders of the Teuton kingdoms. A grey column reached miles into the sky, mountain high and higher still, as if Satan were trying to smoke the angels out of heaven.

The sight prompted Red Kent to curiosity. 'What is a volcano, Jorg?'

'Where the earth bleeds,' I told him. Sim and Grumlow rode in closer to hear. 'Where its blood bubbles up. Molten rock, like lead melted for the siege, poured red and runny from the depths.'

'It was a serious question.' Kent turned his horse away, looking offended.

Days later we could smell the sulphur in the air. In places a fine black dust lay on the new leaves even as they unfurled, and stands of trees stood dead, acre after acre bare and brown, waiting for a summer fire.

You know you're entering the Dane-lore by the troll-stones. You start to see them at crossroads, then by streams, then in circles atop hills. Great blocks of stone set with the old runes, the Norse runes that remember dead gods, the thunder hammer and old one-eye who saw all and told little. They say the Danes choose one rock above another for troll-stones because they

see the lines of a troll in some but not the next. All I can say is that trolls must look remarkably like chunks of rock in that case.

We hadn't seen so many troll-stones before a rider joined us on the road. He came from the south, setting a fast pace and slowing as he caught our band.

'Well met,' he called, standing in his stirrups. A local man, hair braided in two plaits, each ending in a bronze cap worked with serpents, a round iron helm tight on his head and a fine moustache flowing into a short beard.

'Well met,' I said as he drew level at the head of our column. He had a shortbow on his back, a single-bladed axe strapped to his saddlebags, a knife at his hip with a polished bone handle. He gave Gorgoth a wide berth. 'You should follow me,' he said.

'Why?'

'My lord of Maladon wishes to see you,' he said. 'And it would be easier this way, no?' He grinned. 'I'm Sindri, by the way.'

'Lead on,' I said. A band of warriors probably watched us from the woods, and if not, Sindri deserved to be rewarded for his balls.

We followed him a couple of miles along a trail increasingly crowded with traffic, wheeled and on foot or hoof. Occasionally we heard a distant rumble, not unlike a giant version of the lion Taproot had caged, and the ground would tremble.

Sindri led us past two grey villages and brought us along the side of a narrow lake. When the mountains grumbled the water rippled from shore to shore. The stronghold at the far end looked to be made of timber and turf with only the occasional block of stone showing above the foundations.

'The great hall of the Duke of Dane,' Sindri said. 'Alaric Maladon, twenty-seventh of his line.'

Rike snorted behind me. I didn't bother to silence him. A voice was speaking at the back of my mind, just beyond hearing, a low moan or a howl ... a stone face swam across my vision, a gargoyle face.

Men were gathered before the hall, some at work, others preparing for a patrol, each armed with axe and spear, carrying a large round shield of painted wood and hide. Stable hands came to take our horses. As usual Gorgoth drew the stares. When we passed I heard men mutter, 'Grendel-kin'.

Sindri ushered us up the steps to the great hall's entrance. The whole place had a sorry look to it. The black dust coated everything with a fine film. It tickled the throat like a feather. The patrol horses looked thin and unkempt.

‘The Duke wants to see us still wearing the road?’ I asked, hoping for some hot water and a chair after so many miles in the saddle. A little time to prepare would be good too. I wanted to remember where I knew the name from.

Sindri grinned. Despite the beard he hadn’t too many years on me. ‘The Duke isn’t one for niceties. We’re not fussy in the northern courts. The summer is too short.’

I shrugged and followed up the stairs. Two large warriors flanked the doorway, hands on the hafts of double-headed axes, their iron blades resting on the floor between their feet.

‘Two of your party should be enough,’ Sindri said.

It never hurts to trust someone, especially when you’ve absolutely no other option. ‘Makin,’ I said.

Makin and I followed Sindri into the gloom and smoke of the great hall. The place seemed empty at first, long trestle tables of dark and polished wood, bare save for an abandoned flagon and a hambone. Wood-smoke and ale tempered the stink of dogs and sweat.

At the far end of the hall on a fur-strewn dais in a high oak chair a figure waited. Sindri led the way. I trailed my fingers along the table as we walked, feeling the slickness of the wood.

‘Jorg and Makin,’ said Sindri to his lord. ‘Found heading north on your highway, Duke Alaric.’

‘Welcome to the Danelands,’ the Duke said.

I just watched him. A big man, white-blond hair and a beard down his chest.

The silence stretched.

‘They have a monster with them,’ Sindri added, embarrassed. ‘A troll or Grendel-kin, big enough to strangle a horse.’

In my mind a gargoyle howled. ‘You brought a snow-globe,’ I said.

The Duke frowned. ‘Do I know you, boy?’

‘You brought a snow-globe, a toy of the ancients. And I broke it.’ It had been a rare gift, he would remember the globe, and perhaps the avarice with which a little boy had stared at it.

‘Ancrath?’ The Duke’s frown deepened. ‘Jorg Ancrath?’

‘The same.’ I made a bow.

‘It’s been a long time, young Jorg.’ Alaric stamped his foot and several of his warriors entered the hall from a room at the end. ‘I’ve heard stories about

you. My thanks for not killing my idiot son.’ He nodded toward Sindri.

‘I’m sure the tales have been over-told,’ I said. ‘I’m not a violent man.’

Makin had to cover his mouth at that. Sindri frowned, looking rapidly from me to Makin and back at the Duke.

‘So what brings you to the Danelands then, Jorg of Ancrath?’ the Duke asked. No time wasted here, no wine or ale offered, no gifts exchanged.

‘I’d like some friends in the north,’ I said. It hadn’t been part of my thinking but once in a long while I like a man on sight. I’d liked Alaric Maladon on sight eight years earlier when he brought my mother a gift. I liked him now. ‘This place looks to have missed a harvest or two. Perhaps you need a friend in the south?’

‘A plain speaker, eh?’ I could see the grin deep in his beard. ‘Where’s all your southern song and dance, eh? No “prithees”, no “beseeching after my health”?’

‘I must have dropped all that somewhere on the way,’ I said.

‘So what do you really want, Jorg of Ancrath?’ Alaric asked. ‘You didn’t ride five hundred miles to learn the axe-dance.’

‘Perhaps I just wanted to meet the Vikings,’ I said. ‘But prithee tell me what ails this land. I beseech you.’

He laughed out loud at that. ‘Real Vikings have salt in their beard and ice on their furs,’ he said. ‘They call us *fit-firar*, land-men, and have little love for us. My fathers came here a long long time ago, Jorg. I would rather they stayed by the sea. I may not have salt in my beard but it’s in my blood. I’ve tasted it.’ He stamped again and a thickset woman with coiled hair brought out ale, a horn for him and two flagons for us. ‘When they bury me my son will have to buy the longboat and have it sailed and carted from Osheim. My neighbour had local men make his. Would have sunk before it got out of harbour, if it ever saw the ocean.’

We drank our ale, bitter stuff, salted as if everything had to remind these folk of their lost seas. I set my flagon on the table and the ground shook, harder than any of the times before, as if I had made it happen. Dust sifted from the rafters, caught here and there by sunlight spearing through high windows.

‘Unless you can tame volcanoes, Jorg, you’ll not find much to be done for Maladon,’ Alaric said.

‘Can’t Ferrakind send them to sleep for you?’ I asked. I’d read that volcanoes slept, sometimes for a lifetime, sometimes longer.

Alaric raised a hairy brow at that. Behind us, Sindri laughed. ‘Ferrakind stirs them up,’ he said. ‘Gods rot him.’

‘And you let him live?’ I asked.

The Duke of Maladon glanced at his fireplace as if an enemy might be squatting there among the ashes. ‘There’s no killing a fire-mage, not a true one. He’s like summer-burning in a dry forest. Stamp out the flames and they spring back up from the hot ground.’

‘Why does he do it?’ I knocked back the last of my salt beer and grimaced. Almost as bad as the absinthe.

‘It’s his nature.’ Alaric shrugged. ‘When men look too long into the fire it looks back into them. It burns out what makes them men. I think he speaks with the jötnar behind the flames. He wants to bring a second Ragnarök.’

‘And you’re going to let him?’ I asked. I cared little enough for jötnar, or any other kind of spirit. Push far enough past anything, be it fire or sky or even death and you’ll find the creatures that have always dwelt there. Call them what you will. ‘I heard tell there was no problem that a Dane couldn’t cut through with an axe.’ It’s a dangerous business questioning a man’s courage in his own hall, especially a Viking’s, but if ever a place needed shaking up then this was it.

‘Meet him before you judge us, Jorg,’ Alaric said. He sipped from his ale horn.

I had expected a more heated response, perhaps a violent one. The Duke looked tired, as if something had burned out of him too.

‘In truth I came to meet him,’ I said.

‘I’ll take you,’ Sindri said, without hesitation.

‘No.’ His father, just as fast.

‘How many sons do you have, Duke Maladon?’ I asked.

‘You see him.’ Alaric nodded to Sindri. ‘I had four born alive. The eldest three burned in the Heimrift. You should go home, Jorg Ancrath. There’s nothing for you in the mountains.’

*Four years earlier*

Sindri caught us up before we'd got five miles from his father's hall. I'd left Makin with Duke Alaric. Makin had a way with the finding of common ground and the building of friendships. I left Rike too, because he would only moan about climbing mountains and because if anyone could show the Danes true berserker spirit it was Rike. I left Red Kent also, for his Norse blood on his father's side and because he wanted a good axe made for him.

'Well met,' I said as Sindri rode up between the pines. It had never been in doubt that he would give chase. He found us as we left the lower slopes and thick forest behind.

'You need me,' he said. 'I know these mountains.'

'We do need you,' I said.

Sindri grinned. He took off his helm and wiped the sweat from his brow, blowing hard from the ride. 'They say you destroyed half of Gelleth,' he said. He looked doubtful.

'Closer to a fifth,' I said. 'Legends grow in the telling.'

Sindri frowned. 'How old are you?'

I felt the Brothers stiffen. It can be annoying to always have the people around you think you're going to murder everyone who looks at you wrong. 'I'm old enough to play with fire,' I said. I pointed to the largest of the mountains ahead. 'That one's a volcano. The smoke gives it away. What about the rest?'

'That's Lorgholt. Three others have spoken in my lifetime,' Sindri said. 'Loki, Minrhir, and Vallas.' He pointed them out in turn. Vallas had the faintest wisps of smoke or steam rising from its western flanks. 'In the oldest eddas the stories tell of Halradra being the father and these four his sons.' Sindri pointed to the low bulk of Halradra. 'But he has slept for centuries.'

'Let's go there then,' I said. 'I'd like to watch a sleeping giant before I poke a woken-up one.'

‘These aren’t people, Jorg,’ Makin had told me before we left. ‘They’re not enemies. You can’t fight them.’

He didn’t know what I thought I could achieve wandering the landscape. I didn’t either but it always pays to have a look around. If I think back on my successes, such as they are, they come as often as not from the simple exercise of putting two disparate facts together and making a weapon of them. I destroyed Gelleth with two facts that when laid one atop the other, made something dangerous. There’s a thing like that at the heart of the Builders’ weapons, two chunks of magic, harmless enough on their own but forming some critical mass when pushed together.

The Halradra is not so tall as its sons, but it is tall. Its lower slopes are softened by the years, black grit in the main, crunching under hoof, the rocks rotten with bubbles so that you can crumble them in your hands, the fire so long gone that no sniff of it remains. Through the ash and broken rock, fireweed grew in profusion, Rosebay Willowherb as they had it in Master Lundist’s books. The first to spring up where the fire has been. Even after four hundred years nothing much else wanted to push its way through the black dirt.

‘Do you see them?’ Gorgoth rumbled at my shoulder. The depth of his voice took me by surprise as always.

‘If by “them” you mean mountains, then yes. Otherwise, no.’

He pointed with one thick finger, almost the width of Gog’s forearm. ‘Caves.’

I still didn’t see them, but in the end I did. Cave mouths at the base of a sharp fall. Not that dissimilar from Gorgoth’s old home beneath Mount Honas.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘They are.’ I thought that sometimes perhaps Gorgoth should just keep holding on to those precious words.

We pressed on. Higher up and the going gets too steep and too treacherous for horses. We left our mounts with Sim and Grumlow, continuing on foot, trudging on through a thin layer of icy snow. The peaks of Halradra’s sons look broken off, jagged, forged with violence. The old man could pass as a common mountain with no hint of a crater until you scramble up through snow-choked gullies and find the lake laid out before you, sudden and without announcement.

‘Happy now?’ Sindri climbed up beside me and found a perch where the wind had taken the snow from a rock. He looked happy enough himself

despite his tone.

‘It’s a sight and a half isn’t it?’ I said.

Gorgoth clambered up with Gog on his shoulder.

‘I like this mountain,’ Gog said. ‘It has a heart.’

‘The lake is a strange blue,’ I said. ‘Is the water tainted?’

‘Ice,’ Sindri said. ‘The water’s just meltwater, a yard deep if that, run down off the crater slope. The lake stays frozen all year, underneath.’

‘Well now. There’s a thing,’ I said. And I had two facts by the corners.

We hunkered down in the lee of some rocks a little way below the crater rim and watched the strange blue of those waters as we ate a cold meal from Alaric’s kitchens.

‘What kind of heart does the mountain have, Gog?’ I threw chicken bones down the slope and licked the grease from my fingers.

He paused, closing his eyes to think. ‘Old, slow, warm.’

‘Does it beat?’ I asked.

‘Four times,’ Gog said.

‘Since we started climbing?’

‘Since we saw the smoke as we rode in from the bridge,’ Gog said.

‘Eagle,’ Row pointed into the hazy blue above us. He reached for his bow.

‘Good eyes as always, Row.’ I held his arm. ‘Let the bird fly.’

‘So,’ said Sindri, huddled, braids flailing in the wind. ‘What next?’

‘I’d like to see those caves,’ I said. Gorgoth’s observation felt more important all of a sudden. Precious even.

We started to make our way down, strangely a more difficult proposition than the climb, as if Halradra wanted to keep hold of us. The rock seemed to crumble under every heavy downhill step with the ice to help any faller on his way. I caught Sindri at one turn, grabbing his elbow as the ground broke away under his heel.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘Alaric wouldn’t be pleased to lose another son up here,’ I said.

Sindri laughed. ‘I would have stopped at the bottom.’

Gorgoth followed, kicking footholds for himself at each step; Gog scampered free rather than risk getting squashed if the giant fell.

We found Sim and Grumlow sharing a pipe, sprawled on the rocks in the sunshine all at ease.

The caves were almost harder to see as we drew closer. Black caves in a



black cliff with black interiors. I spotted three entrances, one big enough to grow an oak in.

‘Something lives here,’ Gorgoth said.

I looked for signs, bones or scat around the cave mouth. ‘There’s nothing,’ I said. ‘What makes you say there is?’

Expressions came hard to a face like Gorgoth’s, but enough of the ridges and furrows moved to let a keen observer know that something puzzled him. ‘I can hear them,’ he said.

‘Keen ears and keen eyes. I can’t hear anything. Just the wind.’ I stopped and closed my eyes as Tutor Lundist taught me, and let the wind blow. I let the mountain noises flow through me. I counted away the beat of my heart and the sigh of breath. Nothing.

‘I hear them,’ Gorgoth said.

‘Let’s go careful then,’ I said. ‘Time for your bow, Brother Row, good thing you didn’t waste an arrow on that bird.’

We tethered the horses and made ready. I took my sword in hand. Sindri unslung the axe from his back, a fine weapon with silver-chased scrollwork on the blade behind the cutting edge. And we moved in closer. I led in from downwind, an old habit that cost us half an hour traversing the slopes. From fifty yards the wind bought a hint of the inhabitants, an animal stink, faint but rank. ‘Our friends keep a clean front doorstep,’ I said. ‘Not bears or mountain cats. Can you still hear them, Gorgoth?’

He nodded. ‘They’re talking about food, and battle.’

‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ I said. I could hear nothing.

We came by slow steps to the great cave mouth flanked by two smaller mouths and several cracks a man might slip through. Standing before the cave it seemed impossible that I had missed it from across the slopes. Apart from one shattered bone wedged between two rocks there was no sign of habitation. Except for the stink.

Gorgoth stepped in first. He carried a crude flail in his belt, just three thick chains on a wooden haft, set with twists of sharp metal. A leather apron kept the chains from shredding his legs as he ran. I’d never seen him take the weapon in hand, and somehow he seemed more scary unarmed. Gog walked behind Gorgoth with Sindri and me to flank him, then Sim and Grumlow, Row at the rear eyeing everything with suspicion.

‘We can’t go far,’ Row said. ‘Too dark.’ He didn’t sound upset.

Gog lifted his hand and flames sprung from his fingertips. Row stifled a

curse.

I looked back out across the mountain slopes. The fan of rocks and dirt spreading from the cave mouth reminded me of something. Random thoughts scratched each other at the back of my mind, fighting for form, for the words to say what they meant.

‘We’ll go on in,’ I said. ‘A little way. I want to hear what Gorgoth hears.’ He’d been right about the caves after all.

Toward the back of the cavern several tunnels led into the mountain. The larger passage led up at a shallow gradient. ‘That one.’

We moved in. Underfoot the tunnel lay grit-floored, strewn with small rocks, but the walls were smooth, almost slick. The shadows moved and danced as Gog followed Gorgoth, his burning hand throwing a vast shadow-Gorgoth ahead of us. Fifty yards brought us to an almost spherical chamber with the tunnel leading on behind it, now heading up almost as steeply as the slopes outside. The fire glow gave the place memories of the cathedral at Shartres, our shadows processing over smooth rock on every side.

‘Plato came to such a cave,’ I said. ‘And saw the whole world on its walls.’

‘Your pardon?’ Sindri said.

I shook my head. ‘See here?’ I pointed to a slick depression in the rock close by, as if a giant had sunk his thumb into soft mud and left his imprint.

‘What is it?’ Gog asked.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. But it looked familiar. Like a pothole in a riverbed.

I ran across to the tunnel at the back and stood at the entrance. Men didn’t make these passages, nor troll or Grendel-kin, goblin, pixie or ghost. The air sat almost still, but moved even so, crawling from the tunnel. Cold air. Very cold.

‘Jorg,’ Row said.

‘I’m thinking,’ I said, not looking back.

‘Jorg!’ he said again.

And I turned. In the mouth of the tunnel through which we had come stood two trolls. I called them trolls to myself because they looked like the trolls of my imagination, not the rocky lumps the Danes decorated the landscape with but lean dangerous creatures, dark-stained hide, muscles like knots in rope, laid along long limbs that ended in black talons. Crouched as they were their height was hard to judge, but I guessed eight feet, maybe nine. They moved with quick purpose, hugging the stone.

‘Keep the arrow,’ I told Row. I couldn’t see one arrow slowing either of

them down unless it went in the neck or eye.

I would have called them monsters, leucrota, mistakes like Gorgoth, except that there were two of them. A pair speaks of design rather than accident.

‘Hello,’ I said. It sounded stupid, one thin voice in that great chamber, but I could think of nothing else to say, and fighting them just didn’t appeal. The only comfort to be taken was that both those pairs of black eyes were fixed on Gorgoth rather than me.

‘Can’t you hear them?’ Gorgoth asked.

‘No,’ I said.

The leftmost troll leapt forward without the preamble of feints or growling. He threw himself at Gorgoth, reaching for his face. Gorgoth caught the troll’s wrists and stopped him dead. Both monsters stood, locked together, leaning in, muscles writhing and twitching. The troll’s breath escaped in quick rasps. Gorgoth rumbled. I hadn’t seen him struggle with anything since he held the gate up at the Haunt. Every task since then, be it unloading barrels, shifting rocks, anything, hadn’t so much as raised a sweat.

Row lifted his bow again. For the second time I caught his arm. ‘Wait.’

They held each other, straining, the occasional swift readjustment of feet. Troll claws gouging the rock. Gorgoth’s blunt toes anchoring his weight. Muscle heaped against muscle, bones creaking with the strain, spit flecking at their lips as harsh breaths escaped. Moments stretched until they felt like minutes. My own nails bit into my palm, white knuckles on sword hilt; something had to give, something. And without warning the troll slammed into the floor, a beat of silence and Gorgoth let out a deep roar that hurt my chest and set Row’s nose bleeding.

Gorgoth heaved in a breath. ‘They will serve,’ he said.

‘What?’ I said, then, ‘Why?’

The troll on the floor rolled over and got to its feet, backing to its companion.

‘They are soldiers,’ he said. ‘They want to serve. They were made for it.’

‘Made?’ I asked, still watching the trolls, ready to try to defend myself.

‘It has been written in their dena,’ Gorgoth said.

‘By Ferrakind?’

‘A long time ago,’ Gorgoth said. ‘They are a race. I don’t know when they were changed.’

‘The Builders made them?’ I asked, wondering.

‘Maybe then. Maybe after.’ Gorgoth shrugged.

‘They are Grendel’s children,’ Sindri said. He looked as if he thought he was dreaming. ‘Made for war in the ashes of Ragnarök. They’re waiting here for the final battle.’

‘Do they know what made these tunnels,’ I asked. ‘And where they lead?’

Gorgoth paused. ‘They know how to fight,’ he said.

‘That’s good too.’ I grinned. ‘You’re talking to them in your head, aren’t you?’

Gorgoth managed surprise again. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I suppose I am.’

‘What now?’ Sindri said, still looking from one troll to the other, testing the edge of his axe with his fingers.

‘We go back,’ I said. I needed to muse and musing is more comfortable under a duke’s roof than on a windswept volcano or buried in fetid caves.

‘Gorgoth, tell the trolls we’ll be back and to keep our visit to themselves.’ I looked the pair over one more time. I wondered what kind of havoc they’d wreak on a battlefield. The best kind I thought.

‘Let’s go back,’ I said. *And see if our perspectives have changed any after our climb.*

## 19

*Four years earlier*

*The forests in the Danelore have a character all their own, dense pines that make a perpetual twilight of the day and an ink-black soup of each night, moon or no. Old needles deaden every footfall and hoof, leaving the dry scratchings of dead branches the only sound. In such a place it takes no leap of imagination to believe every goblin tale of the long-hall. And in breaking clear once more into open air you understand that it was with the wood-axe man claimed these lands, not the battleaxe.*

We came back to Duke Alaric's hall early with the cocks crowing and every shadow stretching itself out over the grass as if to point the way. A ground mist still hung in shreds around the trees, swirling where the horses stepped. A few servants were on the move, to and fro between the great hall and the kitchens, stable-boys getting horses ready to ride, a baker up from the nearby village with warm loaves heaped on his cart.

Two lads from the stables took our horses. I gave Brath a slap on his haunch as they led him off. A light rain started to fall. I didn't mind.

The rain made the stonework glisten, falling heavier by the moment. There's a word. *Glisten*. Silver chains on holy trees, the gloss on lips for kissing, dew on spiderwebs, sweat on breasts. Glisten, glisten, listen. Say it until the meaning bleeds away. Even without meaning it stays true. The rain made the grey stone glisten. Not quite a sparkle, not quite a gleam, but a glisten to the soaked cobbles, a gurgle from gutters where the dirt ran and leaves twirled in fleeting rapids, bound for dark and hungry throats, swallowed past stone teeth. A piece of straw ran by my feet, arrowing the straightest path; a kayak on white water, it bobbed, plunged, surged, reached the drain, spun twice, and was gone.

Sometimes the world slows and you notice every small thing, as if you stood between two beats of eternity's heart. It seemed to me I had felt

something similar before, with Corion, with Sageous, even Jane. The air hung heavy with the metallic scent of rain. I wondered: if I stood out there, in the flood, would the rain wrap a grey life and make it shine? Should I stand, arms spread, and raise my face? Let it wash me clean. Or did my stains run too deep?

I listened to the fall of it, to the drumming, the drip, the pitter, and the patter. The others moved around me, handing over reins, taking saddlebags, the business of living, as if they hadn't noticed me step outside such things. As if they couldn't sense her.

Rike stumbled from the great hall, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

'Christ, Rike,' I said. 'We've been gone a day. How did you grow a beard?'

He shrugged, rubbing at stubble near deep enough to lose his fingers in. 'When in Roma.'

I ignored his bad geography and the fact that he even knew the phrase, and asked the more obvious question. 'Why are you up?' On the road Rike always came last from his bed-roll and would never rise without some kind of threat or enticement.

He scratched his head at that. Sindri came back from the stables and clapped a hand on my shoulder. 'He'll look good with a beard. We'll make a Viking of him yet!'

Rike frowned. 'She said to meet her at the end of the lake.'

'Who said?'

He frowned again, shrugged and went back into the hall.

I looked out across the lake. At the far end, faint through the grey veils of rain, a tent stood, a yurt, yellowed with age, a thin line of smoke escaping through the smoke-hole. The strangeness came from there. That was where she waited.

Sindri looked too. 'That's Ekatri, a völvá from the north. She doesn't come often. Twice when I was young.'

'Völvá?' I asked.

'She knows things. She can see the future,' Sindri said. 'A witch. Is that what you call them?' He frowned. 'Yes, a witch. You'd best go to her. Wouldn't do to keep her waiting. Maybe she'll read your future for you.'

'I'll go now,' I said. Sometimes you wait and watch, sometimes you walk right on in. There's not much to learn from the outside of a tent.

'I'll see you inside.' Sindri nodded to the hall, grinned and wiped the rain

from his beard. He'd be waking his father before I got to the end of the lake, telling him about the trolls and Gorgoth. What would the good duke make of all that I wondered? Perhaps the witch would tell me.

The ground trembled once as I walked along the lake, setting the water dancing. I could smell the smoke from the witch's tent now. It put an acrid taste in my mouth and reminded me of the volcanoes. The wind picked up, blowing rain into my face.

Old Tutor Lundist once taught me about seers, soothsayers, and the star-watchers who count out our lives by the slow predictions of planets rolling over the heavens. 'How many words would be needed to tell the tale of your life?' he had asked. 'How many to reach this point, and how many more to reach the end?'

'Lots?' I grinned and glanced away, out the narrow window to the courtyard, the gates, the fields beyond city walls. I had the twitchies in my feet, eager to be off chasing some or other thing while the sun still shone.

'This is our curse.' Lundist stamped and rose from his chair with a groan. 'Man is doomed to repeat his mistakes time and again because he learns only from experience.'

He smoothed out an old scroll across the desk, covered in the pictograms of his homeland. It had pictures too, bright and interesting in the eastern style. 'The zodiac,' he said.

I put my finger on the dragon, caught in a few bold strokes of red and gold. 'This one,' I said.

'Your life is laid out from the moment of your birth, Jorg, and you don't get to choose. All the words of your story can be replaced by one date and place. Where the planets hung in that instant, how they turned their faces, and which of them looked toward you ... that configuration forms a key and that key unlocks all that a man will be,' he said.

I couldn't tell if he was joking. Lundist was always a man for enquiry, for logic and judging, for patience and subtlety. All that felt rather pointless if we walked a fixed path from the cradle to whatever end was written in stars.

I'd reached the yurt without noticing. I made an abrupt stop and managed not to walk into it. I circled for the entrance and ducked through without announcement. She was supposed to know the future after all.

'Listen,' she said as I pushed through the flap into her tent, a stinking place of hides and hanging dead things.

'Listen,' she said again as I made to open my mouth.

So I sat cross-legged beneath the dangling husks, and listened and didn't speak.

'Good,' she said. 'You're better than most. Better than those bold, noisy boys wanting so much to be men, wanting only to hear the words from their own mouths.'

I listened to the dry wheeze of her as she spoke, to the flap and creak of the tent, the insistence of the rain, and the complaints of the wind.

'So you listen, but do you hear?' she asked.

I watched her. She wore her years badly and the gloom couldn't hide it. She watched me back with one eye; the other sat sunken and closed in the grey folds of her flesh. It leaked something like snot onto her cheek.

'You should look better after ninety winters,' she sneered. She needed just the one eye to read my expression. 'The first fifty, hard ones in the lands of fire and ice where the true Vikings live.'

I would have guessed two hundred just from looking at her, from the slide of her face, the crags, warts, and wattles. Only her eye seemed young, and that disappointed me for I'd come to seek wisdom.

'I hear,' I said. I held my questions because folk only came to her with questions. If she truly knew the answers then perhaps I didn't need to ask.

She reached into the layered rags and furs around her waist. The stench increased immediately and I struggled not to choke. When her hand emerged, more a bone claw than supple fingers, it clutched a glass jar, the contents sloshing. 'Builder-glass,' she said, wetting her lips with a quick pink tongue, somehow obscene in her withered mouth. She cradled the flask in her hands. 'How did we lose the art? There's not a man you could reach with five weeks of riding that could make this now. And if I dropped it a finger's width onto stone ... gone! A thousand worthless pieces.'

'How old?' I asked. The question escaped me despite my resolution.

'Ten centuries, maybe twelve,' she said. 'Palaces have crumbled in that time. The statues of emperors lie ruined and buried. And this ...' She held it up. An eye made slow rotations in the greenish swirl. 'Still whole.'

'Is it your eye?' I asked.

'The very same.' She watched me with her bright one and set the other on the rug in its Builder flask.

'I sacrificed it for wisdom,' she said. 'As Odin did at Mimir's well.'

'And did you get wisdom?' I asked. An impertinent question perhaps from a boy of fourteen but she had asked to see me, not I her, and the longer I sat



there, the smaller and older she looked.

She grinned, displaying a single rotting tooth-stump. 'I discovered it would have been wise to leave my eye next to the other one.' The eye came to rest at the bottom of the jar, aimed slightly to my left.

'I see you have a baby with you,' she said.

I glanced to my side. The baby lay dead, brains oozing from his broken skull, not much blood but what there was lay shockingly red on his milk-white scalp. He seldom looked so clear, so real, but Ekatri's yurt held the kind of shadows that invited ghosts. I said nothing.

'Show me the box.' She held out her hand.

I took it from its place just inside my breastplate. Keeping a tight grip I held it out toward her. She reached for it, quicker than an old woman has a right to be, and snatched her hand back with a gasp. 'Powerful,' she said. Blood dripped from her fingers, welling from a dozen small puncture wounds. The fact that there was blood to spill in those bony old fingers surprised me.

I put the box back. 'I should warn you that I'm not taken with horoscopes and such,' I told her.

She licked her lips again and said nothing.

'If you must know, I'm a goat,' I said. 'That's right, a fecking goat. There's a whole nation of people behind the East Wall who say I was born in the year of the goat. I've no time for any system that has me as a goat. I don't care how ancient their civilization is.'

She gave the flask a gentle swirl. 'It sees into other worlds,' she said, as if I hadn't spoken at all.

'That's good then?' I said.

She tapped her living eye. 'This one sees into other worlds too,' she said. 'And it has a clearer view.' She took a leather bag from within her rags and set it by the jar. 'Rune stones,' she said. 'Maybe if you go east and climb over the great wall you will be a goat. Here in the north the runes will tell your story.'

I kept my lips tight shut, remembering my pledge at last. She would tell me about the future or she wouldn't. What she told me without questions to answer might be true.

She took a handful from the bag, grey stones clacking soft against each other. 'Honourous Jorg Ancrath.' She breathed my name into the stones, then let them fall. It seemed that they took a lifetime to reach the rug, each making

its slow turns, end to end, side to side, the runes scored across them appearing and reappearing. They hit like anvils. I can feel the shake of it even now. It echoes in these bones of mine.

‘The Perth rune, *initiation*,’ she said. ‘Thurisaz. Uruz, *strength*.’ She poked them aside as if they were unimportant. She turned a stone over. ‘Wunjo, *joy*, face down. And here, Kano, the rune of *opening*.’

I set a finger to Thurisaz and the völva sucked a sharp breath over grey gums. She scowled and batted at my hand to move it, the stone cold to touch, the witch’s hand colder, thin skin like paper. She hadn’t spoken the rune’s name in the empire tongue but I knew the old speech of the north from Lundist’s books.

‘The thorns,’ I said.

She flapped at me again and I withdrew my hand. Her fingers passed swiftly over the rest, counting. She swept them all away and poured them back onto the others still in the bag. ‘There are arrows ahead of you,’ she said.

‘I’m going to be shot?’

‘You will live happy if you don’t break the arrow.’ She picked up the flask and stared one eye into the other. She shivered. ‘Open your gates.’ In her other hand the Wunjo rune-stone, as if she hadn’t put it into the bag. *Joy*. She turned it over, blank side up. ‘Or don’t.’

‘What about Ferrakind?’ I asked. I wasn’t interested in arrows.

‘Him!’ She spat a dark mess into her furs. ‘Don’t go there. Even you should know that, Jorg, with your dark heart and empty head. Don’t go anywhere near that man. He burns.’

‘How many stones do you have in that bag, old woman?’ I asked.

‘Twenty? Twenty-five?’

‘Twenty-four,’ she said, and laid her claw on the bag, still bleeding.

‘That’s not so many words to tell the story of a man’s life,’ I said.

‘Men’s lives are simple things,’ she said.

I felt her hands on me, even though one lay on the bag and the other held the flask. I felt them pinching, poking, reaching in to pick through my memories. ‘Don’t,’ I said. I let the necromancy rise in me, acid at the back of my throat. The dead things above us twisted, a dry paw twitched, the black twist of a man’s entrails crackled as it flexed, snake-like.

‘As you please.’ Again that pink tongue, flicking over her lips, and she stopped.

‘Why did you come here, Ekatri?’ I asked. I surprised myself by finding her name. People’s names escape me. Probably because I don’t care about them.

Her eye found mine, as if seeing me for the first time. ‘When I was young, young enough for you to want me, Jorg of Ancrath, oh yes; when I was young the runes were cast for me. Twenty-four words are not enough to tell all of a woman’s story, especially when one of them is wasted on a boy she would have to grow old waiting for. I called you here because I was told to long ago, even before your grandmothers quickened.’

She spat again, finding the floor-hides this time.

‘I don’t like you, boy,’ she said. ‘You’re too ... prickly. You use that charm of yours like a blade, but charming doesn’t work on old witches. We see through to the core, and the core of you is rotten. If there’s anything decent left in there then it’s buried deeper than I care to look and probably doomed. But I came because the runes were cast for me, and they said I should do the same for you.’

‘Fine words from a hag that smells as though she died ten years back and just hasn’t had the decency to stop wittering,’ I said. I didn’t like the way she looked at me, with either eye, and insulting her didn’t make me feel better. It made me feel fourteen. I tried to remember that I called myself a king and stopped my fingers wandering over the dagger at my hip. ‘So why would your runes send you to annoy me if there’s no chance for me then, old woman? If I’m a lost cause?’

She shrugged, a shifting of her rags. ‘There’s hope for everyone. A slim hope. A fool’s hope. Even a gut-shot man has a fool’s hope.’

I almost spat at that, but royal spit might actually have improved the place. Besides, witches can work all manner of mischief with a glob of your phlegm and a strand of your hair. Instead I stood and offered the smallest of bows. ‘Breakfast awaits me, if I can find my appetite again.’

‘Play with fire and you’ll get burned,’ she said, almost a whisper.

‘You make a living out of platitudes?’ I asked.

‘Don’t stand before the arrow,’ she said.

‘Capital advice.’ I backed toward the exit.

‘The Prince of Arrow will take the throne,’ she said through tight-pressed lips, as if it hurt to speak plainly. ‘The wise have known it since before your father’s father was born. Skilfar told me as much when she cast my runes.’

‘I was never one for fortune-telling.’ I reached the flap and pushed it aside.

‘Why don’t you stay?’ She patted the hides beside her, tongue flicking over dry lips. ‘You might enjoy it.’ And for a heartbeat Katherine sat there in the sapphire satin of the dress she wore in her chamber that night. When I hit her.

I ran at that. I pelted through the rain chased by Ekatri’s laughter, my courage sprinting ahead of me. And my appetite did not return for breakfast.

While others ate I sat in the shadows by a cold hearth and rocked back upon my chair. Makin came across, his fist full of cold mutton on the bone, grey and greasy. ‘Find anything interesting?’ he asked.

I didn’t answer but opened my hand. Thurisaz, the thorns. It’s no great feat to steal from a one-eyed woman. The stone ate the shadow and gave back nothing, the single rune slashed black across it. The thorns. My past and future resting on my palm.

*Four years earlier*

Makin works a kind of magic with people. If he spends even half an hour in their company they will like him. He doesn't need to do anything in particular. There don't appear to be any tricks involved and he doesn't seem to try. Whatever he does is different each time but the result is the same. He's a killer, a hard man, and in bad company he will do bad things, but in half of one hour you will want him to be your friend.

'Good morning, Duke Maladon,' I said as his axemen showed me into the great hall.

I squeezed the rain from my hair. Makin sat in a chair a step below the Duke's dais. He'd just passed a flagon up to Maladon, and sipped small beer from his own as I approached. You could believe they had sat like this every morning for ten years.

'King Jorg,' the Duke said. To his credit he didn't hesitate to call me king though I stood dripping in my road-rags.

The hall lay in shadow, despite the grey morning fingering its way through high windows and the lamps still burning on every other pillar. On his throne Alaric Maladon cut an impressive figure. He could have been drawn from the legends out of dawn-time.

'I hope Makin hasn't been boring you with his tales. He is given to some outrageous lies,' I said.

'So you didn't push your father's Watch-master over a waterfall?' the Duke asked.

'I may—'

'Or behead a necromancer and eat his heart?'

Makin wiped foam from his moustache and watched one of the hounds gnaw a bone. All the Brothers seemed to be hard at work on facial hair. I think the Danes made them feel inadequate.

'Not everything he says is a lie. But watch him,' I said.

‘So did Ekatri have warm words for you?’ the Duke asked. No dancing around the issue with these northmen.

‘Isn’t that supposed to be between me and her? Isn’t it bad luck to tell?’

Alaric shrugged. ‘How would we know if she was any use if nobody ever told what she said?’

‘I think she passed on a hundred-year-old message telling me to lie down and let the Prince of Arrow have his way with my arse.’

Makin snorted into his beer at that and some of the northmen grinned, though it’s hard to tell behind a serious beard.

‘I’ve heard something similar,’ Alaric said. ‘A soothsayer from the fjords, ice in his veins and a way with the reading of warm entrails. Told me the old gods and the white Christ all agreed. The time for a new emperor has come and he will spring from the seed of the old. The whisper among the Hundred is that these signs point to Arrow.’

‘The Prince of Arrow can kiss my axe,’ Sindri said. I’d not seen him in the shadows behind his father’s guards.

‘You’ve not met him, son,’ Alaric said. ‘I’m told he makes an impression.’

‘So how will your doors stand, Duke of Maladon, if the Prince comes north?’ I asked.

The Duke grinned. ‘I like you, boy.’

I let the ‘boy’ slide.

‘I’ve always thought that the blood of empire pooled in the north,’ Alaric said. ‘I always thought that a Dane-man should take the empire throne, by axe and fire, and that I might be the man to do it.’ He took a long draft from his flagon and raised a bushy brow at me. ‘How would your gates stand if the Prince came calling one fine morning?’

‘That, my friend, would depend on quite how fine a morning it was. But I’ve never liked to be pushed, especially not by soothsayers and witches, not by the words of dead men, not by predictions based on the invisible swing of planets, scratched out on number slates or teased from the spilled guts of an unfortunate sheep,’ I said.

‘On the other hand,’ Alaric said, ‘these predictions are very old. The new emperor’s path has been prepared for a hundred years and more. Perhaps this Prince of Arrow is the one they speak of.’

‘Old men make old words holy. I say old words are worn out and should be set aside. Take a new bride to bed, not a hag,’ I said, thinking of Ekatri. ‘A fool may scrawl on a slate and if no one has the wit to wipe it clean for a

thousand years, the scrawl becomes the wisdom of ages.'

Nodding among the warriors, more grins. 'Ekatri's message came from Skilfar in the north.' That wiped the smiles away quick enough.

Alaric spat into the rushes. 'An ice witch in the north, a fire-mage on our doorstep. Vikings were born in the land of ice and fire, and found their strength opposing both. Write your own story, Jorg.'

I liked the man. Let the hidden players reach to move the Duke of Maladon across the board and they might find themselves short of several fingers.

The floor shook, a vibration that put a buzz in my teeth and held us all silent until it had passed. The lamps didn't swing but jittered on their hooks and the shadows blurred.

'And how did you find the Heimrift?' Alaric asked.

'I liked it well enough,' I said. 'Mountains have always pleased me.'

In the wide hearth beside us the heaped ash of last night's fire smoked gently. It reminded me of Mount Vallas with the fumes rising from its flanks.

'And are you ready to seek out Ferrakind?' Alaric asked.

'I am,' I said. I had the feeling that Ferrakind would be seeking me out soon enough if I didn't go to him.

'Tell me about the trolls,' Alaric said. He surprised me this duke, with his dawn-time ways, his old gods, his axes and furs, so that you'd think him a blunt instrument built for war and little else, and yet his thoughts ran so quick that his mouth had to leap from one subject to the next just to keep up. 'The trolls and your strange companions,' he said. And as if on cue the great doors opened at the far end of the hall to admit Gorgoth, his bulk black against the rain.

The Duke's warriors took tighter hold of their axes as Gorgoth advanced toward us, the hall silent but for the heavy fall of his feet. Gog hurried on behind him, the rain steaming off him and each lamp burning brighter as he passed.

The ground shook. This time it jolted as if a giant's hammer had fallen close by. Outside something groaned and fell with a crash. And beside me a lamp slipped its hook and smashed on the flagstones splashing burning oil in a wide bright circle. Several splatters caught my leggings and flamed there though the cloth lay too wet to catch. Gog moved fast. He threw one clawed hand toward me and the other at the hearth. He made a brief, high cry and the lamp oil guttered out. In the hearth a new fire burned with merry flames as if it were dry wood heaped there instead of grey ash.

Oaths from the men around us. Because of the fierceness of the tremor, or the business with the fallen lamp, or just to release the tension built as Gorgoth advanced through the shadowed hall, I didn't know.

'Now that was a clever trick.' I crouched to be on a level with Gog and waved him to me. 'How did you do that?' My fingers tested where the fire had burned, leggings and floor, and came away cold and oily.

'Do what?' Gog asked, his voice high, his eyes on the Duke and the glitter of the axes held around him.

'Put the fire out,' I said. I glanced at the hearth. 'Move the fire.' I corrected myself.

Gog didn't look away from the Alaric in his high chair. 'There's only one fire, silly,' he said, forgetting any business of kings and dukes. 'I just squeezed it.'

I frowned. I had the edge of understanding him, but it kept slipping my grasp. I hate that. 'Tell me.' I steered him by the shoulders until our eyes met.

'There's only one fire,' he said. His eyes were dark, their usual all-black, but his gaze held something hot, something uncomfortable, as if it might light you up like a tallow wick.

'One fire,' I said. 'And all these ...' I waved a hand at the lamps. 'Windows onto it?'

'Yes.' Gog sighed, exasperated, and struggled to turn away for some new game.

I had the image of a rug in my head. A rug with a wrinkle in it. I remembered it from softer days. From days when I slept in a world that never shook or burned, in a room where my mother would always come to say good night. A rug with a wrinkle in it and a maid trying to smooth it down with her foot. And every time she squashed it flat a new wrinkle would spring up close by. But never two. Because there was only one fold in the rug.

'You can take fire from one place and put it in another,' I said.

Gog nodded.

'Because there is only one fire, and we see pieces of it,' I said. 'You squeeze one corner down and pull up another.'

Gog nodded and struggled to be off.

'And that's all you ever do,' I said.

Gog didn't answer, as if it were too obvious for comment. I let him go and he ran beneath the nearest table to play with a red-furred hound.

'The trolls?' Alaric said, with the air of a man forcing patience.



‘We met some. Gorgoth can talk to them. They seem to like him,’ I said. Alaric waited. It’s a good enough trick. Say nothing and men feel compelled to fill the silence, even if it’s with things they would rather have kept secret. It’s a good enough trick, but I know it and I said nothing.

‘The Duke of Maladon knows about the trolls,’ Gorgoth said. The Danes flinched when he spoke, as if they thought him incapable of it and expected him to growl and snarl. ‘The trolls serve Ferrakind. The duke wishes to know why the ones we discovered were not in the fire-mage’s service.’

Alaric shrugged. ‘It’s true.’

‘The trolls serve Ferrakind out of fear,’ Gorgoth said. ‘Their flesh burns as easily as man-flesh. A few hide from him.’

‘Why don’t they just leave the Heimrift if they want to live free?’ I asked.

‘Men,’ he said.

For a moment I didn’t understand. It’s hard to think of such creatures as victims. I remembered their black-clawed hands, hands that could snatch the head off a man.

‘They were once many,’ Gorgoth said.

‘You told me they were made for war, soldiers, so why hide?’ I asked.

Gorgoth nodded. ‘Made for war. Made to serve. Not made to be hunted. Not to be scattered and hunted alone across strange lands.’

I pulled myself to my full height, topping six foot of late. ‘I think—’

‘What do you think, Makin?’ The Duke cut across me.

Makin caught my eye and offered the tiniest of grins. ‘I think all these things are the glimpses of the same fire,’ he said. ‘Everything here comes back to Ferrakind. The dead trees, the lung-flake in your cattle, your lost harvests, the knocking down of your halls one brick, one gable, one rafter at a time, the trolls, the chances of either of you ever making a play for the empire throne, all of it, with Ferrakind burning at the centre.’

It’s always a different thing that makes the magic happen. Today it was his cleverness. But at the end of it all, you wanted Makin to be your friend.

## 21

*Four years earlier*

*The Danes are settled Vikings in the main. The blood of reavers mixed with that of the farmers they conquered. Every Dane counts his ancestry back to the north, to some bloody-handed warrior jumping from his longship, but in truth the wild men of the fjords scorn the Danes and call them fit-firar – a mistake that has seen a lot of Vikings on the wrong end of an axe.*

‘You’re more use to me here, Makin.’

‘You’re mad to go in the first place,’ Makin said.

‘It’s why we came,’ I said.

‘Every new thing I hear about this Ferrakind is a new good reason not to go anywhere near him,’ Makin said.

‘We’re here because he’s gone soft on the little monster,’ Row said from the doorway. He hadn’t been invited to the conversation. None of them had. But on the road any raised voice is an invitation for an audience. Although strictly we weren’t on the road. We were in chambers set aside for guests in a smaller hall paralleling the Duke of Maladon’s great hall.

‘Or *hard* on him.’ Rike leaned in under the door lintel, a nasty leer on him. Since I took the copper box he seemed to feel he had license to speak his mind.

I turned to the doorway. ‘Two things you should remember, my brothers.’

Grumlow, Sim, and Kent appeared as faces poking out behind Rike.

‘First, if you answer me back on this I swear by every priest in hell that you will not leave this building alive. Second, you may recall a time when you and our late lamented brothers were busy dying outside the Haunt. And whilst the Count of Renar’s foot-soldiers were killing you. Killing Elban, and Liar, and Fat Burlow ... Gog had the whole of the count’s personal guard, more than seventy picked men, either as burning pools of human fat, or too damn scared to move. And he was seven. So right now the kind of man he

grows into, and whether he grows up at all, is a question of far greater interest to me than whether you sorry lot live to see tomorrow. In fact there are a lot of questions more important to me than whether you get a day older or not, Rike, but that one is top of the list.'

'You still need me there,' Makin said. Too many years guarding me had turned a duty into a habit, an imperative.

'If things go well I won't need you,' I said. 'And if they go badly, I don't think an extra sword or two will help. He has a small army of trolls at his beck and call, and he can set men on fire by thinking about it. I don't believe a sword will help.'

I left Makin still arguing and the others slinking around like whipped dogs. Well, not Red Kent. He had his new axe. Not a new one in truth but a fine one, forged in the high north and traded from the long-ships off Karlswater. Kent raised the axe to me as I left, nodded, and said nothing.

Gorgoth and Gog waited for me at the Duke's storerooms, a sack of provisions between them and waxed blankets in case we needed shelter on the slopes.

We set off for the Heimrift with a fine spring morning breaking out all around us. We all walked. I'd grown used to Brath and had no desire to leave him untended on the side of a volcano. For all I knew trolls were partial to horsemeat. I quite like it myself.

Sindri caught us half a mile down the road, his plaits bouncing off his back as he cantered along.

'Not this time, Sindri, just me and the pretty boys here,' I said.

'You'll want me until you're clear of the forest.'

'The forest? We had no problems before,' I said.

'I watched you.' Sindri grinned. 'If you had gone wrong I would have guided you. But you were lucky.'

'And what should I be scared of in the forest?' I asked. 'Green trolls? Goblins? Grendel himself? You Danes have more boogie-men than the rest of the empire put together.'

'Pine men,' he said.

'How do they burn?' I asked.

He laughed at that, then let the smile fall from him. 'There's something in the forest that lets the blood from men and replaces it with pine sap. They don't die, these men, but they change.' He pointed to his eyes. 'The whites turn green. They don't bleed. Axes don't bother them.'

I pursed my lips. ‘You can guide us. I’m busy today. These pine men will have to come to the Highlands and get in line if they want a part of me.’

And so we walked, with Sindri leading his horse, along the forest paths he judged safe, and we watched the trees with new suspicions.

By noon the woods thinned and gave over to rising moorland. We marched through waist-deep bracken, thick with stands of gorse scratching as we passed, and everywhere heather, trying to trip us, clouds of pollen blazing our trail.

Sindri didn’t have to be told to leave. ‘I’ll wait here,’ he said, and nestled back in the bracken on a slope that caught the sun. ‘Good luck with Ferrakind. If you kill him you’ll have at least one friend in the north. Probably a thousand!’

‘I’m not here to kill him,’ I said.

‘Probably for the best,’ Sindri said.

I frowned at that. If I’d had three brothers die in the Heimrift then I would have an account to settle with the man who ruled there. The Danes though seemed to think of Ferrakind in the same terms as the volcanoes themselves. To take issue with him would be the same as feuding against a cliff because your friend fell off it.

I took us back to Halradra, along the paths and slopes that we first followed. As we gained height the wind picked up and took the sweat from us. The sun stayed bright and it seemed a good day. If this was to be our last one then at least it had been pretty so far. We trailed along a long valley of black ash and broken lava flows, ancient currents still visible in the frozen rock. Far above us a lone herders’ hut stood dwarfed by the vast heave of the mountains around it, built in days when grass must have found a way to grow here. Unseen in the blue heavens a cloud passed before the sun and its shadow rippled across the expanse of silent sunlit rock arrayed east to west. Gorgoth made a deep sound in his chest. I liked that about travelling with Gorgoth. He hoarded his words, so you wouldn’t know his thoughts from one moment to the next, but he never missed anything, not even those rare occasions when the myriad parts of this dirty, worn-out world of ours come into some fleeting alignment that constructs a beauty so fierce it hurts to see.

Where Gorgoth held his silence Gog normally provided enough chatter for two. In the most part I would let it flow over me. Children prattle. It is their nature and it is mine to let it slide. Climbing Halradra for the second time though Gog said nothing. After so many weeks of, ‘Why do horses have four

legs, Brother Jorg?’ ‘What colour is green made from, Brother Jorg?’ ‘Why is that tree taller than the other one, Brother Jorg?’ you would think I’d appreciate a rest from it, but in truth it grated more when he said nothing.

‘No questions today, Gog?’ I asked.

‘No.’ He shot me a glance then looked away.

‘Nothing?’ I asked.

We carried on up the slope without speaking. I knew it wasn’t just fear that kept his tongue. As a child there’s a horror in discovering the limitations of the ones you love. The time you find that your mother cannot keep you safe, that your tutor makes a mistake, that the wrong path must be taken because the grown-ups lack the strength to take the right one ... each of those moments is the theft of your childhood, each of them a blow that kills some part of the child you were, leaving another part of the man exposed, a new creature, tougher but tempered with bitterness and disappointment.

Gog didn’t want to ask his questions because he didn’t want to hear me lie.

We came to the caves that I had failed to see before, wrinkled our noses at the troll stink, and passed on into the darkness.

‘Some light if you will, Gog,’ I said.

He opened his hand and fire blossomed as if he’d been holding it in his fist all along.

I led the way, through the great hall of the entrance cave, along the smooth passage rising for fifty yards to the cathedral cave, almost spherical with its potholed floor and sculpted walls.

The trolls came quickly this time, a half dozen of them insinuating themselves into the shadowed circle around Gog’s flame. Gorgoth stood ready to set his strength against any of the new ones who doubted him, but they crouched and watched us, watched Gorgoth, and made no attacks.

‘Why are we here?’ Gorgoth asked at last. I had wondered if he would ever crack.

‘I’ve chosen my ground,’ I said. ‘If you have to meet a lion then it’s better if it isn’t in his den.’

‘You didn’t look anywhere else,’ Gorgoth said.

‘I found what I wanted here.’

‘And what’s that?’ he asked.

‘A faint hope.’ I grinned and squatted down to be level with Gog. ‘We have to meet him sometime, Gog. This problem of yours, these fires, they’re going to pull you down sooner or later, and there’s nothing I can do, not even

Gorgoth can help you, and the next time will be worse and the next worse still.' I didn't lie to him. He didn't want to hear me lie.

A tear rolled down his cheek then sputtered into steam. I took his hand, very small in mine, and pressed the stolen rune stone into his palm, closing his fingers about it. 'You and I, Gog, we're the same. Fighters. Brothers. We'll go in there together and come out together.' And we were the same, all lying aside. Underneath it, brushing away the goodness in him, the evil in me, we had a bond. I needed to see him win through. Nothing selfless about it. If Gog could outlast what ate him from the inside out, then maybe I could too. Hell, I didn't come halfway across the empire to save a scrawny child. I came to save me.

'We're going to call Ferrakind to us,' I said. I glanced at the trolls. They watched me with wet black eyes, no reaction to Ferrakind's name. 'Do they even understand what I'm saying?'

'No,' said Gorgoth. 'They're wondering if you'd be good to eat.'

'Ask them if there other ways out of here, ones that lead out higher up the mountain.'

A pause. I strained to hear what passed between them and heard nothing but the flutter of Gog's flame.

'They can take us to one,' Gorgoth said.

'Tell them Ferrakind is going to come. Tell them to hide close by but be ready to lead us out by one of these other paths.'

I could tell when Gorgoth's thoughts hit them. They were on their feet in a moment, black mouths stretched in silent snarls and roars, black tongues lashing over their jagged teeth. Quicker than they appeared they were gone, lost in the darkness.

'Right, we're going to call Ferrakind. I'm going to try to get him to help us.' I steered Gog's face away from the entrance and back to mine. 'If things go badly I want you to do the trick we saw in the Duke's hall. If Ferrakind tries to burn us, I want you to take the fire and put it where I show you.'

'I'll try,' Gog said.

'Try hard.' I'd been scared of burning all my life, since the poker, maybe before that even. I thought of Justice howling as he burned in chains. Sour vomit bubbled at the back of my throat. I could walk away from this. I could just walk.

'How will we make him come here, Brother Jorg?' Gog's first question of the day.

The vision of me walking down the slope still filled my eyes. I would whistle in the spring sunshine and smile. Sweat trickled from beneath my arms, cool across my ribs. If Makin were here he would say he had a bad feeling about this. He'd be right too.

I could just leave. I could just leave.

If Coddin were here he would call this too great a risk with no certain reward. He would say that but he would mean 'Get the hell out of there, Jorg', because he wouldn't want me to burn.

And if my father were here. If he saw me stepping toward the sunlight. Taking the easy path. He would say in a voice so soft that you might almost miss it, 'One more, Jorg. One more.' And at each crossroad thereafter I would choose the easy path one more time. And in the end what I loved would still burn.

'Make a fire, Gog,' I said. 'Make the biggest fucking fire in the world.'

Gog looked at Gorgoth, who nodded and stepped back. For a long moment, measured by half a dozen slow-drawn breaths, nothing happened. Faint at first, as if it were imagination, the flame patterns on Gog's back started to flicker and move. The colour deepened. Flushes of crimson ran through him and the ash grey paled. The heat reached me and I stepped back, then back again. The shadows had run from the cavern but I had no time to see what they revealed. Gog pulsed with heat like an ember in the smith's fire pulses with each breath of the bellows. Gorgoth and I retreated into the tunnel that led up from behind the cathedral cave. We stood with the heat of Gog's fire burning on our faces and the air rolling down from behind us icy on our necks.

The flames came without sound and the whole of the cathedral cave filled with swirling orange fire. We staggered back, losing sight of the cavern but still blistered by the inferno. My breath came in gasps as if the fire had burned out what I needed from the air.

'How will this help?' Gorgoth asked.

'There's only one fire.' I drew in a lungful of hot and useless air. Black dots swam across my vision. 'And Ferrakind watches through it as if it were a window to all the world.'

Gorgoth caught my shoulder and stopped me falling. It seemed to take no effort and I managed a small pang of resentment at that even as I began to slip into a darker place where his hand could not support me. I could hear nothing but my own gasps and the sound of my heels dragging as he pulled

me further back, further up. Most of me felt hot enough to ignite spontaneously, but strangely my feet were freezing.

The fire that had made no sound as it came gave a distinct ‘whumpf’ as it went out. It ended before I passed out entirely, and a shock of cold brought me round with a hoarse curse.

‘What the hell?’ I lay in a small stream of icy water. The tunnel had been dry before, yet now a stream ran along it, rattling pebbles in its flow. I rolled in the freezing trickle for good measure then used the wall to get myself vertical. Gorgoth led the way back. He’d spent a lifetime in the dark beneath Mount Honas and his cats’ eyes found him good footing whilst I stumbled behind. The little stream followed us back into the cathedral chamber where it bubbled and steamed on the hot rocks.

Gog waited where we had left him, still glowing, and Ferrakind stood at the mouth of the tunnel that led to the entrance chamber.

I had thought to find a man with fire in him. Ferrakind was more of a fire with a touch of man remaining. He stood in the form of a man but as if fashioned from molten iron such as runs from the vats of Barrow and of Gwangyang. Every part of him burned and his whole shape flickered from one posture to another. When his eyes, like hot white stars, glanced my way his gaze seared my skin.

‘To me, Gog!’ It hurt to shout, but the steam from the meltwater around my feet helped a little.

‘The child is mine.’ Ferrakind spoke in the crackle of his flames.

Gog scrambled toward us. Ferrakind made a slow advance.

‘And why would you want him?’ I called. I couldn’t get any closer without the skin melting off me.

‘The big fire consumes the small. We will join and our strength will multiply,’ Ferrakind said.

It seemed to me as if he spoke from memory, using what parts of the man had yet to burn away.

‘We came to save him from that,’ I said. ‘Can’t you take the fire from him and leave the boy behind?’

Those hot eyes found me again and stared as if truly seeing me for the first time. ‘I know you.’

I didn’t know what to say to that. My lips felt too dry for the foolish words I might have found in other circumstances.

‘You woke a fire of an old kind that hasn’t burned for a thousand years,’



Ferrakind said.

‘Ah, yes,’ I said. ‘That.’

‘You brought the sun to earth,’ Ferrakind’s crackle softened as if awed by the memory of the Builders’ weapon. Shadows ran across him.

Gog reached us, the heat gone from him leaving new markings, bright flames caught in orange across his back, chest, arms.

‘So can you change him? Can you take the fire out of him, or enough so he can live with it?’ I asked. It still hurt to breathe and the steam from the meltwater made it hard to see. Somewhere above and behind us the heat from Gog and Ferrakind was meeting the ancient ice at Halradra’s core.

Ferrakind’s fire guttered and spurted, flowing over the cavern floor. I realized he was laughing.

‘The Builders tried to break the barriers between thought and matter,’ he said. ‘They made it easier to change the world with a desire. They thinned the walls between life and death, between fire and not-fire, whittled away at the difference between this and that, even here and there.’

It occurred to me that Ferrakind’s sanity had been one of the first things to be consumed in his own personal inferno. ‘Can you help the boy?’ I asked, coughing.

‘It’s written in him. His thoughts touch fire. Fire touches his mind. He is fire-sworn. We can’t change how we’re written.’ Ferrakind stepped toward us, flames rising around him like wings readying for flight. ‘Give me the boy and you may leave.’

‘I’ve come too far for “no”,’ I said.

Fire isn’t patient. Fire does not negotiate. I should have known these things.

Ferrakind reached toward us and a column of white flame erupted from his hands. I had considered myself quick, but Gog moved quicker than I could think and caught the conflagration in his arms, his body shading from orange toward white-heat, but none of it reaching Gorgoth or me.

‘Behind us!’ I shouted. ‘Send it back.’

And Gog obeyed. The tunnel behind us filled with Ferrakind’s white fire as Gog caught it on one hand and threw it away from the other. I could see nothing of the fire-mage, just the white inferno boiling off him, and nothing of the tunnel, just a fierce tornado of white fire swirling away through it, up. We stood in a cocoon with furnace heat on every side and one small boy keeping our flesh from charring to the bone.

For an age we saw nothing but blinding heat, heard nothing but the roar of fire. And each moment that I thought it could last no longer, the fury built. Gog blazed, first the bright orange of iron ready for the hammer, then the white of the furnace fire, then a pure white like starshine. I could see the shadows of his bones, clearer by the heartbeat, as if fire were burning though him, taking substance from muscle, skin, and fat. Leaving him brittle and ashen.

And in an instant the fire and fury fell away revealing Ferrakind, white-hot and molten, with Gog crouched, pale as silvery ash, unmoving.

A torrent of meltwater rushed around us now, hip deep, white and roaring, pouring into the main chamber through a tunnel mouth that lay dry and gritty when we first scrambled through it to escape the fire. The waters divided around Gog and again around Ferrakind as if unable to touch the essence of fire. Gorgoth and I kept close to Gog and the water hardly reached us.

Ferrakind laughed again, new pulses of flame rising from him. ‘You thought to quench me, Jorg of Ancrath?’

I shrugged. ‘It’s the traditional way. Fighting fire with fire doesn’t seem to have worked.’ Already the flow around us had started to slacken.

‘It would take an ocean!’ Ferrakind said. He gathered fire into his hands and let it blaze white. ‘The child is done. Time to die, Jorg of Ancrath.’

If it were time then so be it. I had a faint hope, but it had only ever been that. At least it wouldn’t be a slow fire. I drew my sword. I always thought I would have a blade in hand when the time came.

I heard a roar, but not the roar of flame, somehow deeper and more distant. *It would take an ocean.*

‘How about a lake?’ I asked and sighted along my sword at the burning mage.

‘A lake?’ Ferrakind paused.

The waters hit then, a black wall rushing down on the heels of the trickle around our feet. I dived at Gog, carrying him with me into the cathedral cavern, rolling to the side of the tunnel mouth. He broke as though he were made of glass. He shattered like a toy, into a thousand sharp and brilliant pieces. I felt the sudden flash of heat. Needles of fire pierced my cheek where I hit him, my jaw, my temple. I lay amongst the scintillating shards, Gog’s remains, paralysed by a whole world of pain, curled on the gritty cavern floor with a flood of biblical proportions blasting its way out of the tunnel just yards behind me.

In Halradra's crater a thousand times a thousand tons of ice have lain for hundreds of years. But before that, in the distant long ago, waters flowed. How else would these tunnels be smooth, be strewn with grit and ancient mud, be scoured and potholed like the stone where rivers flow? With glacial slowness the ice has crept where underground streams carved hidden cathedrals and long galleries, and Halradra has slept, ice-choked and silent.

I couldn't expect any fire to melt enough ice to drown a fire-mage, least of all for the fire-mage's own fire to do the melting whilst he stood there patiently awaiting his own deluge. But I had a hope, a faint hope, that his fire and Gog's together, might at least melt a passage through the ice, a passage where the tunnels led and where heat rises ... a passage up.

In spring and summer Halradra's crater is a remarkable blue. The blue of a yard of meltwater lying on top of fathoms of ice. A twenty-acre lake, just a yard deep, sitting on all that ice.

When a hole wide enough to swallow a wagon is melted through that ice you discover that a yard times twenty acres is a lot.

The icy water hit Ferrakind in a thick column faster than the swiftest of horses, and swept him away without pause.

With the mage gone and the sparkles dying from Gog's fragments, darkness returned. I knew only pain and the roar of the waters. The knowledge that I would drown rather than burn held no interest. I only wanted it to be quick.

Somehow, in the darkness and the deluge, hands found me. Troll-stink mixed with the stench of my roasted flesh and I moved in their grasp. I cursed them, thinking only that the agony would last longer this way. I considered for a moment if they were still wondering whether I tasted good. Perhaps they liked their food part-cooked. I bit one at some point and I can say that trolls taste worse than they smell. I remember no more of it. I think they banged my head on a wall as they scrambled to escape the flood.

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*December 16th, Year 98 Interregnum*

Ancrath. The Tall Castle. My bedchamber. Maery Coddin sewing in the corner chair. Rain rattling on the shutters.

*'Madam, you send the winter running. We bask in the warmth of your smile.'*

*That's what the Prince of Arrow said when I came down the stairway into the East Hall. 'Madam', not 'Princess', because that's how they have it in the land of Arrow. Madam. Pompous maybe, but it made me smile, for I'd been serious before, thinking of Sageous and the writing on his face. And even though a dead poet probably wrote Orrin's lines, it felt as though Orrin meant them and had spoken them just for me.*

*'Katherine, you look good.'*

*Egan said that, while his brother bowed. Night and day those two. Or maybe morning and twilight. Orrin as blond as a jarl and handsome as the princes painted in those books to delight little princesses before they learn that it isn't kissing that turns frogs into princes, just the ownership of a castle and some acres. Egan with his hair short and blacker than soot, his skin still holding a stain from the summer sun, and his face that would be brutal, that would fit on a butcher or executioner, but for the fire behind it, the energy that sets the short hairs on your arms and neck on end.*

*And what were Jorg Ancrath's last words to me? 'Perhaps, Aunt, you have a better hand?' As he invited me to finish his father's work. As he stood there, more pale than Orrin, darker than Egan, his hair across his shoulders like a black river. He watched me and my knife, his face sharp and complicated, as if you could see there not the man he will become, but the men he might become.*

*And why am I writing of that boy here when there are men to speak of? That boy who hit me. I don't think he tore my dress. I think he considered it though.*

*They both asked for my hand. Orrin with sweet words that I can't capture. He made me feel perfect. Clean. I know he would keep me safe and would turn his mind toward making me happy. I paint him too ... prissy. There's fire and strength in Orrin of Arrow. At his core he is iron and every part of him is wholly alive.*

*Egan asked with short words and long, dark looks. I think his passions*

would terrify Sareth, despite her dirty mouth. I think a weak woman would die in his bed. And a strong one might find it the only place she's been alive.

We walked in the rose garden that Queen Rowan had planted the year before she died, out between the keep and the curtain wall. I strolled first with Orrin, since he's the elder brother by a year, and then with Egan, with Maery Coddin a yard behind to chaperone us. The garden is overgrown now, not neglected but tended without care, the roses left withered on the stems, thorns and dead flowers all bearded with frost. Orrin walked without speaking to start, with only the crunch of feet in gravel to break the cold silence. His first words plumed before him: 'It wouldn't be easy to be my wife.'

'Honesty is always refreshing,' I told him. 'Why should it be so difficult?'

And he told me there among the roses, without bluster or pride, that he would be emperor some day but the path to Vyene would not be easy. God had not told him to do it, nor had he laid a promise to a dying father; he didn't paint it as destiny, only duty. Orrin of Arrow is, I think, that rarest of things. A truly good man with all the strengths to do what his goodness demands of him.

He was right of course. To love such a man might be easy, to marry him much more difficult.

Where Orrin first thought and then spoke about the future, Egan spoke without hesitation and about the now. All they shared was honesty. Egan told me he wanted me, and I believed him. He told me he would make me happy and how. I'm sure if I'd turned around Maery's face would have been as red as mine. Egan spoke of his horses, the battles he'd fought in, and the lands he would take me to. Some of it was boasting, sure enough, but in the end he spoke of his passions, killing, riding, travelling, and now me. It may be shallow of me, but to be counted among the simple primal pleasures of a man like Egan of Arrow is a compliment. And yes, he may see me as a prize to be won, but I think I would be equal to his fire and that he could find himself well matched.

I told them I would have to consider.

Sareth thinks I'm mad not to choose one and jump at the chance to leave Ancrath.

Maery Coddin says I should choose Orrin. He has more land, more prospects, and enough fire to melt her but not so much as to scorch her.

But I chose to wait.

*February 8th, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Tall Castle. Library. Cold and empty.*

*Sareth has squeezed out her Ancrath brat. She howled about it, loud enough for half the castle to know more than they ever wanted about the business of pushing a big slimy head through a hole where even fingers feel tight. She sent me away after only a few hours. For my sulking she said. Truly, I was glad to go.*

*I should be happy for her. I should be thankful they both lived. I do love her, and I suppose I will come to love the boy. It's not his fault he's an Ancrath. But I'm scared.*

*It wasn't sulking. It was fear. She howled the rest of the day and into the night before she got it out of her. I knew she had a dirty mouth, but the things she shouted near the end. I wonder how the servants will look on her now. How the table-knights will watch their queen behind their visors.*

*I'm scared and this quill puts the fear wavering into each letter. I'm trembling and I have to write slow and firm just to be able to read what I've set down.*

*I missed my time last month, and again this month. I think before the year is out it will be me screaming and not caring what I say or who hears. And there won't be flags out and prayers in chapel for my bastard. Not like there were for little Prince Degran at midnight. Not even if my baby has the same black hair slime-plastered to its head and the same dark eyes watching out of a squashed up face.*

*I hate him. How could he? How could he spoil everything?*

*I dreamed of Jorg last night, coming to me, and my belly all fat, taut and hot and stretched, stretching like the bastard wanted out of me, little hands sliding beneath my skin. I dreamed Jorg brought a knife with him. Or it was my knife. The long narrow one. And he cut me open, like Drane guts fish in the kitchen, and he pulled the baby out scarlet and screaming.*

*I should tell somebody. I should go to Friar Glen with the story. How Jorg raped me. And seek forgiveness, though Christ knows why I should be the one to ask. I should go. They would send me to the Holy Sisters at Frau Rock.*

*But I hate that man, that stocky friar with his blank eyes and thick fingers. I don't know why but I hate him even more than Jorg Ancrath. He makes my skin want to drop off and crawl away.*

*Or I could ask someone to help me lose it. They had old mothers in the*

*slum quarter in Scorrion who could grind up a bitter paste ... and the babies would fall out of the women who went to them, tiny and dead. But that was in Scorrion. I don't know who to ask here. Maery Coddin maybe, but she's too good, too clean. She would tell Sareth and Sareth would tell King Olidan and who knows what he would do to me for spoiling his plans, for not playing his game of statehood like a good pawn, for falling off the board.*

*Better I should marry Prince Orrin or Egan. Quickly before it shows. Egan wouldn't wait for the wedding. He would be on me in a moment. He would never know it wasn't his. Orrin would wait.*





## Wedding Day

‘Where’s Coddin, dammit?’

‘Back down there.’ Watch-master Hobbs pointed down the valley. The grey rear-guard of the Watch sketched a ragged line ahead of the foremost of Arrow’s troops.

‘Should have left him in the castle, Jorg,’ Makin said, heaving a breath between every other word. ‘He’s too old for running.’

I spat. ‘Keppen’s a hundred if he’s a day, and he’d be up and down this mountain before you’d broke fast, Sir Makin.’

‘He might be sixty,’ Makin said. ‘A whack older than Coddin in any case, I’ll grant you.’

Watch-master Hobbs joined us on the ridge, with Captain Stodd beside him, his short beard white against a red face.

‘Well?’ Hobbs said.

I watched him.

‘Sire,’ he added.

It’s easy to lose faith on the mountain, but also to find it. Somehow being a few thousand feet closer to God makes all the difference.

Hobbs had good reason for his doubts in any case. Above us the valley narrowed to a steep-sided pass, a choke point that would slow three hundred men to the point where the men of Arrow might finally get to blood their swords after their long chase. Above that, the snowline and the long climb to Blue Moon Pass, blocked at this time of year despite the promise of its name. Below us ten times our number and more filled the valley, a carpet of men in constant motion, the sun glittering off helms, shields, the points of sword and spear.

‘Let’s wait for Coddin,’ I said. Even Coddin needed his faith restored.

‘Sire.’ Hobbs bowed his head. He took his bow in hand and waited, his breath heavy in his chest. A good man, or if not good, solid. Father picked him from the royal guard for the Forest Watch, not as punishment but to reward the Watch.

I looked away from the seething mass of men to the peaks, snow-clad, serene. The snowline waited for us not far above the choke point. The wind carried fresh snow, icy crystals in a thin swirl. None of us felt the cold. Ten thousand mountain steps burned in my legs, leaving them to tremble, and warming my blood close to boiling point.

To the west I could see God's Finger. The tiredness in me was nothing compared to what I felt the day I hauled myself onto the tip of that finger and lay as dead beneath the bluest sky. I lay there for hours and in the end I stood, leaning into the teeth of the wind, and drew my sword.

When you climb take nothing that is not essential. I took a sword, strapped across my back. There's a song behind the swinging of a sword. On God's Finger it can be heard more clearly. I had climbed chasing the memory of my mother's music, but the Spire had sung me a different song. Perhaps it's that heaven is closer, perhaps the wind brings it. Either way I heard the sword-song that day and I made my blade *kata*, slicing the gale, spinning, turning, striking high then low. I danced to the sword-song in that high place for an hour maybe more, wild play with an endless drop on every side. And then, before the sun fell too low, I left the blade on the rocks, an offering to the elements, and started down.

Standing on God's Finger I had first understood why men might fight for a place, for rocks and streams, no matter who calls themselves king there. The power of place. I felt it again at the head of the valley with the hordes of Arrow swarming toward me.

'What ho, Coddin,' I said as my chancellor staggered to us. 'You look half-dead.'

He hadn't the breath for a reply.

'Do you have what I gave you?' I asked. At the time I hadn't known why I gave it to him, only that I should.

Still gasping, Coddin shrugged off his pack and dug into it. 'Be glad I didn't drop it just to keep ahead of the enemy,' he said.

I took the whistle from him, a Highland whistle such as the goatherds use, a foot long with a leather-washed piston.

'I always trust you to deliver, Coddin,' I said, though I had Makin carry a second and had a third with Keppen. Trust is a fine thing but try not to build plans upon it.

'We're none of us local men,' I said to my captains, voice raised for the Watch men starting to gather round. 'Well you are.' I pointed to a fellow in

the second rank. 'But most of us were born and raised in Ancrath.'

The last of the Watch were drawing in now, the men of Arrow a couple of hundred yards further back, toiling over broken rock.

'You're here with me, men of Ancrath, because you're my best warriors, because you learned to fight in lands that are hard to defend and that others want to take. These Highlands of ours, however, are easier to protect, and hold bugger all save stones and goats.' That got a laugh or two. Some of the Watch still had go in them.

'Today,' I said. 'We all become Highlanders.'

I took the whistle, held it high, and drove the piston home, not too hard because that spoils the tone. It's a steady pressure gives the best results.

A goat-whistle will carry for miles across the mountains. It's pitched to let the wind take it and to bounce from rock to rock. One long blast would reach almost back to the Haunt. Certainly far enough to reach each and every Highlander I had hidden on the high slopes overlooking our path up the mountain. And not just any Highlanders these, but the men who had held these particular slopes from generation to generation. The men who like their fathers and grandfathers would take a rock for a walk. They kept their secrets well, the men of Renar, but from the tip of God's Finger, that day years before, it had all been revealed to me.

It took the blasts of seven trumpets to bring down the walls of Jericho, but they weren't stacked to fall. One blast of a herder's whistle set the mountainsides moving in the Renar Highlands. On both sides of the valley, along the full length, a dozen individual rock-slides. The Highlanders know their slopes with an intimacy that puts lovers' knowing of each other's curves to shame. Big stones poised to fall, boulders on edge with levers set and ready, toppled with a shove and a grunt, rolling, colliding, cascading one into several into many into too many. We felt the ground tremble beneath our feet. The noise, like a millstone grinding, rattled teeth in loose sockets. In moments the whole valley had been set in motion and Arrow's thousands vanished as the dust rose and stone churned flesh into bloody paste.

'Well thank you, Coddin. Much appreciated.' I handed him back the whistle. 'Hobbs,' I said. 'When the dust clears enough for a good shot, if you could have the men knock down anyone still standing.'

'Christ Bleeding,' Makin said, staring into the valley below us. 'How ...'

'Topology,' I said. 'It's a kind of magic.'

'And what now, King Jorg?' Coddin asked, faith restored but still focused

on the numbers, knowing our chances against seventeen or sixteen thousand were scarcely better than our chances against twenty thousand.

‘Back down, of course!’ I said. ‘We can’t attack from up here now, can we?’



## Wedding Day

The journey back to the Haunt took us over fresh territory, a new and broken surface, littered with dead men turned into ground meat, and here and there along the way the cries of live ones trapped beneath us. We moved on, the grey of the Watch's tatter-ropes renewed with rock dust, the men pale with powdered stone and with horror.

The Prince's army encircled the Haunt now, archers on the heights, siege machinery being hauled into place. All my troops at the castle crowded within the walls, space or not. There was no standing against the foe on open ground.

I could see units of bowmen descending in long files, presumably ordered east to meet our advance in light of the recent massacre. The Prince looked to be a fast learner. He anticipated my renewed attack. It didn't seem likely that he would consider my three hundred men a mere nuisance this time.

'He shouldn't be in a hurry,' Makin said beside me.

'He'll reduce the walls and thin the ranks first,' said Coddin.

'He doesn't need to get inside until the snows come, the big snows,' said Hobbs. 'Inside by the big snows. Winter by the fire. Over the passes when the spring clears them.'

'He wants in today,' I told them. 'Tomorrow by the latest. He'll go through the front gate.'

'Why?' Coddin asked. He didn't argue, but he wanted to understand.

'Why waste a good castle?' I said. 'A big push. A surrender. A dose of mercy and he has a new stronghold, a new garrison, and a small repair to make on the entrance. He doesn't do half-measures any more than I do. Go in hard, fast, get the job done.'

'A dose of mercy?' Makin asked. 'You think that famous Arrow mercy has survived recent events?'

'Maybe not,' I said, my smile grim, 'but I don't intend to offer any either. Mark me, old friend, nobody gets out alive, not this time.'

'Red Jorg.' Makin clapped his hand to his chest as he had at Remagen Fort

years before.

‘A red day,’ I said. I dipped two fingers into something that lived and laughed just hours ago and drew a crimson line down my left cheek then the right.

As we made our way back down the valley I fiddled with the copper box in its leather sack on my hip. All day I had felt Sageous trespassing through the edge of my imaginations, the half-dreams and day dreams to which he could find paths. My own sources, a spy network far less sophisticated than most of the Hundred maintained, told me the Prince of Arrow had a second army, far smaller than the one at my gates, headed for Ancrath and the Tall Castle, presumably to ensure my father kept his troops indoors. There seemed no reason for Sageous to be haunting my dreams unless he had joined Arrow when the balance of power became clear and now served as the Prince’s advisor, seeking of course to own his mind rather than merely guide it.

Then again, the dream-witch might be keeping himself at the Tall Castle. It might be that Sageous sought to know my plans in order to sell them to Arrow and buy Ancrath’s independence for my father. Either way, I wasn’t going to show them to him.

I snagged the thread of memory that I’d been fishing for and pulled at it. The pre-laid plans that I stored in the box always emerged as sudden inspiration, moments of epiphany where disparate facts connected. I drew on the thread of my schemes but this time something went wrong. This time, despite my care, the box cracked open, a hair’s breadth, and I saw in my mind’s eye a dark light bleeding from beneath the lid. I hammered it down in an instant and it closed with a *schnick*.

For the longest moment I thought that nothing had escaped.

Then the memory lifted me.

‘Hello, Jorg,’ she says, and my clever words desert me.

‘Hello, Katherine.’

And we stand among the graves with the stone girl and the stone dog between us, and blossom swirls like pink snow as the wind picks up, and I think of a snow-globe broken long ago and wonder how all this will settle.

‘You shouldn’t be out here alone,’ I say. ‘I’m told there are bandits in these woods.’

‘You broke my vase,’ she says, and I’m pleased that her tongue has turned traitor too.

Her fingers return to the spot where I hit her, where the vase shattered and she fell.

I have put her loved ones in the ground, but she talks about a vase. Sometimes a hurt is too big and we skirt around the edge of it, looking for our way in.

‘To be fair, you were about to kill me,’ I say.

She frowns at that.

‘I buried my dog here,’ I tell her. She has me saying foolish things already, telling her secrets she has no right to know. She’s like that knock on the head I took from Orrin of Arrow. She steals the sense from me.

‘Hanna is buried there.’ She points. Her hand is very white and steady.

‘Hanna?’ I ask.

Thunder on her brow, green eyes flash.

‘The old woman who tried to throttle me?’ I ask. An image of a purple face floats before me, framed with grey wisps, my hands locked beneath her chin.

‘She. Did. Not!’ Katherine says, but each word is more quiet than the one before and the conviction runs from her. ‘She wouldn’t.’

But she knows she did.

‘You killed Galen,’ she says, still glaring.

‘It’s true,’ I say. ‘But he was a heartbeat away from stabbing his sword through my back.’

She can’t deny it. ‘Damn you,’ she says.

‘You’ve missed me then?’ I say and I grin because I’m just pleased to see her, to breathe the same air.

‘No.’ But her lips twitch and I know she has thought of me. I know it and I’m ridiculously glad.

She tosses her head and turns, stepping slowly as if hunting her thoughts. I watch the line of her neck. She wears a riding dress of leather and suede, browns and muted greens. The sun finds a hundred reds in her coiled hair. ‘I hate you,’ she says.

Better than indifference. I step after her, moving close.

‘Lord but you stink,’ she says.

‘You said that the first time we met,’ I say. ‘At least it’s an honest stink from the road. Horse and sweat. It smells better than court intrigue. At least to me.’

She smells of spring. I’m close now and she has stopped walking from me. I’m close and there’s a force between us, tingling on my skin, under my



cheekbones, trembling in my fingers. It's hard to breathe. I want her.

'You don't want me, Jorg,' she says as if I had spoken it. 'And I don't want you. You're just a boy and a vicious one at that.' The line of her mouth is firm, her lips pressed to a line but still full.

I can see the angles of her body and I want her more than I have wanted anything. And I am built of wants. I can't speak. I find my hands moving toward her and force them still.

'Why would you be interested in the sister of a "Scorron whore" in any case?' she asks, her frown returning.

That makes me smile and I can speak again. 'What? I have to be reasonable now? Is that the price for growing up? It's too high. If I can't take against the woman who replaced my own mother ... can't make childish insults ... it's too high a price, I tell you.'

Again the twitch of her lips, the quick hint of a smile. 'Is my sister a whore?'

'In truth, I have no evidence either way,' I say.

She smiles a tight smile and wipes her hands on her skirts, glancing at the trees as if looking for friends or for foes.

'You wouldn't want me reasonable,' I say.

'I don't want you at all,' she says.

'The world isn't shaped by reasonable men,' I say. 'The world is a thief, a cheat, a murderer. Set a thief to catch a thief they say.'

'I should hate you for Hanna,' she says.

'She was trying to kill me.' I walk to the grave Katherine pointed out. 'Should I apologize to her? I can speak to the dead, you know.'

I stoop to pick a bluebell, a flower for Hanna's grave, but the stem wilts in my hand, the blue darkening toward black.

'You should be dead,' she says. 'I saw the wound.'

I pull up my shirt and show her. The dark line where Father's knife drove in, the black roots spreading from it, threading my flesh, diving in toward the heart.

She crosses her own chest, a protection quickly sketched. 'There's evil in you, Jorg,' she says.

'Perhaps,' I say. 'There's evil in a lot of men. Women too. Maybe I just wear it more plainly.'

I wonder though. First Corion, then the necromancer's heart. I could blame them for my excesses, but something tells me that my failings are my own.

She bites her lip, steps away, then straightens. 'In any case, I have my heart set on a good man.'

For all my cleverness I hadn't thought of this. I hadn't thought of Katherine's eyes on other men.

'Who?' Is all I can find to say.

'Prince Orrin,' she says. 'The Prince of Arrow.'

And I'm falling.

I hit the rocks with a curse and skinned a palm, saving my face. Makin pulled me to my feet sharp enough. 'Kings fall in battle,' he said, 'not tripping up on the way.'

It took me a moment to shake the memory off. Still there's little better than a hard reunion with the ground and blood on your hands to haul a man back into the here and now. The mountains, impending snow, and an enemy many thousands strong. Real problems, not rogue memories best forgotten.

'I'm fine.' I patted the sack on my hip. The box was still there. 'Let's break this Arrow.'



## Wedding Day

From the heights even Arrow's many thousands looked small, arrayed across the slopes before the Haunt and along the ridges to the east. The sight might have given me heart had not my castle looked smaller still, swamped on three sides by men and more men, the winter sun picking glimmers from spear and helm.

Whether the Prince of Arrow's plans were in line with my prediction of an overwhelming assault or with Makin and Coddin's siege wasn't yet clear. What was clear was that our second attack would cost us. On our line of approach the Prince's troops spread out before the main body of his army in a scattered buffer zone, foot-soldiers under the best cover the slopes could offer, with additional defences hastily cobbled from overturned carts and heaped supplies. They kept under cover whilst the Watch picked whatever targets they could. Our arrows were killing or wounding men in their scores but all the time the archer columns ordered down from the eastern ridges drew closer. Perhaps a thousand of the Prince's four thousand archers would be returning fire within five minutes.

'They're not happy,' Makin said. He didn't look too happy himself.

'No,' I said. The roar from the Prince's army waxed and waned as the wind rose and fell. No true warrior holds any love for archers or archery. Death wings in unseen from a distance and there is little that skill or training can do to save you. I remembered four years back, Maical sliding from the grey as if he'd just forgotten how to ride. I didn't relish the arrival of the Prince's archers myself. My little tale of wickedness and gambles could be cut short easily enough by the sudden arrival of the right arrow in the wrong place.

'We should leave now,' Coddin said.

'They won't follow us until the archers join them,' I said.

'And why do we want them to follow us? The rockslides, well that was impressive, I won't deny that, but it can't happen again,' Coddin said.

'Can it?' Hobbs at my right, hopeful.

‘No,’ I said. ‘But we need to draw as many men from the fight as we can. The castle can work for us, but not with these odds. And remember gentlemen, the beautiful Queen ... Mi-something?’

‘Miana,’ Coddin said.

‘Yes, her. Queen Miana. Remind the men who we’re fighting for, Hobbs.’

And that was Coddin for you. He watched and he remembered. The man had a mixture of decency and reserve in him that struck a chord with me, qualities I would never own but could appreciate none the less. He’d been the first man of Ancrath I met on my return four years back. I’d thought him tall back then, though now I overtopped him. I’d thought him old, though now he had grey amid the black and I thought him in his prime. I’d elevated him from a guard captain to Watch-master of the Forest Watch because something in him told me he wouldn’t let me down. That same quality put the chamberlain’s robe around his shoulders a year later.

Across the slope old Keppen had his archers lofting their flights high into the air, passing over the scattered foot-soldiers to rain down unaimed in the midst of the Prince’s forces.

I could see the first of the archers emerging from the ranks, men of Belpan with their tall bows, and the Prince’s own levies with the dragons of Arrow painted red on their leather tabards.

‘Time to go.’ I slipped the purple ribbon over the end of my shortbow and held it high for the Watch to see.

In retrospect it would have been better to have somebody else do it. Somebody unimportant. Fortunately the Prince’s archers were still finding clear ground to shoot from and the shafts aimed at me went wide, at least wide enough to miss me. A man ten yards ahead of us jerked back with an arrow jutting from under his collarbone.

‘Damn,’ said Coddin.

I turned sharp enough toward him. Something down the slope held his gaze but I couldn’t tell what.

‘Problem?’ I asked.

Coddin held up scarlet fingers. It didn’t make sense at first. I tried to see where he was cut.

‘Easy.’ Makin moved to support him as he staggered.

At last I saw the arrow, just the flights showing, black against the dark leather over his guts. ‘Ah, hell.’

A gut-shot man doesn’t live. Everyone knows that. Even with silks under

the leathers to twist and wrap the arrow so it pulls out easy and clean, you don't live past a gut shot.

'Carry him,' I said.

The others just looked at me. For a moment I saw the Norse witch, felt the intensity of her single eye and the mockery in her withered smile. 'Even a gut-shot man has a fool's hope,' she'd said. Had she been looking past me, at this day?

'Damn prophecy and damn prediction!' I spat and the wind carried it away.

'Sorry?' Makin looked at me, even Coddin stared.

'Get some men here, pick him up, and carry him,' I said.

'Jorg—' Makin started.

'I'll stay here,' Coddin said. 'It's a good view.'

I liked Coddin from the start. Four years with him at the Haunt just scored the feeling deeper. I liked him for his quick mind, for his curious honesty, and for his courage in the face of hard choices. Mostly though I liked him because he liked me. 'It's a better view from up there.' I gestured up the slope.

'This will kill me, Jorg.' He looked me in the eyes. I didn't like that. It put a strange kind of hurt on me.

Arrows in the guts don't kill quick, but the wound sours. You bloat and sweat and scream, then die. Two days, maybe four. Had a Brother once that lasted a week and then some. I never once met a man who could show me a scar on his belly and tell how it hurt like a bastard when they pulled the arrow out.

'You owe me, Coddin,' I said. 'Your duty to your king is the least of it. That arrow probably will kill you, but not today. And if you think I've a sentimental side that will give you a quick death here and lose several days of useful advice when I need it most, you're wrong.'

I'd never met a man who lived after that kind of hurt. But I *heard* of one. It *did* happen.

'We carry him up to the rock fall. We send men ahead to make a hidey-hole in the loose stone. We put him there and cover him up. If he's lucky we come back for him later. If not, he's ready buried,' I said.

Already men of the Watch were crowding around, linking arms to lift Coddin. No complaints. They liked him too.



## Wedding Day

None of the men who carried Coddin up the mountain breathed a word of complaint. They had no breath for it, but if they had still they would have held their peace. Coddin led men by example. Somehow he made you want to do it right.

‘I love you, Jorg, as my king, but also as a father loves his son, or should.’

There are some things two men can only say to each other when arrows are raining down and one of them lies mortally wounded, walled away in a rough void amid a mass of fallen rock, and thousands of enemy troops are closing in. Even then it’s uncomfortable.

We carried Coddin, Captain Lore Coddin, formerly of Ancrath, High Chancellor of the Renar Highlands. We carried him ahead of the fresh and surging army of Arrow, fuelled as they were by the desire to avenge the thousands crushed beneath our rockslides. The archers of the Watch held every ridge until the last moment, loosing flight after flight into the oncoming soldiers, making them climb their dead as well as the mountain. And tired as they were, the men of my Watch still opened a lead on the enemy, even bearing Coddin in their arms.

The troops sent ahead to the loose rubble of the morning’s rockslides found a suitable cavity between two large boulders freed amongst the general fall. They enlarged the void and set aside rocks suitable for sealing and hiding the space.

By the time we reached the cave, the men carrying Coddin were scarlet with his blood and he groaned at each jolt of their advance. Captains Keppen and Harold massed their commands at separate points across the slope and shot the last of their arrows to hold our enemies’ attention. And to kill them.

With the narrow neck of the valley ahead of us, and the snowline glistening high above that, and the wind picking up, filching warmth with quick sharp fingers, and the men of Arrow panting and gasping as they closed the last few hundred yards, I lay on the rock and spoke through gaps to the



dying man below.

‘You shut your mouth, old man,’ I said.

‘You’d need to dig me out to stop me,’ he gasped. ‘Or run away. And I’ve a mind you’re not running, not just yet.’ He coughed and tried to hide a groan. ‘You need to hear such words, Jorg. You need to know that you are loved, not just feared. You need to know it to ease what poisons you.’

‘Don’t.’

‘You need to hear.’ Again the cough.

‘I’m coming back for you when this is done, Coddin. So don’t say anything you’ll regret, because I *will* hold it against you.’

‘I love you for no good reason, Jorg. I’ve no sons, but if I did I wouldn’t want them to be like you. You’re a vicious bastard at the best of times.’

‘Careful, old man. I can still stick a sword through this crack and put you out of my misery.’

A Watch man screamed and fell to my left, an arrow through his neck. Just like Maical, but louder. Another shaft hit the rock behind me and shattered.

‘I love thee for no good reason,’ Coddin said, falling back into some accent from wherever he was born, his voice weak now.

I could hear the thud of boots. Steel on steel. Shouts.

‘... but I do love thee well.’

I looked up, blinking. Down the slope Makin cut into the first of the enemy to reach us, an expert sword against exhausted common swords. No contest. At least until the odds mounted.

‘Do something about that girl.’ Coddin’s voice with new strength.

‘Miana?’ I asked. She should be safe in the castle. For now at least.

‘Katherine of Scorrón.’ Another cough. ‘These things seem terribly important when you’re young. Matters of the heart and groin. They fill your world at eighteen. But believe me. When you’re the wrong side of forty-five and the past is a bright haze ... they’re more important still. Do something. You’re haunted by many ghosts. I know that, though you hide it well.’

The men of the Watch massed before our position now, in full melee against the first few dozen of the enemy, with more pressing in moment by moment. They knew the bow like lovers know each other, but they could fight hand to hand too. Fighting on a steep slope of broken rock is not a skill you want to learn for the first time when somebody is trying to kill you, and the Watch had had years to learn the art, so for now they held.

‘Miss an opportunity like Katherine and it will haunt you longer and more

deeply than any ghost you keep now,' Coddin said.

Another arrow hit, closer than any before.

'Run!' I shouted.

Whatever other wisdom Coddin had been hoarding would have to keep. There's a time for sentimental chatter and none of it is on a mountain whilst being shot at.

'Run!' I shouted. But I didn't raise the purple ribbon on a shortbow, because I had a plan to carry out, and no part of it involved being hit by arrows.



## Wedding Day

I'd buried Brothers before, even friends, but never alive.

We left Coddin in his tomb, not dead but with his passage booked. We made a messy retreat, fighting across the ground where we'd buried him. I joined the fray and cut a path through the men of Arrow, as if I was planning to make my way right back to the Haunt. There's something about a fight that makes you forget your troubles. Mainly it's that all your troubles are suddenly very small in the face of the new problems swinging your way with sharp edges on them.

Perhaps there's something wrong with me. Perhaps it's part of those three steps I took away from the world of reasonable men, of good men. But there's little that is more satisfying to me than a well-blocked sword blow followed by a swift riposte and the scream of an enemy. God, but the noise and feel of a blade shearing through flesh is as sweet as any flute speaking out its melody. Provided it's not my flesh of course. It can't be right. But there it is.

I fought well but the enemy just kept coming, as if dying were the only thing on their list today. We fell back and left them slipping in blood, tripping on corpses. Most of us managed to find the space to turn and run. Many of us didn't.

About two thirds of the Watch made it through the neck of the valley and scrambled up the steeper slopes onto the broad shoulder of the mountain above. The rest, even if it were only a light wound that slowed them, were swallowed by the advancing army.

Wind is the cruellest cold. Exposed on the mountainside we felt those sharp fingers stealing our warmth. All the running and climbing didn't matter. The wind put a chill in you even so, taking your strength one pinch at a time.

We struggled on through the wind, a ragged bunch without ranks or squads, the snow blinding now, small flakes too cold to stick to the rocks. Not far above us the snowline glittered, the whiteness hiding the folds and

hollows, making it all of a likeness. Whiteness, stretching up to Blue Moon Pass, snow-choked and useless for escape, stretching beyond to the peak of Mount Botrang, and past that, the sky.

I caught Makin up, grey-faced and staggering. He looked at me, just a glance as if he were too tired to do anything but hang his head. He hadn't the breath for words but his look, quick as it was, told me we were going to die on these slopes. Maybe on the next ridge, maybe further up, on the snow with our blood making pretty crimson patterns against the white.

'Stick with me,' I said. I had a little go left in me. Not much, but some. 'I have a plan.'

I hoped I had a plan.

The wind numbed my face. On the right where Gog had left me scarred it felt good. That twisted flesh had never stopped burning, as if shards of him found the bones in my jaw and cheek and lodged there with fire trapped inside. The wind made my face feel solid, like one block that would crack if I spoke again. I enjoyed the relief. I've become good at finding crumbs of comfort. Sometimes they're all you have to eat.

Screams behind us as the slowest men of the Watch met the fastest men of Arrow.

I had my head down, concentrating on one foot then the next, hauling in one breath and throwing it out to make room for the one after. Beside me Makin looked to have retreated into that closed and lonely place that we all reach if we keep digging. Dig a little deeper than that and you're in hell all of a sudden.

The snow took me by surprise. One moment *thump thump thump* over rocks and the next a silent wade through deep white powder. It took maybe four strides to go from bare rock to snow past my knees. Another hundred strides and my feet were as numb as my face. I wondered if I was dying piece by piece, a slow introduction rather than the traditional unexpected embrace.

The snowfield started to get us killed. Pushing a path through snow is hard work. Following in the beaten trail of two hundred men is easier. More men were caught. Natural selection had set the toughest of Arrow's men at our heels with the weaker troops still struggling through the neck of the valley below the snowline.

'Up there!' I pointed to a place with nothing to distinguish it from any other acre of white. I could feel the box hot against my hip. I picked up the pace and left Makin plodding. 'Up there!' I didn't know why, but I knew.

I took the box in my hand and ran on, lungs filling with blood, or that's how it felt.

The thing that tripped me wasn't a rock. The snow had all the rocks covered, deep under our feet. What tripped me was something long and hard and near the surface. Broomstick came to mind as I fell. Then the box went *schnick* and my mind filled with entirely new things. Old things.



## Wedding Day

*Schnick* and the box opens. Memory drags me back to Rennat Forest to stand amongst gravestones and wild-flowers in the spring sunshine.

‘In any case, I have my heart set on a good man,’ Katherine says.

‘Who?’ I ask.

‘Prince Orrin,’ she says. ‘The Prince of Arrow.’

‘No,’ I say. I don’t want to say anything, but I speak. I don’t want to admit any kind of interest, any form of weakness, but none of this is going as I planned, and plans are what I’m good at.

‘No?’ she asks. ‘You object? You’d like to offer a proposal? Your father is my guardian. You should go and discuss the matter with him.’

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. None of the others made me this way. Not Serra leading me astray as a child almost, not Sally bought and paid for, nor Renar’s serving maids, ladies-at-court, bored wives of nobles, comely peasant girls, not the ones on the road that the Brothers took and shared, none of them.

‘I want you,’ I say. The words are hard, they have awkward shapes, they leave my mouth clumsy and ill-formed.

‘How romantic,’ she says. Her scorn withers me. ‘You like me because I’m pleasing to your eye.’

‘You please more than my eye, lady,’ I say.

‘Would you kill Sareth?’ she asks. For a moment I think she’s asking me to do it. Then I remember she’s not like me.

‘Maybe ... does she please my father?’ I don’t say does he love her; he has never loved. And I don’t lie. If it would hurt my father to lose her, then yes, maybe.

‘No. I don’t think anything pleases Olidan. I can’t even imagine what would. Though he did laugh that day when you killed Galen,’ she says.

‘I might kill Sareth in case you’re wrong or trying to protect her,’ I say. I don’t know why I can’t lie to her. ‘But you’re probably telling the truth. My father has found little in this world that doesn’t disappoint him.’



She steps towards me and although she's coming closer her eyes get more distant. I can smell her scent, lilacs and white musk.

'You hit me, Jorg,' she says.

'You were going to stab me.'

'You hit me with my mother's vase.' Her voice is dreamy. 'And broke it.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. And the strange truth is that I am.

'I wasn't made to be this way.' She's reaching for something hidden in the folds of her riding dress, under fawn suede. 'I wasn't meant to be the prize princes compete for, or the container to grow their babies in. Damn that. Would you want to be a token? Or made just to grow babies and raise children?'

'I'm not a woman,' I say. It's just my lips filling the pause while the questions, or rather the new images they paint of her, bounce around my mind.

I see her pull the knife from her skirts. A long blade like those for slotting through chinks in armour when you have your foe pinned, only not so sturdy. This one would break if the man twisted and might not reach the heart. I'm not supposed to see it. I'm supposed to be watching her eyes, her mouth, the heave of her breasts, and I am, but often I see more than I'm supposed to.

'Can't I want something more?' she asks.

'Wanting is free.' I can't stop watching her. My glance touches the knife only now and then. Her eyes don't see me. I don't think she knows what her hands are doing, the right gripping a hilt, the left on her belly, clawed like she wants to tear her way in.

'Do I have to be a monster? Do I have to be a new Queen of Red to—'

I catch her wrist as she drives the knife at me. She is stronger than I imagined. We both look down at my hand, dark on her white wrist, and the thin blade quivering with its point an inch from my groin.

'A low blow.' I twist her arm but she drops the knife before I make her.

'What?' She stares at her hand and mine, mouth open.

'You're making a habit of trying to stab me,' I say. The bitterness rises in me. I taste it.

'I killed our child, Jorg.' Her laugh is too high, too wild. 'I killed it. I swallowed a sour pill from Saraem Wic. She lives here.' Katherine whips her head around, unfocused, as if expecting to see the crone among the trees.

I know of Saraem Wic. I've seen her gather her herbs and fungi. I crept to her hut once, almost close enough to look in, but I didn't want to go closer. It

smelled of burned dog. ‘What are you talking about?’ I ask. She looks beautiful. She curses being a woman but here I am forgetting even the knife on the ground, the knife she almost buried in me, forgetting it because of the curve of her neck, the tremble of her lips. Want makes fools of men.

‘You hit me and then you took me. You put your seed in me.’ She spits. It misses my face but drips in my hair and wets my ear. ‘And I drove it out. With a sour pill and a paste that burned.’

She grins and I can see the hatred now. She sees me clear for once, head down, hair framing her, eyes dark. She shows her teeth. She dares me.

I remember her lying there in the sapphire pool of her dress. Senseless. The voice from the briar, maybe mine, maybe Corion’s, or something of both, told me to kill her. My father would give that advice. The hardest line. Want makes fools of men. But I didn’t kill her. The voice told me to rape her too. To just take her. But I only touched her hair. What I wanted couldn’t be taken.

‘Nothing to say, Jorg?’ She spits again. This time it’s in my face. I blink. Warm spittle cools on my cheek. She wants me angry. She doesn’t care what I might do. ‘I bled your baby out. Before he was even big enough to see.’

And I don’t know what to say. What words would serve? I wouldn’t believe me. I have to believe my memory – things have been taken from it in the past, but never added – but who else would give Jorg of Ancrath the benefit of the doubt? Not me.

I fold Katherine’s arm up behind her and walk her through the graveyard, back the way I came. There are white marks where my fingers touched her skin. Did I grip her that hard? Imagination has put my hands on her many times, but this feels as though I’ve broken something precious and I’m carrying the pieces, knowing they can’t be reassembled.

‘You’re going to do it again?’ The anger has leaked from her. She sounds confused.

‘No,’ I say.

We walk on. Brambles catch at her dress. Her riding boots leave heel marks a blind man could follow. ‘I’ve left my horse tied,’ she says. This isn’t the Katherine I left on the floor that day. That Katherine was sharp, clever; this one is dazed, as though just waking.

‘I’m going to marry the Prince of Arrow,’ she says, twisting to look at me over her shoulder.

‘I thought you didn’t want to be a prize,’ I say.

She looks away. 'We can't always have what we want.'

I need her. I wonder if I can have what I need.

We walk in silence until Red Kent steps out of the undergrowth before us. My sword is strapped over his shoulder. 'King Jorg.' He nods. 'My lady.'

'Take her to Sir Makin,' I say. I let her arm go.

Kent gestures for Katherine to lead the way along the trail he's been guarding. 'No kind of harm is to come to her, Kent. Watch Row and Rike particularly. Tell them you've my permission to cut from them any part that touches her. And move camp. We've left a trail from there to here.' I walk away.

'Where are you going?' she asks.

I stop and turn, wiping her spit from my cheek. 'Who found you?'

'What?'

'Who found you after I hit you?' I ask. 'A man was with you when you recovered your senses.'

She frowns. Her fingers touch the place where the vase shattered. 'Friar Glen.' For the first time she sees me with her old eyes, clear and green and sharp. 'Oh.'

I walk away.

*Schnick* and a heartbeat later the box closes again, snapped shut by numb fingers.

Back on the mountain, knee-deep in snow. My shin hurts. I tripped over a spade.

*There are men to walk to the mountain with and then there are men that are the mountain.  
Goroth, though I may not call him brother, was forged from the qualities I lack.*

*Four years earlier*

*There are books in my father's library that say no mountain ever spat lava within a thousand miles of Halradra before the Thousand Suns. They tell it that the Builders drilled into the molten blood of the Earth and drank its power. When the Suns scorched away all that the Builders had wrought, the wounds remained. The Earth bled and Halradra and his sons were born in fire.*

Gorgoth carried me to where Sindri waited. The sun still shone outside though I felt it should be dark. I came to my senses halfway down the mountain, bouncing on Gorgoth's broad back. They came one by one, my senses, first the pain and only the pain, then after an age, the smell of my own burned flesh, the taste of vomit, the sound of my moaning, and finally a blurred vision of Halradra's black slopes.

'God, just kill me,' I whimpered. The tears dripped off my nose and lips, hanging as I was like a sack over Gorgoth's shoulder.

It wasn't Gog I was sorry for, it was me.

In my defence, having a hand-sized part of your face burned crisp is ridiculously painful. It hurt worse hanging there, bumping with the monster's strides, than when it happened, and I had wanted to die back there in the cave.

'Kill me,' I moaned.

Gorgoth stopped. 'Yes?'

I thought about it. 'Christ Jesu.' I needed someone to hate, something to take my mind off the fire still eating into me. Gorgoth waited. He would take me at my word. I thought of my father with his young wife and new son, snug in the Tall Castle.

'Maybe later,' I said.

I remember only snippets until Gorgoth laid me down in the bracken and

Sindri leaned over me.

‘*Uskit’r!*’ He fell back into the old tongue of the north. ‘That’s bad.’

‘At least I’m still half-pretty.’ I retched and turned my face to spit sour liquid into the ferns.

‘Let’s get him back,’ Sindri said. He looked around for a moment, opened his mouth then closed it.

‘Gog’s gone,’ I said.

Sindri shook his head and looked down. He drew a breath. ‘Come, we need to get you back. Gorgoth?’

The monster made no move.

‘Gorgoth’s not coming,’ I said.

Gorgoth bowed his head.

‘You can’t stay here,’ Sindri said, alarmed. ‘Ferrakind—’

‘Ferrakind is gone too,’ I said. Each word hurt, almost enough to make them into one scream.

‘No?’ Sindri’s mouth stayed open.

‘We are not friends, Jorg of Ancrath,’ Gorgoth said, deeper than he’d ever spoken. ‘But we both loved the boy. You loved him first. You named him. That means something.’

I would have told him what rubbish he was speaking but my face hurt too much for more words.

‘I will stay in the Heimrift, in the caves.’

I would have said, *I hope the troll-stink chokes you*, but the price for opening my mouth was too high. I just raised my hand. And Gorgoth raised his. And we parted.

Sindri closed his mouth, then opened it again. ‘Ferrakind’s gone?’

I nodded.

‘Can you walk?’ he asked.

I shrugged and lay back in the bracken. Maybe I could. Maybe I couldn’t. I wasn’t going to, and that was the main thing.

‘I’ll get help. Horses,’ he said. ‘Wait there.’ He held out both hands as if to stop me standing, then turned on a heel and sprinted away. I thought the news drove him more than any of my needs. He wanted to be the one to tell it. Which was fair enough.

I watched the blue sky and prayed for rain. Flies buzzed about me, drawn by the raw pink, the skinless muscle and fat on offer. They wanted to lay their eggs. After a while I stopped trying to wave them away. I lay a-moaning,

twisting one way and another as if there might be a way that helped. From time to time I fainted and in the afternoon a light rain did come and I prayed it would stop. Each drop burned like acid.

In the evening clouds of mosquitoes rose from wherever it is that mosquitoes hide. The Dane-lands were thick with the things. Probably why the folk are so pale. The blood's been sucked from them. I lay there, letting them eat me, and eventually I heard voices.

Makin came and I wanted to beg for death, but my face hurt too much. It would crack apart if I opened my mouth, all the wounds oozing. Then Rike stepped up, black against the deep blue of the sky and a little strength flowed into me. It doesn't pay to be weak in front of Rike, and there's something about Rike that makes me forget all about dying and want to do a bit of killing instead. 'I knew I brought you along for a reason, Rike.' Each word an agony, edged with murder.

We stayed five days in Alaric Maladon's hall. Not in the guest hall but in his great hall. They put a chair for me on the dais, nearly as grand as the Duke's own, and I sat there wrapped in furs when I shivered and stripped to the waist when I sweated. Makin and the Brothers celebrated with Maladon's people. Women appeared for the first time in any number, carrying the ale in flagons and horns from the storehouse, knives at their hips, eating at the long tables like the men, drinking and laughing almost as loud. One, near as tall as me, blond as milk and handsome in a raw-boned way, came up to my chair as I huddled in my furs. 'My thanks, King Jorg,' she said.

'I could be making it all up,' I said. Feeling rotten and ugly made me want to sour the day.

She grinned. 'The ground hasn't shaken since they brought you back. The sky is clear.'

'What's that?' I asked. She had a clay pot in one hand, filled with black and glistening paste, a twist of hide next to it.

'Ekatri gave it to me. A salve for the burns, and a powder to swallow in water to fight the poison in your blood.'

I managed half a laugh before the pain stopped me. 'The old witch who keeps predicting my failures? There'll be poison in me if I take anything she sends all right. It's probably how the future turns out the way she says it will.'

The woman – girl maybe – laughed. 'That's not how völvas are. Besides, my father would take it in poor humour if you died here. It would reflect

badly upon him, and Ekatri depends upon his favour.'

'Your father?' I asked.

'Duke Maladon, silly,' she said and walked away leaving the pot and wrap in my lap. I watched her backside as she went. I thought perhaps I wouldn't die if I could still find time to watch a well-crafted bottom.

She looked over her shoulder and caught me watching. 'I'm Elin.' And she walked on, lost in the crowd and the smoke.

I took Ekatri's powder and bit on a leather strap as Makin dabbed the ointment on my burns. He may have a light touch with a sword but as a healer he seemed to have ten thumbs. I nearly chewed through the strap but when he'd finished the pain had died to a dull roar.

The girl, Elin, said the völvu depended upon her father's favour. I hoped that was so, rather than he on hers. Makin had been digging around, asking my questions in the right corners, doing that thing he does, the one that gets him answers. No one had said it, but if you stacked those answers up and looked at the pile from the right angle, it seemed the ice-witch, Skilfar, had a cold finger in every northern pie. I didn't doubt that many a jarl and north-lord danced to her tune without ever knowing it. Ekatri though, Makin said she was a smaller fish. I wondered on that one, sitting alone with my pain in the quiet of night. Alaric of Maladon should mind himself I thought – even the smallest fish can choke you.

I sat for five days, feeding on oat-mush whilst the Brothers gorged on roasted pig, ox heads, fat trout from the lake, sugar apples, and anything else that would be agony for me to chew. Each night more of the Duke's kith and kin arrived to swell the throng. Neighbours too. Men of the Hagenfast, beards plaited with locks from those who died under their axes, true Vikings tall and fair and cruel, out of Iron Fort and ports north, and a lone fat warrior from the marches of Snjar Songr, sour with seal grease and not parting with any of the furs that bundled him despite the hall's heat.

I watched Rike win the wrestling contest after ten drunken heats, finally throwing down a Viking with slab-muscled arms and a permanently florid face. I watched Red Kent come first in the throwing of the hand-axe at a wooden target board, and third in the log-splitting. A tall local with pale eyes beat Grumlow into second in the business of knife-throwing, but Grumlow was ever a stabber and better motivated to hit a target if it breathed. They told me Row acquitted himself well in the archery, but that took place outside and I didn't let them move me. Makin lost at everything, but then again Makin



knows that winners may be admired but they are not liked.

The Duke and Sindri sat beside me often enough, asking for the tale of Ferrakind's end, but I shook my head and told it with a single word. 'Wet.'

The ale flowed, but I drank only water and watched the torch-flames more often than I watched the Danes at their feasting and sport. Flames held new colours for me. I thought of Gog, destroyed by fire, and of his little brother who bore the name I gave him, Magog, for only a few hours. I thought of Gorgoth among the silence of the trolls in the black caverns. I held the copper box in my hand and wondered if its contents would distract me from my pain.

Most of all, though, as boys do when they're hurt – and at fourteen I discovered I was still a boy if the hurt came fierce enough – I thought of my mother. I remembered how I twisted and moaned on the slopes after Sindri left me, the agony that held me and the thirst I had, nearly as large as the pain. I would have fitted well amongst the dying at Mabberton, amongst the wounded that I had watched with a smile, coiled about their hurts, calling for water. And when pain bites, men bargain. Boys too. We twist and turn, we plead and beg, we offer our tormentor what he wants so that the hurting will stop. And when there is no torturer to placate, no hooded man with hot irons and tongs, just a burn you can't escape, we bargain with God, or ourselves, depending on the size of our egos. I made mock of the dying at Mabberton and now their ghosts watched me burn. Take the pain, I said, and I will be a good man. Or if not that, a better man. We all become weasels with enough hurt on us. But I think a small part of it was more than that. A small part was that terrible two-edged sword called experience, cutting away at the cruel child I was, carving out whatever man might be yet to come. I promised a better one. Though I have been known to lie.

We were bound for Wennith on the Horse Coast that day, when Mabberton burned. Wennith where my grandfather sits upon his throne in a high castle overlooking the sea. Or so my mother told me, for I had never seen it. Corion came from the Horse Coast. Perhaps he had aimed me there, a weapon to settle some old score for him. In any event, in Duke Maladon's hall in the quiet hours before dawn when the torches failed and the lamps guttered out, amid snoring Norsemen slumped over their tables, my thoughts turned once more to Wennith. I had friends in the north now, but to win this Hundred War of ours, of mine, I might need some family support.

*Age set its hand on Brother Row and left him forever fifty, not wanting to touch him a second time. Grey, grizzled, lean, gristly, mean. That pale-eyed old man will bend and twist but never break. He'll hold where the better man would fail beneath his load. The shortest of our number, rank and filthy, seamed with forgotten scars, often overlooked by men who had scant time to reflect on their mistake.*

*Four years earlier*

*On the long journey south I questioned the motivation for my diversion more than once. More than a hundred times, truth be told. The fact of the matter was that I hadn't found what I needed yet. I didn't know what I needed, but I knew it wasn't in the Haunt. My old tutor, Lundist, once said that if you don't know where to look for something, just start looking where you are. For a clever man he could be very stupid. I planned to look everywhere.*

We rode out on the sixth day. I sat in Brath's saddle stiff in every muscle, my face aching and weeping.

'You're still sick,' Makin said beside me.

'I'm sicker of sitting in that chair watching you gorge yourself as if your only ambition were to be spherical,' I said.

The Duke came to the doors of his hall with a hundred and more of his warriors to see us off. Sindri stood at his right hand, Elin at his left. Alaric led them in a cheer. Three times they roared and shook their axes overhead. They were a scary enough bunch saying farewell to friends. I didn't fancy the chances of any they deemed to be enemies.

The Duke left his men to come to my side. 'You worked a magic here, Jorg. It will not be forgotten.'

I nodded. 'Leave the Heimrift in peace, Duke,' I said. 'Halradra and his sons are sleeping. No need to go poking them.'

'And you have a friend up there.' He smiled.

'He's no friend of mine,' I said. Part of me wished he was though. I liked Gorgoth. Unfortunately he was a good judge of men.

'Good travels.' Sindri came to stand beside his father, grinning as ever.

'Come back to us in the winter, King Jorg.' Elin joined them.

'You wouldn't want to see this ugly face again.' I watched her pale eyes.

'A man's scars tell his story. Yours is a story I like to read,' she said.

I had to grin at that, though it hurt me. ‘Ha!’ And I wheeled Brath to lead my Brothers south.

Back on the road, and with regular applications of Ekatri’s black ointment, my face began to heal, the raw flesh congealing to an ugly mass of scar tissue. From the right you got handsome Jorgy Ancrath, from the left, something monstrous: my true nature showing through, some might say. The pain eased, replaced by an unpleasant tightness and a deeper burning around the bones. At last I could bear to eat. Now all the fine servings from the Duke’s table were trailing farther and farther behind us I discovered that I had an awful hunger about me. And that’s a thing about the road. Out on a horse, trotting the ways of empire day after day with nothing to eat but what you can carry or steal, you discover that everything tastes good when your stomach is empty. If you look at a mouldy piece of cheese and your mouth doesn’t water – you’re just not proper hungry.

In the Haunt the cooks would honey-glaze venison and garnish it with baked, rosemary-sprinkled dormice just to tempt my palate. After days in the saddle I find that in order for food to tempt me it must be either hot or cold and preferably, though not essentially, if it is animal, that it should not be moving and should once have possessed a backbone.

Around the fire at camp on that first evening we made a subdued huddle, somehow more reduced by the absence of our smallest companion than by that of our largest. I stared at the flames and imagined a sympathetic tingling in the bones of my jaw, even under the deadening effect of the ointment.

‘I miss the little fellow.’ Grumlow surprised me.

‘Aye.’ Sim spat.

Red Kent looked up from the polishing of his axe. ‘Did he give good account of himself, Jorg?’

‘He saved me and Gorgoth both,’ I said. ‘And he finished the fire-mage before he died.’

‘Sounds about right,’ Row said. ‘He were a godless bastard, that one, but he had a fire in him, God did he.’

‘Makin,’ I said.

He looked up, the flames reflected in his eyes.

‘Since Coddin is at home ...’ I paused then, realizing that I’d called the Haunt ‘home’ for the first time. ‘Since Coddin is at home, and the Nuban isn’t with us ...’

‘Yes?’ he said.

‘I’m saying, if I set on a path that’s ... maybe a little too harsh. Just let me know. All right?’

He pursed those too-fleshy lips of his then sucked air in through his teeth. ‘I’ll try,’ he said. He’d been trying all these years, I knew that, but now I gave him permission.

For a week we skirted villages, circled towns, and picked our way through the soft edges of the kingdoms we had passed on our journey north. We came to the settlement of Rye, too big to be a village, too recent and too random to be a town. On our trip out we had purchased provisions there and with our saddlebags flapping empty we rode in to resupply. Paying for goods still feels odd to me, but it’s a good habit to get into when you’ve the coin to spare. Of course you should steal every now and then, take something by force just for the wickedness of it, or how else will you keep your hand in the game? But aside from that, paying is recommended, especially if you’re a king with a pocketful of gold.

The main square in Rye isn’t square and it’s only just about ‘main’ as there are other markets and clearings in Rye almost as large. Rike had loaded the last sack of oats onto that great carthorse of his and Makin was trying to strap his saddlebag over four gutted hares in their fur when the crowd flowing around us seemed to part like the Red Sea for an old man. I had been leaning against Brath feeling rather faint. Summer had decided to give us a preview and the sun came beating down out of a faded sky. My face ached like a bastard and a fever had got its claws into me.

‘Prince of Thorns!’ the old fellow cried as he homed in on me, loud enough to turn heads.

‘That’d be “king” if it’s anything,’ I muttered. ‘And if there’s a Thorns on the map then I must have missed it.’

He stopped about a yard in front of me, and drew himself up tall. A skinny fellow, dried like a prune, with white hair fluffing at the sides of a bald head. His eyes were milky, though not like cataracts but somehow pearly with a hint of rainbows. ‘Prince of Thorns!’ Louder this time. People started to close in.

‘Go away.’ I used my quiet voice, the one that recommends you listen.

‘The Gilden Gate will open for the Prince of Arrow.’ Something electric crackled in the air around us, the white fluff stood out from the sides of his

head. ‘You can only—’

There’s an art to the quick drawing of a sword. Providing the scabbard strap is undone, and I always keep mine so, you can propel the whole blade several feet into the air just by hooking a hand loosely under one side of the cross-guard and literally throwing it upward. With good timing and a quick turn of the body you can snatch the hilt at the apex of the throw and as the sword falls you can turn that momentum into a sudden thrust into whatever is beside you.

I looked back over my shoulder. The man’s eyes still had their milky sheen but he’d stopped prophesying on me. By stepping away I drew the blade from his chest. He looked down at the scarlet wound but, oddly, did not fall.

I waited a moment, then another. The crowd kept their silence and the old man kept standing, making a close study of the blood pumping down his stomach.

‘Hey,’ I said.

He looked up at that, which helped. His chin had been in the way. I took his head with one clean blow. I’m not one to boast but it’s not easy to decapitate a man in one swing. I’ve seen expert axemen take three blows to do it at an execution when their victim’s neck is laid out for them on a block.

The seer had enough grace to let his body topple after his head landed by his feet. He kept looking at me though, with those pearly eyes. There’s no magic in it, a severed head can watch you for close on a minute if you let it, but they say it’s bad luck to be the last thing it sees.

I picked the head up by its tufts of hair and held it facing me at eye level. ‘Seriously? You can tell me what I am and am not going to sit on in years to come and you didn’t see that one coming?’ I kept my voice loud for the crowd. ‘This fake has been living off your misery and the misery of folk like you for years.’

And in a quiet voice, just for the seer and any who watched me through his eyes, for all those who watched this moment across the span of years before I was born. ‘I will make my own future. Being dead doesn’t make you right. Everybody dies.’

The lips smiled. They writhed. ‘Dead King,’ they said, without sound, and where I touched him my skin crawled, as if a spider unfolded itself in my palm.

I dropped the head and kicked it into the crowd. I say ‘kicked’ but in truth it’s a bad idea to kick a head. I learned that years ago, a lesson that cost me

two broken toes. What you want to do is shove the head with the side of your foot, like you're throwing it. It's going to roll anyhow so you don't need that much force. See, the thing about severed heads is the owner no longer has any interest in minimizing the force of the blow, or any ability to do so for that matter. When you kick somebody in the head as you do from time to time, they tend to be actively trying to move themselves out of the way and the contact is lessened. A severed head is a dead weight, even if it's watching you.

And that exhausts my insights into the kicking of severed heads. Admittedly it's more than most people have to offer on the subject but there were Mayans who knew a lot more than I do. That of course is a whole different ball-game.

Makin finished with his straps and stepped beside me. 'That was probably too harsh,' he said. 'You did ask me to point these things out.'

'Fuck off,' I said.

I waved to the Brothers. 'Let's ride.'

For close on a hundred miles we retraced our path along the North Way, down through the duchies of Parquat and Bavar where most travellers are welcome so long as they don't plan to stay, and even our sort are tolerated so long as we don't get off our horses.

The town of Hanver greeted us with bunting. Among those peaceful huddles of thatched cottages that I had remarked upon whilst travelling north, Hanver lay equally untouched and unspoiled, a place not visited by war and cradled amidst idyllic farmland divided into tiny fertile fields.

'Looks like a holy day.' Kent stood in his stirrups to see. For all that he was a dark and deadly bastard, Kent had himself a pious nature, the good kind of pious, or at least the better kind.

'Gah.' Rike liked his celebrations louder, more wild, and more likely to end in a riot.

'There'll be chorals,' Sim said, ever the music-lover.

And so without much more than a nod toward the fact I was king of Renar and that none of them were much more than scabby peasants at the end of it all, the Brothers led me into Hanver. We rode in down the main street, through the crowd, the locals with scrubbed faces, sporting their best rags, the children waving ribbon-sticks, some clutching sugar-apples kept sweet over winter. The Brothers set off on separate ways, Sim to the church, Grumlow to

the smithy, Rike handing his reins to a boy outside the first tavern. Row, more particular, chose the second tavern and Kent veered off to a stables to get a expert eye on Hellax's front right foreleg.

'Looks like there'll be more than chorals.' Makin nodded ahead to the main square. A wooden platform had been erected, fresh timbers, still weeping. A wide stage, a gallows frame and three strangling cords dangling in the breeze.

We tied up at the public tether and Makin flicked the watch-boy a copper double.

'Church execution,' Makin said. A white flag fluttered at the far corner of the platform, the holy cross and cup inked onto the linen.

'Hmmm.' I had little enough enthusiasm for matters ecumenical in the Tall Castle. On the road the church spread Roma's poisons without moderation. And that perhaps is the only time I have considered my father to be a moderating influence.

We stood with the others in the sunshine, snagging skewers of roast mutton from a passing seller. An ale-boy sold us arac in pewter cups, a dark and bitter local brew, stronger than wine. He waited for us to throw it back then went on his way with his cups returned. I may not have any time for the church, but why miss a good execution? Once years back we'd watched them hang Brother Merron and Row had said, 'A good execution don't need a good reason.' Which is true enough.

We heard the singing first, four choirboys, probably none of them cut, not in a wattle-and-daub town like Hanver. Nothing to see to start with save a silver cross up high on a staff, then the crowd parting and the boys in white frocks, voices soaring. I saw Sim way back, mouthing the words, though he didn't know the latin, just the sounds of it.

The priests then, two black crows with the holy purple showing at their breast, swinging censers. Blunt-faced, alike as brothers, no older than Makin. Following, drawn on a cart and bound at hand and foot, a mother and two daughters, ten, twelve, hard to say, white with terror. The senior priest brought up the rear, purple silks showing in diamonds through the black of his cassock, a stern man, handsome enough, silver hair in a widow's peak lending him gravitas.

'I need a decent ale.' Makin spat. 'That arac's left a sour taste.'

It might be that a good execution doesn't need a good reason, but it seemed to me that no execution the church conducted could be called good. I'd held



Father Gomst in contempt most of my life, as much for the lies he told as for his weakness. That night of thorns and rain had shown his lies, clear as if lightning found them in a dark room. But they would have surfaced in time either way. In fairness though, Gomst's brand of feeble optimism and talk of love had little of the Roma doctrine in it. Father wouldn't let the pope's hand inside his castle.

There were jeers among the crowd as the woman and her girls were manhandled onto the platform, though plenty kept silent, faces held tight and joyless.

'Do you know what the Church of Roma has in common with the church that came before it, the faith the popes held in the time of the Builders, in the centuries before the Builders?' I said.

Makin shook his head. 'No.'

'Nobody else does either,' I said. 'Pope Anticus took in every bible that survived the Thousand Suns in deep vaults, all the books of doctrine, all the Vatican records. All of it. Could have burned the lot. Could be following every letter and footnote. The scholars can tell you nothing except that you're not allowed to know.'

The priest up on the platform had found his stride, patrolling the edge before the crowd and bellowing about wickedness and witchcraft. White flecks of spit caught the sunlight as they arced over the heads of the peasants closest in.

'I never took you for a theologian, Jorg.' Makin turned away. 'Coming for that ale?'

I watched the executioners wrestle the first girl to the post. Not to be a straight hanging then, a little cutting first perhaps. She put up a struggle for a small thing: you could see the strain in the man's arms.

'Too early in the day for blood, Sir Makin?' I goaded him but the jibe was aimed inward at whatever was putting that same sour taste in my own mouth.

Makin growled. 'Call me soft but I've no stomach for it. Not for children.'

I don't think he'd ever have a stomach for it, Makin, not for children, not for men, though he'd let himself be carried along in the darkness of the Brotherhood back in those early years when he counted himself all that stood to defend me.

'But they're witches.' Another taunt meant for myself. They probably were witches. I'd met witches of many flavours and more magic seemed to leak into the world with each passing year, finding its way through this person or

that as if they were cracks in the fabric of our days. I'm sure the priest would have had me up on his platform too if he knew I could talk to dead men, if he saw the black veins running corrupt across my chest – if he had the balls to take me. They might be witches, but just as likely the woman had dared to disagree, or invent. Roma hated nothing like it hated invention. A priest might order you burned for making free with some enchantment, but find the trick of a better steel, or rediscover some alchemy of the Builders, and they would have an expert spend all week killing you.

Makin spat again, shook his head, walked away. A judgment on me. On his damn king! I threw off the anger, it was an escape, I could hide in it, but it wasn't Makin that had made me angry.

Let people pray to God, it's nothing to me. Some good may even come of it, if goodness is something that matters to you. Trap him in churches if you must, and lament him there. But Roma? Roma is a weapon used against us. A poison flavoured sweet and given to hungry men.

Up on the platform the girl screamed as they stripped her. A man approached holding a cane all set with metal teeth, glittering and pretty.

'It's the bishop isn't it?' I found Kent beside me, his hand on mine as somehow it worked to draw steel without asking my permission. With Kent's help I kept my sword in its scabbard.

'Murillo,' I agreed. There were few men who would dare mention Bishop Murillo to me. I regret the nails still. I had hammered them slow enough into his head, but even so it was too quick an escape for him.

'A black day,' Kent said, though I couldn't tell if he meant then or now. Pious or not he had never once chided me for the pope's nephew.

I nodded. I had better reasons to hate the church of Roma than for Murillo, but the bishop had put the edge on it. 'How's Hellax?' I asked.

'She'll be fine. They put a poultice on her leg,' Kent said.

The girl howled like the damned though all they'd done was show her the cane.

'Fit to ride is she?' I asked.

Kent gave me a look. 'Jorg!'

We're built of contradictions, all of us. It's those opposing forces that give us strength, like an arch, each block pressing the next. Give me a man whose parts are all aligned in agreement and I'll show you madness. We walk a narrow path, insanity to each side. A man without contradictions to balance him will soon veer off.

‘Let’s get a better view.’ I moved through the crowd. Most got out of my way, some I had to hurt. Kent stayed close behind.

Makin walked away because his contradictions allowed him a compromise. Mine are not so gentle. I’ll say it was hate that put me on that platform. Hate for Roma, for its doctrine of ignorance, for the corruption of its highest officials, perhaps for the fact it wasn’t my idea. My Brothers would tell you the decision owed as much to contrariness, to my taking offence at the idea that the only things holding those prisoners save the binding cords were fear of the priest and the baying of the mob. Certainly my actions owed nothing to three months on the throne of Renar. When they set that crown on my head technically I accepted responsibility for the people of my kingdom, but the crown weighed more than the responsibility ever did, and I even took the crown off before too long.

Nobody tried to stop me clambering on stage. I swear there were even a few helping shoves. I took the cane from the executioner’s hand as he drew back for his first swing. Sharp little twists of iron studded its length. The girl, naked against the post, watched that cane as if it were the only thing in the world. She looked too clean for a peasant. Perhaps the priests had washed her so the marks of her torture wouldn’t be lost in the dirt.

Red slaughter was an option, my fingers itched for a sword hilt and I felt fairly sure I could kill everyone on the stage without breaking sweat. Hanver hadn’t seen war in a generation – I was more than ready to change that. Instead I tried reason, or at least my brand of reason. Three strides brought me to within a yard of the silver-haired priest. The toothed cane twirling in one hand.

‘I am King Jorg of Renar. I have killed more priests than you have killed witches, and I say you will release these three for no reason other than it pleases me.’ I spoke clear and loud enough for the crowd which had fallen so quiet I could hear the flag’s fluttering. ‘The next words out of your mouth, priest, will be “Yes, Your Highness” or you’ll be making a meal of this cane.’

To his credit the priest hesitated, then said, ‘Yes, Your Highness.’ I doubt he believed my lineage, but he sure as hell believed my culinary predictions.

Armed men stood among the peasants, not so many but enough, bullies in helms and padded jerkins keeping order for whatever lordling held sway here. I met their eyes, beckoned to a group of three over by the horse trough. They shrugged and turned away. I can’t say it pleased me. Makin stood just beyond the trio, his compromise not having taken him as far as the closest

alehouse after all.

‘Tell me no!’ My sword cleared its scabbard so fast it almost rang.

Blood-hunger on faces in the crowd, the shock that they had been denied their due. I shared it too. Like a sneeze that goes unvoiced, a vacuum demanding to be filled. I waited, more than half of me wanting them to riot, to sweep forward in a wave of outrage.

‘Tell me no.’ But they stood silent.

The prisoners’ ropes gave before my sword’s honed edge. ‘Get out,’ I told them, angry now as if it were their fault. The mother limped away pulling her girls behind her. Makin helped them down.

I wondered later if it would be enough to send my ghost away, if my good deed, whatever the reason for it, would keep that dead baby from my dreams. But he returned as ever with the shadows.

We stayed a full day in Hanver and left on a bright morning, our saddlebags full, and with the bunting still overhead. Such is the beauty of places untouched by war. And the reason they don’t last.

*Four years earlier*

*I had left my monsters in the North – Gog and Gorgoth – my demons I carried south with me as ever.*

We made good time on our journey south. We crossed the Rhyme aboard one of those rickety barges I had been so dismissive of on the way north. I found it an interesting experience – my first journey *by* water rather than merely through it or over it. The horses huddled, nervous in the deck pen, and for the few minutes it took to haul the barge across by means of a fixed rope, I leaned over the prow and watched the river sparkle. I wondered at the captain, a sweat-soaked bulge of man, and the three men in his service. To live their lives on a broad river that would bear them to the sea in a few short hours. To haul their craft for mile after mile, hundreds in a month, and never get more than shouting distance from where they started.

‘Remind me again,’ Makin said when we alighted on the far shore. ‘Why aren’t we just going back to the Haunt where we, well you at least, can live like kings, instead of crossing half the world to see relatives you’ve never met?’

‘I’ve met some of them. I’ve just not been to where they live.’

‘And the reason we’re doing it now? Did you take the Highlands just so Coddin could rule it for you?’ Makin asked.

‘My family has always had a high regard for stewards,’ I said.

Makin smiled at that.

‘But we’re going because we need friends. Every soothsayer and his disembowelled dog is telling me that the Prince of Arrow is set for the empire throne. If that’s even part true then he’s going to roll over the Renar Highlands soon enough, and having met him I’d say we’d have a hard time stopping him. And despite the legendary friendliness of my nature it seems that these days I have to cross half the world to find someone who might be

ready to help out in time of need,' I said.

All that was true enough, but more than any move in the game of empire, I quite wanted to find a member of my family who didn't yearn to kill me. Blood runs thick they say, but what I have from my father is thin stuff. As I got older, as I started to examine the parts from which I'm made, I felt a need to see my mother's kin, if only to convince myself not all of me was bad.

We passed among the roots of Aups, mountains that put the Matteracks to shame both in size and number. Legion upon legion of white peaks marching east to west across nations – the great wall of Roma. Young Sim found them a fascination, watching so hard you might think he'd fall off his mare at any moment.

'A man could never climb those,' he said.

'Hannibal took elephants across them,' I told him.

A frown crossed him then passed. 'Oh, elephants,' he said.

Until that moment it hadn't occurred to me he hadn't the least clue what an elephant was. Even Dr Taproot's circus didn't have elephants. Sim probably thought they climbed like monkeys.

For weeks we rode along the lawless margins of minor kingdoms, along the less worn routes. Seven is a dangerous number of men for travelling. Not so few that you can pass unnoticed. Not so many that safety is assured. Still, we looked hard-bitten. Perhaps not as hard-bitten as we were, but enough to dissuade any bandits who might have watched us pass. Looking poor helps too. We had horses, weapons, armour, true enough, but nothing that promised a rich prize, certainly not a rich enough one for taking on Rike and Makin.

The foothills of the Aups roll out along the margins of Teutonia in long barren valleys divided by high ridges of broken stone. Bad things happened here in the distant long ago. The Interdiction they called it, and little grows in the sour dust, even now. Amid the emptiness of those valleys, a week's march from anywhere you might want to be, we passed the loneliest house in the world. I have read that in the white north, beyond a frozen sea, men live in ice houses, sewn in their furs, huddled from a wind that can cut you in half. But this stone hut, dwarfed amongst abandoned boulders, its empty windows like dark eyes, it seemed worse. A woman came out of it and three children lined up before her to watch as we rode past. No words were spoken. In that dry valley with just the whisper of the wind, without crow call or the high song of larks, it felt as if words would be a sin, as if they might wake something better left sleeping.

The woman watched us from a face that looked too white, too smooth, like a dead child's face. And the children crouched around her in their grey rags.

Riding north, we had paced the spring. Now it seemed we galloped into summer. Mud dried to hardpan, blossoms melted away, the flies came. Rike turned red as he does in any hint of summer, even the dirt won't keep him from it, and the sunburn improved his temper not a bit.

We left the mountains and their grim foothills, finding our way across wild heathlands and into the great forests of the south.

At the end of a hot day when my face hurt less, not healed but no longer weeping, I drew my sword. We had set camp on the edge of a forest clearing. Row found us a deer and had a haunch spitting over the fire.

'Have at ye, Sir Makin of Trent!'

'If you're sure you've not forgotten how to use that thing.' He grinned and drew. 'My liege.'

We sparred a while, parrying and feinting, stretching our limbs and practising our strokes. Without warning, Makin picked up the pace, the point of his blade questing for me.

'Time for another lesson?' he asked, still grinning, but fierce now.

I let my sword-arm guide me, watching only the plot of the fight, the advances and retreats, not the details of every cut and thrust. Behind Makin the sun reached through the forest canopy in golden shafts like the strings of a harp, and beneath the rustle of leaves, above the birds' calls, I caught the strains of the sword-song. The tempo of our blades increased, sharp harsh cries of steel on steel, the rasp of breath – faster. The burn on my face seemed to reignite. The old pain ran in me, acid and lightning, as if Gog's fragments were lodged in my bones, still burning. Faster. I saw Makin's grin falter, the sweat running on his forehead. Faster – the flicker of reflected light in his eyes. Faster. A moment of desperation and then – 'Enough!' And he let the sword fly from his fingers. 'Jesu!' he cried, shaking his hand. 'Nobody fights like that.'

The Brothers had stopped their various tasks and watched as if unsure what they had seen.

I shrugged. 'Perhaps you're not such a bad teacher?'

My arms trembled now and I used my free hand to steer the point of my blade home into its scabbard. 'Ouch!' For a moment I thought I had cut myself and raised my fingertips to my mouth. But there was no blood, only blistering where the hot metal scorched me.

We followed the curve of the mountain range and the sweep of one great river then another. The maps had names for them, sometimes the locals had their own, not trusted to maps. Sometimes those upstream called a river one thing and those further down named it differently. I didn't much care as long as it led us where I chose to go. Lately though we had been blocked at each turn it seemed. Watchtowers, patrols, floods, rumours of plague, each of them turned us one way then another, as if funnelling us south along particular paths. I didn't much like the feeling but it was, as Makin said, just a feeling.

'Dung on it!' I jumped from Brath's saddle and approached the shattered bridge. On our side the stonework still held part of its original arc, spanning out across the white waters for several yards before ending like a broken tooth. I could see large chunks of the bridge just below the river's surface, making waves and troughs in the flow. The damage looked fresh.

'So we trek east a bit. It's not the end of the world,' Makin said.

Of all of us Makin held the best mind for finding a path. Maps stayed with me. I could close my eyes and see each detail on the map scroll, but Makin had an instinct for turning ink on hide into wise choices in the matter of this valley or that ridge.

I grunted. Crouched at the side of the bridge I could smell something, just a hint, beneath that fresh metallic tang of fast moving waters, something rotten. 'East then,' I said. And we turned toward the trail leading east, a thin line of darker green amid the verdant woods, overhung with willow and choked by brambles. The thorns scratched at my boots as we rode.

The thing about the path less travelled is that it is often less travelled for a good reason. When that reason is not the dangers that haunt the road then it is the road itself. Sometimes it's both. In Cantanlona the soft edge of civilization becomes very soft, so soft in fact that it will suck you down given a quarter-chance.

'We're going through?' Red Kent stood in his stirrups frowning at the reed-dotted marshland stretching before us into a greenish brown infinity.

'Stinks.' Makin sniffed as if he weren't getting quite enough of the stink that offended him.

Rike just spat and slapped at the mosquitoes. He seemed to draw them as if they just couldn't tell how foul he was going to taste.



The Duchy of Cantanlona lies along what was once the border between two vast kingdoms, the bonding of which was the first step Philip took in forging the empire. It's said Philip's mother gave birth on that border, in Avinron, and being therefore a man of two lands he felt he had claim to both. It seemed fitting then that nothing remained of Avinron but a fetid swamp fed by a river aptly named 'the Ooze'.

Our route lay through the marshland. Good reasons for it lay to either side. I led the way, on foot with Brath's reins in hand. The Brothers and I had spent long enough in the Ken Marshes to develop a sense for uncertain ground. The vegetation tells the story. Watch for cotton grass, the first whisper of deep mud, black bog-rush where the ground will bear a man but a horse will sink, sedge for clean water, pimpnel for sour, bulrush where the water is deep but the mud below is firm. Sharp eyes you need, and watchful feet, and the hope that the warm swamps of Cantanlona are not too different from the cold marshes that border Ancrath.

Makin was right about the stink. The heat made it a high summer. An all-pervading rot encompassed us, the reek of putrid flesh and worse.

We made slow progress that day though we covered enough miles to make the way we had come look pretty much identical to the directions ahead, pathless, uniform and without hope of end.

I found a place to camp where we might be sure of a full complement in the morning. A series of grassy hummocks connected by strands of firm ground offered sufficient room for the men and horses, though we would all be keeping closer quarters than perhaps we would like.

Grumlow set to cooking, using sticks and charcoal that he'd had the foresight to bring with him. He brought out his iron tripod and hung a pot over the little fire and crouched over it, trickling in barley atop strips of smoked venison, the steam rising all about him and dripping off his moustache and back into the stew.

When night fell it dropped heavy and moonless, swallowing all the stars. The swamp, silent by day save for the squelching of our feet, came alive in the dark. A chorus of croaks, whirrs, chirps, and wetter, more disturbing sounds, flowed over us from sunset to sunrise. I set a watch, though the embers of our fire gave nothing to watch, and when my hour came I sat with closed eyes, listening to the darkness speak.

'Makin.' I kicked him, wary lest he take off my foot. 'You're on.'

I heard him grunt and sit. He hadn't taken his breastplate off, or his

gauntlets. ‘Can’t see a damn thing. What the hell am I watching for?’

‘Humour me,’ I said. The place just made me feel that if we all fell asleep together maybe none of us would wake up again. ‘And why are you still clanking if you think this place is safe?’

Dreams took me before Makin could find an answer. Katherine walked them, the dead child in her arms and accusations on her lips.

The morning sun drew a mist from the pools of standing water. At first it hung a foot or two above the cotton grass, but by the time we were ready to move, the mist boiled around our chests as if it were ready to drown us where the mud had thus far failed.

Some stenches you get used to. After a short while you can’t say if they are gone or not. Not the stink of the Cantanlona Marsh though. That stayed as ripe after a day and a night as it did when the reluctant breeze first brought it to me.

The mist managed to make me sweat and give me chills at the same time. Wrapped in it, with my Brothers reduced to wraiths at the edge of vision, I thought for some reason of the woman and her brats at that remote cottage – the woman with her dead face and the children like rats around her calves. Isolation comes in many flavours.

‘We could wait it out,’ Kent said.

A splash and Rike cursed. ‘Mud past my feckin’ knee.’

Kent had a point. The mist couldn’t hope to hold out against the heat of the day as the sun climbed.

‘You want to stay here a moment longer than you have to?’ I asked.

Kent plodded on by way of answer.

Wherever the sun had got to, it was doing a piss poor job of keeping me warm. The mist seemed to seep into me, putting a chill along my bones, fogging my eyes.

‘I see a house,’ Sim called.

‘You do not!’ Makin said. ‘What the hell would a house be doing in a—’

There were two houses, then three. A whole village of rough timber homes, slate-tiled, loomed about us as we slowed our advance.

‘What the fuck?’ Row spat. I think he invented spitting.

‘Peat-cutters?’ Grumlow suggested.

It seemed the only even half-sensible explanation, but I had it in my mind that peat bogs lay in cooler climes, and that even there the locals came to the

bog to cut peat and then went home, they didn't build their homes on it.

A door opened in the house to our left and seven hands reached for weapons. A small child ran out, barefoot, chasing something I couldn't see. He ran past us, lost in the mist, just the splashing of his feet to convince me he was real, and the dark entrance to the house where the door lay open.

I approached the doorway with my sword in hand. It reminded me of a grave slot, and the breath of wet rot that issued from it did nothing to erase the image.

'Jamie, you forgot—' The glimmer of my steel cut the woman short. Even in the mist Builder-steel will find a gleam. 'Oh,' she said.

'Madam.' I faked a bow, not wanting to lower my head more than a hair's breadth.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I wasn't expecting company.' She looked no more than twenty-five, fair-haired, pretty in a worn-thin kind of way, her homespun simple but clean.

Between the houses to our left a man in his fifties came into view, labouring under a wooden keg. He dumped it from his shoulder onto a pile of straw and raised a hand. 'Welcome!' he said. He rubbed at the white stubble on his chin and stared up into the mist. 'You've brought the weather with you, young sir.'

'Come in, why don't you?' the woman said. 'I've a pot on the fire. Just oat porridge, but you're welcome to some. Ma! Ma! Find the good bowl.'

I glanced round at Makin. He shrugged. Kent watched the old man, his eyes wide, knuckles white on his Norse axe.

'I'm so sorry. I'm Ruth. Ruth Millson. How rude of me. That's Brother Robert.' She waved at the old man as he went into the house he'd set the keg by. 'We call him "brother" because he spent three years at the Gohan monastery. He wasn't very good at it!' She offered a bright smile. 'Come in!'

A memory tickled me. Gohan. I knew a Gohan closer to home.

'Does your hospitality extend to my friend?' I asked, opening a hand toward Makin.

Ruth turned and led on into the house. 'Don't be shy. We've plenty for everyone. Well, enough in any case, and there's no sin like an empty belly!'

I followed her, Makin at my heels. We both ducked to get under the lintel. I had half-expected the interior to be dripping with the mire but the place looked clean and dry. A lantern burned on the table, brass and polished to a high shine as if it were a treasured heirloom. The place lay in shadows, the

shutters closed as though night threatened. Makin sheathed his sword. I was not so polite.

I cast about. Something was missing. Or I was missing something.

Rike stood outside, looming over the Brothers who pressed about him. Foolish enough they looked, bristling with weaponry as two young girls ran past laughing. An old woman hobbled up with a bundle under her arm, oblivious to Grumlow's daggers as she grumbled on by.

'Ruth,' I said.

'Sit! Sit!' she cried. 'You look half-dead. You're a just a boy. A big lad, but a boy. I can see it. And boys need feeding. Ain't that right, Ma?' She put her hand to her neck, an unconscious gesture, and stroked her throat. Pale skin, very pale. She'd burn worse than Rike in the sun.

'They do.' The mother put her head around the entrance from what must be the only other room. Grey hair framed a stern face, softened by a kind mouth. 'And what's the boy's name then?'

'Jorg,' I said. As much as I like to roll out my titles there is a time and a place.

'Makin,' said Makin, although Ruth only had eyes for me, which is odd because even if I were handsome before the burns, it's Makin that has a way with ... everyone.

'And is there a Master Millson?' Makin asked.

'Sit!' Ruth said. So I sat and Makin followed suit, taking the rocker by the empty fireplace. I leaned my blade against the table. The women gave it not so much as a glance.

Ruth picked up a woollen jerkin from behind my stool. 'That Jamie would forget his head!'

'You have a husband?' I asked.

A frown crossed her like a cloud. 'He went to the castle two years back. To take service with the Duke.' She brightened. 'Anyhow you're too young for me. I should call Seska over. She's as pretty as the morning.' She had mischief in her eye. Blue eyes, pale as forget-me-not.

'So what are you doing out here?' I asked. I'd taken a shine to Ruth. She had a spark in her and put me in mind of a serving girl named Rachel back at the Haunt. Something about her made me unaccountably horny. Unaccountable if you don't count eight weeks on the road.

'Out here?' Distracted she put her fingers to her mouth, a pretty mouth it has to be said, and wiggled at one of her back teeth.

‘Ma’ came from the kitchen with an earthenware pot, carried in a blackened wooden grip to keep the heat from her fingers. Makin got up to help her with it but she paid him no heed. She looked tiny beside him, bowed under her years. She laid the pot before me and set her bony hand to the lid, hesitating. ‘Salt?’

‘Why not?’ I would have asked for honey but this wasn’t the Haunt. Salt porridge is better than plain, even when you’ve eaten salt and more salt at Duke Maladon’s tables for a week.

‘Oh,’ said Ruth. Her hand came away from her mouth with a tooth on her palm. Not a little tooth but a big molar from far back, with long white roots and dark blood smeared around it, so dark as to be almost black. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, holding her hand at arm’s length as if horrified by the tooth but unable to look away, eyes wide and murky.

‘No matter,’ I said. It’s strange how quickly impersonal lust can slip into revulsion. It probably crosses the tail end of that thin line the poets say divides love and hate.

‘Perhaps we should eat?’ Makin said.

My stomach rolled at the thought of food. The marsh stink, that had yet to fade, invaded the room with renewed vigour.

Ma returned with three wooden bowls, one decorated with carved flowers, and a chair that looked too fine for the house. She set the bowls on the table, the fancy one for me, one before the new chair. The third she held onto, casting about for something, confusion in her eye. She put her hand to the side of her head, rubbing absently.

‘Lost something?’ I asked.

‘A rocking chair.’ She laughed. ‘A place this small. You wouldn’t think you could lose a thing like that!’ Her hand came away from her head with a clump of white hair in it. Pink scalp showed where it came from. She looked at it with as much bewilderment as her daughter, studying her tooth.

‘The Duke’s castle you say, Ruth?’ Makin said from the rocker. ‘Which duke would that be?’ Makin could take the awkward edge off a moment, but neither woman looked at him.

Ma stuffed the hair into her apron and shuffled back into the kitchen. Ruth set the tooth on the window ledge. ‘Is it supposed to be lucky?’ she asked. ‘Losing a tooth. I thought I heard that once.’ She opened the shutters. ‘To let the dawn in.’

‘What duke rules here?’ I asked.

Ruth smiled, the smallest smear of black blood at the corner of her mouth. 'Why you *are* lost, aren't you? Duke Gellethar of course!'

In that moment I realized what was missing. The dead baby, the box-child, he would lie in any idle shadow. But not here. These shadows were too full.

The front door banged open and little Jamie charged in. Boys of a certain age seem only to go flat out or not at all. He grazed the doorpost as he passed and lost a coin-sized patch of skin to a loose nail.

He ran up to me, grinning, snot on his upper lip. 'Who're you? Who're you, mister?' Oblivious to the missing skin where dark muscle glistened like liver.

'So this would be the land of ...' I ignored the boy and watched Ruth's muddy eyes.

'Gelleth of course.' She opened the shutters. 'Mount Honas is west of us. On a clear night you can sometimes see the lights.'

Makin may have been the man for maps, but I knew we were five hundred miles and more from Gelleth and the dust I had made of its duke. You would need the eyes of the god of eagles to see Mount Honas from any window in the Cantanlona ... and yet Ruth believed what she said.

She turned from the window, the right half of her as scarlet as if she'd been dipped in boiling water.

## 31

*Four years earlier*

I stood up sharp enough, beating Makin out of his rocker. ‘Ladies, my thanks but we have to leave.’

‘We?’ the mother asked from the kitchen doorway, half-scarlet like her daughter but on the left rather than the right, as if together they might make an untouched woman and a wholly scalded one.

‘There’s only you, Jorg,’ Ruth said, the side of her face starting to blister and weep. ‘There’s only ever been you for us.’ She spat two teeth – incisors, one upper, one lower – making a slot in her smile.

Makin slipped past me, out into the mist. I backed after him, sword held ready to ward the women off. Ruth’s smile held my gaze and I forgot her child. He clamped himself to my leg, the skin falling off him like wet paper. ‘Who’re you? Who’re you, mister?’

‘Only you, Jorg,’ said the mother, her head bald now but for random white tufts. ‘Since the sun came.’ She lifted her hand to the window.

The mist lit with a yellow glow then shrivelled back, drawn across the marsh as if it were a tablecloth whipped away fast enough to leave everything in place.

Out across the marsh it seemed that a second sun rose, too terrible and too bright to look at, too awful to look away from. A Builders’ Sun.

In horrible unison both women started to scream. Ruth’s hair burst into flame. Her mother’s scalp smouldered. I shook Jamie from my leg and he crashed against the wall, pieces of his skin left adhering to my leggings. I backed away from the house. I recognized the screams. I had made the same sounds when Gog burned me. Justice made those screams when Father lit him up.

Once upon a time perhaps I might have thought two women running around on fire was a free show. Rike would laugh that laugh of his even now. Row would bet on which one would fall first. But of late my old tastes had

gone sour. I had grown to understand this kind of pain. And whatever enchantments might have staged this show for me, these people had felt real. They had felt kind. A truth ran through this lie and I didn't like it.

Outside the sun shone, watching us from a midmorning angle, and the screams sounded fainter, farther off.

'The hell?' Red Kent swung his head. 'Where'd the mist go?'

'Ain't that a thing.' Row spat.

The buildings dripped with mud. They looked rotted. The roofs were gone.

'What did you see in there, Makin?' I asked, watching the doorway. No fire. No smoke. It looked dark. As if the sun wasn't reaching in even though the roof had gone.

He shook his head.

'They're sinking,' Rike said.

I could see it. Inch by inch each of the houses sunk into the foulness of the marsh. The sound of it put me in mind of sex though nothing had been more distant from my thoughts

'They're going back,' Sim said. He kept his distance from the walls.

He had it right. If we were seeing true now the mist had gone, then those buildings sunk long ago and something had made the marsh vomit them up again just for us.

'What happened?' Makin asked, although his face said he'd rather not know.

'They were ghosts,' I said. 'Summoned for my benefit.' Some tortured re-enactment of the suffering at Gelleth. People who died because of me. 'They can't hurt us.'

Within minutes the buildings were swallowed and no trace remained above the mud. I scanned the horizon. Nothing but stagnant pools for mile after mile. The retreating mist had cleared more than my sight though. A second veil had been drawn away. A more subtle kind of mist that had been with us since we first scented the marsh. The necromancy tingled in me. We stood on the surface of an ocean and the dead swam below. Something had been overwriting my power, blinding me. Something or someone.

'Show yourself, Chella!' I shouted.

The weight of her necromancy pulled me around to stare at the mire where she rose. She emerged by degrees, black slime sliding from her nakedness, her hair plastered around her shoulders, over the tops of her breasts. Ten yards of dark and treacherous mud stood between us. Row had his bow



across his back, the Nuban's bow lay strapped to Brath's saddle. Grumlow at least had a dagger in hand. In both hands actually. But he didn't seem tempted to throw either. Perhaps he just didn't want to draw her attention to him.

None of us spoke. Not one of us reached for a bow. The necromancer had a magic to work on the living as well as the dead. Or at least a magic to work on men. The mire had tainted the flesh that I remembered so well, leaving it dark but still firm. The slime that ran from her, that dripped and clung, seemed to guide the eye, to gild each dark curve and point.

'Hello, Jorg,' she said.

She used Katherine's words from the graveyard. Maybe what is spoken in such places is always heard by those who have married Death.

'You remember me.' I wondered how long she had been leading me to this point. I had no doubt now that her creatures had torn down the bridge we hoped to cross.

'I remember you,' she said. 'And the marsh remembers you. Marshes have long memories, Jorg, they suck down secrets and hold them close, but in the end, in the end, all things surface.'

I thought of the box at my hip and of the memories it held. 'I suppose you've come to tell me not to stand against the Prince of Arrow?'

'Why? Do you think I have my hooks in him?'

I shook my head. 'I would have smelled you on him.'

'You didn't smell me here and this place reeks of death,' she said, always moving, slow gyrations and stretches, demanding the eye.

'To be fair, it reeks of so much more beside.'

'The Prince of Arrow has enough defenders, enough champions, he doesn't need me. In any case, you don't want to believe everything you read, and the older a book is the less reliable its stories.'

There were written prophecies too? That made me snarl. It was bad enough that every turn of the tarot card and toss of the rune sticks put Arrow on the throne. Now books, my oldest friends, had turned traitor. 'So why are we here?' I asked. I knew, but I asked in any case.

'I'm here for you, Jorg,' she said, husky and seductive.

'Come and take me, Chella,' I said. I didn't lift my sword but I turned it so the reflected light slid across her face. I didn't ask what it was she wanted. Revenge doesn't need explanation. 'And *how* are you here?' A mountain had fallen on her in Gelleth and buried her deeper than deep.

She frowned at that. ‘The Dead King came for me.’ And for a moment, just a moment, I swear I saw her shudder.

‘The Dead King.’ This was new. I had thought I understood – that she was after revenge, pure and simple, emotions I could appreciate. After all, I had dropped Mount Honas on her. ‘Did he send you?’

‘I would have come anyway, Jorg. We have unfinished business.’ Again the seduction, stilling the Brothers who had started to move.

‘So who wants me more, Chella? You or this king of yours?’

A hint of a snarl in Chella now, the Brothers starting to shake her influence as irritation wore it thin.

‘Or did he want me more than he wanted you, Chella? Is that it? Your new king only dug you up to find me for him?’ I showed her my best smile. I had the truth of it: she couldn’t hide the annoyance that flickered across her brow. All to the good, an angry enemy is the best kind to have, but why this Dead King should have taken against me so I’d no idea.

‘Come and take me.’ I invited her again, beckoning, hoping to goad her into range. With my free hand I shoved Makin. ‘I know there’s a naked woman and everything, but if you could point the Brothers in more useful directions then we’re less likely to be eaten by her friends.’

‘Come and take you?’ Chella smiled, composure returned. She wiped her hand across her mouth, flicking mud aside, her lips blood-red. ‘I do want you. I do. But not for breaking. I know your heart, Jorg. Join with me. We can be more than flesh.’

The creature put an ache in my groin, true enough, as if that line between lust and revulsion had been erased as completely as the village. Part of me wanted to take her dare. *Embrace what you fear*, I had told Gog. *Hunt your fears*. And what is death if not the ultimate of fears, the final enemy? I had eaten the cold heart of a necromancer. Perhaps I should take Chella, take death by the throat, and make it serve me. I thought of the women burning in their house. ‘You are less than flesh,’ I said.

‘Cruel words.’ She smiled. She stepped closer. The fluid motion of her held my eyes. The jounce of breasts, the jut of hips, the redness of her mouth. ‘There’s a magic between us, Jorg. Surely you must have felt it? Does it not echo in your chest? Doesn’t it underwrite the very beating of your heart, dear one? We were meant to be together. The Dead King has told me I can have you. Told me to bring you to him. And I will.’

‘You’ll have a long wait for me in hell,’ I said. ‘Because I intend to send

you there right now.’ A weak line perhaps but mention of the Dead King knocked me out of my stride.

She smiled and made a kiss with crimson lips. ‘Are you angry because I showed you your ghosts? It wasn’t me who made them, Jorg.’

That stole the certainty from me. I saw Ruth again, and her mother, scalded by the hot light of the Builders’ Sun. ‘I didn’t know—’

‘You didn’t know a sun would burn them. You thought a cloud of poison would roll out and devastate the land. Isn’t that right? So, if Ruth and her mother and her child were choking on their own intestines, bleeding from eyes and anus, screaming different screams, that would be all right? That would be fine because that was the plan?’ Chella stepped closer. Relentless.

I couldn’t answer that. I had thought to poison the Castle Red, and I had known it would be everyone in it, not just the warriors. And if the toxins had spread? I had no idea how far they might go. And I hadn’t cared.

‘You know what men are really afraid of, Chella?’ I asked.

‘Tell me.’ She ran her hands up her thighs, across her belly, smearing dark skin with darker mud.

Makin pressed the Nuban’s bow into my palm. I grasped it. The thing nearly too heavy to hold in one hand.

‘Men are afraid of dying. Not of death. Men want it to be quick, clean. That’s the worst thing, the wound that lets you linger. Ain’t that right, Makin?’

‘Yes,’ he said. Makin isn’t a man of few words, but it’s difficult to break into a necromancer’s spell.

‘Linger,’ I said. ‘That’s a word that frightens the Brothers. Don’t let me linger, they say. And you know what undeath is, Chella? It’s the ultimate in lingering. A coward dies a thousand times, the Bard told us. And what about you? You’ve died just once but you’ve lingered a thousand times longer than you should.’

‘Don’t mock me, child,’ Chella said. Her ribs stood out now, her cheeks hollowed. ‘I hold more power—’

‘You can show me my ghosts, Chella. You can try to scare me with death and with dead things, so that I’ll choose your path. But I have my own road to follow. My ghosts are my own and I will deal with them alone. You are a thing of rot and fear and you should find a grave that will take you.’

The time when nothing could put fear in me had passed. It seems terror is a companion in the soft years when everything is new, and returns to us with

age, as we acquire things to lose. Perhaps I didn't have my full share of old man's cowardice just yet, but Gelleth's ghosts and knowing how many dead things swam beneath the mud, ready for the necromancer's call, had set a coldness in my bones. I had a prince to defeat, perhaps Katherine to woo, a comfortable throne to warm. Being drowned in slime by dead men didn't fit into those plans.

'It wasn't just ghosts I brought with me from Gelleth, Jorg.' Chella raised her arms high, a languid motion.

Other forms started to emerge from the mire, human forms.

I stuck my sword into the ground and lifted the Nuban's bow.

'I've been collecting,' Chella said.

The shape rising in front of her held familiar lines, a broad and powerful build, darkest in the places where the mud lay thin. A hole in his chest.

'I think he wants his bow back,' Chella said.

To her left a bloated form, guts hanging like black sausage from his slit belly. Others around us, clawing and shaking the mud from their faces. One stood head and shoulders above the rest, flesh hanging from his bones in tatters.

'I've walked where you walked, Jorg, taken what you tried to burn, and dug where you buried. Even in the shadow of your walls.'

I knew them all. The Nuban between Chella and my bow ... his bow, Fat Burlow to her left. Gemt with patches of dull red hair showing through the muck, head stitched back on, Brother Gains, Brother Jobe, Brother Roddat. Old Elban who always prayed for a quiet grave, Liar whose body we never found to bury even though he fell at the Haunt, and Brother Price all bones and tatters from four years in the ground. And more rising in the deep mire or hauling themselves onto firmer ground from the standing pools.

Chella watched me over the Nuban's shoulder, using him as her shield. Another lesson in the value of attacking without hesitation.

'Join with me.' Her voice fluttered from corrupt lungs. Her eyes glittered, sunken in their sockets as if lifting my Brothers from the depths had sucked vitality from her. 'My brother's strength runs in you, all but unused, fading, wasted.'

*Brother? The necromancer I cut down was her brother?*

'My thanks, lady, but I've had my fill of necromancers.' I fired both bolts from the Nuban's bow. One punched a hole in his shoulder. The other passed through Chella's neck just to one side of her throat.

The Nuban, almost turned around by the impact, straightened and faced me again, no expression on his grey lips. Chella put a hand to her neck and twisted her head with a noise like popping cartilage.

‘We’re family, Jorg. Families argue. But I forgive you, and when I’ve taken you down into the marsh with me ... when we’re together in the cold deep places ... embracing like family do ... you’ll forgive me too.’

*Brother Sim holds himself close and you will never know him no matter what words pass between you. He whispers something to each man he kills. If he could speak it to a man and let him live, then I might have lost a killer.*

*Four years earlier*

*In the hot and endless swamp of the Cantanlona many things are lost, secrets swallowed, lives drawn down into blackness. And sometimes, slow currents return what was better kept hidden.*

It's never a good idea to run in a bog. Slow steps are called for when a place is littered with sucking pools, deep mire, and tufted hummocks perfect for the breaking of ankles. However, there are times when a bad idea is the best you have.

'Follow me!' I shouted, and I ran out between the pools and the tussock-grass to my left. Chella let herself slide under the mud whilst the Nuban moved to intercept.

Whatever necromancy I'd gained from Chella's brother would have made only a drop in the ocean of Chella's strength. However, secrets hold power. The secret I had in mind had slipped from Doctor Taproot's lips, and he would never have given the information away for free if he thought it still held value.

'I release you, Kashta!' I slapped my palm to the wound in his chest, careless of his grasping hands.

When a name is held secret its power multiplies. The Nuban toppled without hesitation and I felt that he would never rise again. As he fell my anger rose.

I splashed on with the live Brothers behind me and the dead Brothers behind them. Back and to my right, Fat Burlow moved to block Rike. I raced on, finding a low ridge of firmer ground. Turning, I saw Rike's broadsword shear through Burlow's arm. Burlow grabbed him with his remaining hand, but Makin cut that off and both men charged on, slowing as they hit softer ground and starting to wade. Makin lost a boot to the sucking mud but he made it to my side. Our panicked horses ran in various directions; some

cantered after us, Brath among them, but I saw two horses hit the mud and start to sink, rearing and plunging as if they thought they might win through.

Some yards away a mud-pit began to boil with activity. Corpse after corpse clambered from it as if they had been stacked fathoms deep and with unsettling intimacy.

I led on. It seemed that whilst the undead lacked fear and would literally need to be hacked apart before they stopped trying to kill us, they were at least slow. On an open field we would have left them in our dust. In the swamp the match turned out to be more even. A pervasive aura of lingering death infects the mud in the Cantanlona bogs. Somehow the mire itself is a half-alive, or half-dead depending on your perspective, and it supported the undead, vomiting them up, keeping them from sinking.

The corpses from the mud-pit managed to intercept us when the firm ground swung to the left.

‘Keep moving!’ I shouted.

Makin sliced one across the chest, his training misleading him for once. The creature didn’t notice the wound and grappled him with muddy arms. Rike didn’t bother with his sword. He set his boot to the stomach of the corpse-man in his path with such force that he threw it yards back, felling another before it reached us. Of all the Brothers Red Kent proved best suited to the work. His Norse axe sheared off grasping limbs, weaving a savage pattern that left the bog scattered with hands, arms, and heads.

We raced on with the creatures at our heels, silent in their determination to catch and dismember us, just the noise of their splashing and our panting. At one point a mud-grey army of undead hunted our trail, but each mile left them further behind us until at last they dropped from sight.

I called a halt on a low mound that offered a firm footing and an elevated view of the bogs. A ring of weathered stone indicated the place had once been a burial, some local chieftain perhaps, but the grave looked to have been emptied years ago and I felt no more death there than in any of the surrounding mire. My anger had kept pace with me during the long chase. Chella had kept the Nuban’s corpse as her plaything for more than half a year. I didn’t know if anything of the man remains when necromancy animates his flesh, but the possibility of his suffering, and the horror of it if he did, made me swear revenge. I had only made one such vow before and then as now I made it without words and with every intention to tear the world apart if that were needed to see it through.



‘I don’t want to spend another night in this place,’ Makin said.

‘Really?’ Rike growled, sitting on the largest of the stones. I’d never heard him use sarcasm before. I guessed he must have been saving it for extreme circumstances.

‘Stand a moment, Rike,’ I said.

And he did. I lifted the point of my sword to his side. With a stab and a twist I took Burlow’s severed hand away, tearing off the patch of tunic it had a grip on, and flicked it into the swamp.

‘We’ve wandered into hell,’ Grumlow said with conviction. ‘We got lost and now we’re in hell.’ He had mud plastered up one side of his face and blood clotting in his moustache, trickles of it making crimson trails from nose to lip.

‘Hell smells better,’ I said.

With the horses around us the mound was crowded and our sightlines blocked. I pushed the grey aside, slapping her rump. Of the five horses left to us she was the only one relaxed enough to crop at the short grass.

‘We should go,’ Makin said.

We should, but where to? The horizon offered nothing. Except, perhaps ...

‘Is that the sea?’ I pointed. To the east a hint of black or blue lined the furthest reaches of the marsh.

A sharp cry cut off anyone inclined to answer. I spun toward the sound. Just behind us, thigh-deep in water, chest-deep in rushes, Chella held Young Sim by the throat and head. She took another step back away from the mound, dragging Sim. It seemed that she had done something to him, to his neck maybe, for his arms hung limp at his side though he watched us with wild eyes. We called him Young Sim and he had perhaps sixteen years, but when it came to killing he was an old hand and he would not have gone easy without good reason.

‘Jorg, you shouldn’t run from me,’ Chella said. The water had washed away the mud though it couldn’t take the bog-stain from her skin, the colour of old teak. The Celtic patterns scrolling across her were deep-set too, not the paint I had once thought them. A needle must have placed those swirls and knots along her arms, reaching across her sides.

‘I don’t want any part of you, necromancer.’ I still held the Nuban’s bow, though I hadn’t reloaded it. I aimed at her, assuming she wouldn’t pay close attention to the number of bolts in place. ‘Whatever power I consumed is fading from me. Slower than I would like it to fade, but it will be gone and I

won't be sorry. I want no part of you or your dirty trade.'

She smiled. 'The Dead King won't let you go, Jorg. He's gathering all our kind to him. Black ships wait to take us to the Drowned Isles.'

I made no reply. My anger had subsided once I vowed to destroy Chella. Vengeance is patient when it needs to be and she sought to use the Brothers against me to enrage me, to set me chasing her into the drowning pools. I didn't let her know how deep her hooks had sunk.

'You're not going to ask me to release your brother, Jorg?' She dragged Sim a yard further back.

Row had an arrow trained on her and Grumlow looked ready to throw his knife this time. Grumlow had a soft spot for Sim: fear wouldn't stay his hand.

'So, you have my brother. Eat his heart and we will be even. Back to where we started,' I said. I knew she wouldn't be letting go of Sim. She just wanted me to ask.

'Oh, you can't go back, Jorg. You should know that. You can never go back. Not even if every trace of necromancy left you. Look!' She made a quick change of grip and jerked Sim's head to the right. Far too far to the right. The grating of bone set my teeth on edge. 'Annnnd ...' She rotated his head slowly back to face us. 'He's back. But he's not the same now, is he?'

'Bitch!' Row released his arrow. Whether his hand trembled or Chella moved faster than I could see I don't know, but the arrow ended up jutting from Sim's eye.

'Now see what you've done.' Her red mouth smiling, her eyes seductive, and she whispered in Sim's ear.

Grumlow threw his knife but Chella was already falling. It may have cut her, but the waters closed over her before I could tell.

Sim, despite his arrow and his broken neck, remained standing. And then he took an uncertain step toward us. The clear water between the rushes clouded as the mud below began to stir.

'The sea,' I shouted. I pointed for good measure. The Prince of Arrow had advised me to see the ocean and it looked as though it might be the last thing I did. The Brothers needed no encouragement. We set off running, hoping that Brother Sim would prove as slow as the other dead men and not as fast as we remembered him.

*Brother Row you can trust. Trust him to lie, trust him to cheat, perhaps to betray. Most of all trust him to be true to what he is, a weasel, a killer in the dark, handy in the fight. Trust in all that and he will not disappoint.*

*Four years earlier*

The sea air added no more than a salt tang to the rankness of the Cantanlona bogs. I could see a grey expanse of water now, still miles off.

‘At least they’re slow,’ Kent said. He splashed along beside me, axe in hand. He risked a backward glance. Running in a marsh with a sharp axe whilst looking over your shoulder is not to be advised. But then again, nothing we had done for two days was advisable.

The sea breeze carried a low moaning with it. I tried not to worry about that.

We pressed on, unwilling to rest after the last time. Four horses followed us, Row’s having taken a broken ankle after putting its leg down a mud-hole. I made Kent cut its legs off once Row had slit its throat. ‘I’m not having Chella stand him up again and have her dead men ride after us.’

The sea kept looking bigger by the minute. We’d soon be in the salt marsh.

‘Jesus please us.’ Row stopped dead ahead of me. Of all the Brothers he was the one least likely to call on divine aid.

I came to his shoulder. The tufted marshland we’d been crossing ended without warning and a long stretch of mudflats reached out before us, eventually giving over to reed-beds after two hundred yards or so. The heads were what stopped Row, not the mud.

Every five yards, like cabbages in a field, a head stuck up from the flats. The closest ones stopped moaning and swivelled their eyes to watch us.

The one by Row’s feet, a woman of middle years, slightly jowly, strained to see our faces. ‘God save me,’ she said. ‘Save me.’

‘You’re alive?’ I knelt beside her on one knee, the mud firm beneath me, like wet clay.

‘Save me!’ A shriek now.

‘They’re underneath.’ A man to our left, Makin’s age maybe, black-bearded, the mud only in the lower parts of his beard as if rain had washed

him clean.

I reached out with the necromancy lurking in my fingertips. I could sense no more death in this mud than in any other part of the bog. Except around the people themselves. I could feel the life leaching out of them – being replaced by something less vital, but more durable.

‘They’re tearing my skin off!’ The man’s voice rose to a howl.

To our right, a younger woman, black hair flowing down into the mud. She raised her face to us, the skin mottled with dark veins like that on my chest. She snarled. A deep throaty sound, full of hunger. And behind her another woman who might have been her sister. ‘They come at night. Dead children. They give us sour water and feed us awful things. Awful things.’ She hung her head again.

‘Kill me.’ A man further out on the mudflats.

‘And me.’ Another.

‘How long ...’ I said.

‘How long have you been here?’ Makin asked.

‘Three days.’

‘Two weeks.’

‘Nine days.’

‘Forever!’ The moaning and the snarling grew in volume.

I stood, cold in my limbs and sick in my stomach. ‘Why?’ I asked Makin. He shrugged.

‘I know,’ Rike said.

‘You don’t know anything, Rike,’ I told him.

But he did. ‘The quick and the dead,’ he said. ‘She’s making them here. Letting them stew. She’s turning them slowly and they’ll be fast. Heard of this kind before.’

Out on the flats another head watched us with new hunger and screeched. Several more took up the call.

‘Give them what they want, Kent,’ I said.

‘No! Please mercy.’ The woman at Row’s feet begged. ‘I have children.’

‘Or if they don’t want it, give them what they need,’ I said.

Kent set to cropping the field. Red work and hard on the back. The others pitched in, Rike with rare enthusiasm.

We moved on at a trot, eager to be quit of the place.

‘That won’t be the only field,’ Makin said. He’d lost his other boot along the way and ran barefoot now.

I wasn't so much worried about what else Chella had growing. Rather I worried about what she had already grown.

We moved through a green sea to reach a grey one. The reeds came chest high and higher, dark mud around them that took you calf-deep before your next step. Broad swathes of open mud divided the reed banks, each with a tiny stream trickling at its middle. I started to hear the distant waves as we broke out onto yet another of these divisions.

'No.' Grumlow put a hand on my shoulder before I stepped onto the mud.

Out toward the middle, where the stream made a bright ribbon, the mud heaved.

Row took out his bow. I wound the Nuban's crossbow.

The mud flexed again, mounded, and began to flow in reluctant waves as something black emerged.

'It's a fucking boat,' Rike said.

Clearly it was Rike's day for being right. A fishing boat of black and rotting timber emerged as if surging from beneath a rogue wave, its crew lifting themselves from the deck, shedding mud and clumps of decayed flesh as they rose. I thought of the fat captain on his barge crossing the Rhyme. Perhaps he made the wise choice to stick to the route he knew after all.

'Back!' And I led them into the reed-beds again.

We ran, carving our path through reeds that overtopped me, reed-heads beating at my face.

'Something's coming,' Rike shouted. He could still see above the green.

'From the boat?' I called.

'No. The other side.'

We veered away and ran harder.

I could hear them. Gaining on us, beating a path through the stems.

'What is it?' I shouted.

'Can't see,' Rike said, panting now. 'I just see the reeds falling.'

'Stop!' And I followed my own order. I threw the Nuban's bow down and whipped out my sword, scything through reeds. 'Cut a clearing!' I shouted.

There's no point running if you're going to be caught.

Three dead men tore into our clearing as we cut it. They moved at blinding pace, howling the moment they saw us. Without hesitation all three launched themselves at us, hands reaching for throats. Row went down. I skewered the one that chose me. He literally swallowed my sword, his split cheeks reaching the hilt whilst the point dug between his lungs and down into his

stomach. An image of Thomas at the circus flashed to mind.

Having his vital organs divided by four foot of steel only seemed to enrage my foe. He almost tore the sword from my grip as he struggled to take hold of my throat. I held on and he pushed me back through the reeds, him nearly on all fours, lunging at me as if to take more of the sword. If he could have opened his jaws wider he would have taken the hilt and my hands too. Vital organs seemed to be a misnomer.

The dead man pushed on, gargling dark blood as he forced me back, splashing into a sucking pool. I dug in, twisted my blade, and ripped it down, carving a path out through his neck, chest, and stomach. His guts flooded out and he pitched into the pool, clawing at me as I tore free and drove my sword into the firmer ground. Kicking in wild fear and hauling on my sword I managed to drag myself out of the pool. I lay on my back, panting and gasping. I could hear the howls and snarls of the other dead men and the Brothers cursing as they fought. The reeds rose about my head like forest giants, swaying gently against the blueness of the sky.

By the time I found my breath and returned to the cut clearing the fight had ended.

‘Row’s dead.’ Makin scrubbed at rips on his cheek with a handful of reeds. They seemed to make matters worse, but maybe he wanted to bleed it clean.

‘I never liked him,’ I said. We said that sort of thing on the road. Also it was true.

‘Make sure there’s nothing left for Chella to play with,’ I told Kent.

He set to beheading the first of our attackers. Someone had already taken its arms off and mud filled its mouth, but it still wriggled and glared.

Seeing Makin tend his wounds I thought to pat myself down. Sometimes it’s hours before you notice an injury taken in battle.

‘Fuck,’ I said.

‘What?’ Makin looked up.

‘I’ve lost the box.’ I ran my hands over my hips as if I could have missed it the first time.

‘Good riddance,’ Makin said.

I walked back along the path of flattened reeds where the dead man had pushed me. Nothing. I reached the sucking pool.

‘It’s sunk here,’ I said.

‘Good.’ Makin came up behind me.

I turned away. It didn’t feel right to lose it. It felt like something I should

keep. Part of me.

‘Kent!’ I shouted. He stopped with his axe poised overhead, Row’s corpse at his feet.

‘Leave him,’ I said.

I walked back and knelt beside Row. Death isn’t pretty close up. The old man had fouled himself and stunk even worse than usual. Red-and-pink tatters of his throat hung down over his collarbones; loose ends of white cartilage reached out to frame the dark hole to his lungs. Trails of snot and purple blood had run from his nose, and his eyes had rolled to the left at a painfully sharp angle.

‘I’ve not finished with you, Brother Row,’ I said.

I took his hands in mine. Dead men’s hands are not intrinsically unpleasant but in truth it did make my skin crawl as I laced fingers with him. He lay limp, the hard skin at the top of his palms scratched against me.

‘What’re you doing?’ Grumlow asked.

‘I have a job for you, Brother Row,’ I said.

I searched for him. He couldn’t have gone far in just a few minutes. I felt the pulse of necromancy in the unhealed wound in my chest. A dark hand closed around my heart and a chill wrapped me.

I knew I had very little power, just a trickle, like the ribbon of water in those wide avenues of mud. But Row still held warmth. His heart didn’t beat but it twitched and quivered, and more important – I knew him blood to bone. I’d never liked him, but I knew him.

To make a dead man walk you have to wear his skin. You have to ease under it, to let your heartbeat echo in him, to run your mind along his thoughts.

I spat like Row did. I lifted my head and watched the Brothers with narrowed eyes, seeing them with Row’s likes, dislikes, jealousy, old grudges, remembered debts.

‘Brother Row,’ I said.

I got up. We got up. He got up.

I stood face to face with his corpse and he watched me from a distant place through eyes he once owned. The Brothers said nothing as I walked back to the pool and Row followed me.

‘Find it,’ I said.

I didn’t have to explain myself. We wore the same skin.

Row walked into the pool and let it take him. I crouched to watch.



Row had sunk from view before I felt the steel at my neck. I looked around, up along the blade.

‘Don’t ever do that to me,’ Makin said. ‘Swear it.’

‘I so swear,’ I said.

I needed no convincing.

*Four years earlier*

It seemed that we had been running in the marshes for most of our lives. Mud spattered each of us to the tops of our heads. The Brothers showed white skin only where they had scraped the filth from around their eyes. Now as the sun lowered red toward the western horizon it gave them a wild look. Soon, when the sun drowned in the marsh and left us in darkness we would drown too.

‘More of the bastards,’ Rike shouted. Once again he was the only one who could see over the reed-sea.

‘How many?’ I asked.

‘All of them,’ he said. ‘It’s like all the reeds are falling.’

I could hear the snarls, faint but clear on the evening air. I patted the box at my hip. It took Row two hours to find, two hours before his hand finally broke the surface to give it to me. The Brothers had not liked waiting, but two more hours would not have got us out of Chella’s muddy hell. We left him in the pool. I told Makin I had set him free. But I didn’t.

‘Can you see any clear ground?’ I asked.

Rike didn’t answer but he set off with purpose so we followed.

The snarling grew louder, closer behind us. We ran hard, the splashing of quick dead feet closer by the second, and the shredding of reeds as they tore their path.

One moment I ran through a rushing green blindness and the next I broke clear onto a low mound. It felt like a hill though it rose no higher than three feet above the water level.

‘Good work,’ I told Rike, then gasped in breath. It’s better to die in the open.

Chella’s army converged on us from all sides. The quick ones, mottled and mire-stained, undying rage on their faces and an unholy light in their eyes, dozens of them, flowing out to surround the mound. Behind them, minutes later, shambling in through the flattened reeds came the grey and rotting

dead, and amongst them the bog-dead from the depths, cured to the toughness of old leather and of a similar colour. I saw Price's tall bones and tattered flesh overtopping all others. Chella walked at his side wearing a white dress, all lace and trains such as might be worn at a royal wedding. Hardly a touch of mud on it.

'Hello, Jorg,' she said. She stood too far away for me to hear but every dead mouth whispered her words.

'Go to hell, bitch.' I would rather have said something clever.

'No harsh words on our wedding day, Jorg,' she said, and the dead echoed her. 'The Dead King is risen. The black ships sail. You'll join with me. Love me. And together we will open the Gilden Gate for our master and set a new emperor on the throne.'

The dead of Gelleth came then, wandering through the marsh as if lost, ambling one way and the next. Ghosts these, but looking real enough, with their burns and their sores, teeth missing, hair and skin falling away. Hundreds of them, thousands, in a great ring of accusation. They pressed so hard that at the back some of the bog-dead were pushed aside and trampled under.

'So,' said Rike. 'Marry the bitch.'

'She's going to kill you all either way, Rike. She'll have your corpse walking beside her. Price on one side, you on the other, the brothers back together again.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Fuck that then.'

'Come now, Jorg, don't be a baby,' Chella said, and the dead spoke with her. She spoke again, echoed this time by just one voice, from a corpse woman close by the edge of our mound. A muddy corpse, one arm chewed to the bone, her skin stained, lips grey and rotting, but something of Ruth's lines in her face. 'The Dead King is coming. The dead rise like a tide. They outnumber the living, and each battle makes more corpses, not more men.' The dead woman's tongue writhed, black and glistening, Chella's words slipping from it. 'Join with me, Jorg. There's a place for you in this. There's power to be taken and held.'

'There's more to this,' I said. Even the high esteem in which I held my own charms didn't allow me to believe her so smitten as to cross nations for this. And if vengeance drove her then she could take it easily enough now without this charade. 'The Dead King scares you.' She sounded too eager, desperate even. 'What does he want with me?'

Even with so many yards between us I could read her. *She didn't know.*

I made to step forward but something caught my foot. Looking down I saw teeth, a dog's skull half-buried, half-emerged to grip my foot. Another ghost, but it pinned me even so.

I looked out across the dead horde, scanning the packed crowds of ghosts behind them. Chella couldn't know about my dog, Justice. She couldn't have gathered all the dead of Gelleth or learned their stories. Somehow this came from me. Somehow Chella was pulling the ghosts of my past out through whatever hole it was I made in the world. And not even the ghosts I knew of but the ghosts of those whose end I caused. I felt the corner of an idea, not the whole shape of it, but a corner.

The skull brought my gaze back to the ground at my feet. 'You shouldn't have done that,' I said. I tore free. I felt him rip me but Justice's teeth left no marks upon my boot. It was just pain, no blood. It was just my mind that trapped me. The ghosts couldn't harm us or we would have died in Ruth's house, we would have burned with them when the Builders' Sun lit. Chella brought them only to torment me.

'Let's get married, dear-heart,' Chella said. 'The congregation is assembled. I'm sure we can find a cleric to perform the ceremony.'

And pushing from the other ghosts came Friar Glen, a shade wavering in the daylight, less clear than the other spirits, as if something tried to keep him back. At my hip the box of memories grew heavy. I hadn't known Friar Glen to be dead, but perhaps I knew it once and chose to forget. He came with a slow step, hobbling, though I could see no wound upon him, and he didn't look well pleased. In one hand he held a knife, a familiar knife, red with blood. When a dead man shambled into his path the friar stabbed him in the neck. The creature toppled with the knife still in him. Ghosts couldn't hurt the living, but apparently they could hurt the dead plenty. Friar Glen hobbled on until he stood at Chella's side.

I wondered how the friar's ghost came to be here, watching me with such hatred. I could feel it from fifty yards. But more than that – more than I wondered about Friar Glen – I circled around the words Chella spoke before she called him.

*The congregation is assembled.*

The quick-dead moved closer though I heard no instruction. They took slow steps, their hands ready to grab and twist and tear. Against so many we would last moments.

‘It’s no kind of wedding if my family can’t attend.’ I sheathed my sword.

‘Some ghosts I can’t summon. The royal dead are buried in consecrated tombs and lie with old magics. If I could have made your mother dance for you I would have done so long ago,’ Chella said. The whisper reached me through the crowd, writhing on the lips of the quick-dead as they stepped ever closer.

*The congregation is assembled, but some ghosts she can’t summon.*

The remaining horses nickered behind me, nervous, even the grey.

‘I was thinking of my Brothers,’ I said. I opened a hand to the left and right to indicate Makin, Kent, Grumlow, and Rike.

‘They can attend,’ Chella said. ‘I will leave them their eyes.’

‘Will we have no music? No poets to declaim? No flowers?’ I asked. I was stalling.

‘You’re stalling,’ she said.

*The congregation is assembled. Aside from those she can’t summon. And those she does not wish to.*

‘There’s a poet I’m thinking of, Chella. A poem. A fitting one. “To his coy mistress.”’

‘Am I coy?’ She walked closer now, swaying through the dead.

The wisdom of poets has outlived that of the Builders.

‘The poem is about time, at least in part. About how the poet can’t stop time. And in the end he says, “For Thus, though we cannot make our sun; Stand still, yet we will make him run”.’

Ghosts can’t hurt men. They can drive them mad. They can torment them to the point at which they take their own lives, but they cannot wound them. I felt this to be true. My stolen necromancy told me it was so. But they can hurt the dead, it seems. I had seen it with my own eyes. The corpses that Chella set to walking could be felled by spirits because they stood closer to their world, close enough to the gates of death for a ghost to reach out and throttle them.

‘Very sweet,’ Chella said. ‘But it won’t stop me.’

‘So I’ll make you run.’ And with every fragment of my will I summoned my ghosts. I pulled them through the gates that Chella had opened. With arms spread wide I returned each shade and phantom, each haunt and spirit that had trailed me these long years. I bled them through my chest, let them pulse through me with each beat of my heart. I couldn’t stop Chella drawing forth those she wanted but I could make damn sure they all came, each and every

one. At a run.

And they came. The congregation Chella had chosen not to invite. The burning dead of Gelleth, those that the Builders' Sun took first, not victims from the outskirts of the explosion like Ruth and her Ma, but those who burned in the Castle Red at the heart of the inferno. They poured from me in an endless torrent. Ten of them to every child of Gelleth that Chella had brought forth. And my dead, the burning dead, brought with them a fire like no other. They burned as candles in the hearth, flesh running, flames leaping, each man or woman screaming and racing or staggering and clutching. And behind them, with measured pace, a new kind of ghost, each glowing with a terrible light that made their flesh a pink haze and shadows of their bones.

I saw nothing but fire without heat, heard only screams, and after forever we stood alone on our mound with no sign of Chella or her army save for blackened bones smouldering on damp reeds.

'Wedding's off,' I said, and taking my bearing from the sunset I led the Brothers away to the south.

*Brother Makin has high ideals. If he kept to them, we would be enemies. If he nursed his failure, we would not be friends.*





## Wedding Day

‘A spade?’ Hobbs said.

If there was ever a man to call a spade a spade, Watch-master Hobbs was that man. I was just impressed a man of his age had any breath left at this point, for stating the obvious or otherwise.

I kicked about in the snow. Spades lay everywhere, covered by a recent fall.

‘Get Stodd and Keppen’s squads shooting down the slope. Harold’s men I want using these spades to dig,’ I said.

‘Stodd’s dead.’ Hobbs spat and watched the snowfield. The gap between the Watch and our pursuit had vanished. Here and there men stopped running. Few managed to draw a blade, let alone swing, before they were cut down.

Blood on snow is very pretty. In the deep powder it melts its way down and there’s not much to see, but where the snow has an icy crust, that dazzling white shines through the scarlet and makes the blood look somehow richer and more vital than ever it did in your veins.

‘Get men shooting down the slope. I don’t much care what they hit. Legs are good. Put more bodies in the way. Slow them down.’

An injured man is more of an obstacle than a dead one. Put a big wound in a man and he often gets clingy, as though he thinks you can save him and all he has to do is hold on so you won’t leave. The fresh-wounded like company. Give them a while and they’d rather be alone with their pain. For a moment I saw Coddin, odd chinks of light offering the lines of him, curled in his tomb. Some folk bury their dead like that, curled up, forehead to knee. Makin said it makes for easier digging of a grave, but to my eye it’s more of a return. We lay coiled in the womb.

‘Shoot the bastards down!’ I yelled. I waved my hands toward the men that I wanted using their bows. ‘Don’t pick targets.’

Makin staggered up and I slapped a spade across his chest. Captain Harold and I started to collar other men and set them digging. None of them asked

why. Except for Makin, and truthfully I think he just wanted the chance to rest.

‘We came here once,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ I threw another load of snow behind me. It felt odd having climbed for what seemed like forever, to now be desperately digging back down with the last of my strength.

‘We were on our way to some village ... Cutting?’

‘Cutting,’ I said. Another load of snow. The cries and clash of blades on the slopes closer now.

‘This is insane!’ Makin dropped his spade and drew his sword. ‘I remember now. There are caves here. But they don’t lead anywhere. We searched them. The men we have here – they’d barely fit in.’

My spade bit into nothing and slipped from numb fingers into the void below. ‘I’m through! Dig here!’

The melee reached to within fifty yards of our position, a bloody, rolling fight, men slipping in the snow, a pink mush now, screaming, severed limbs, dripping blades. And beyond the carnage, like an arrowhead pointing directly at me, more and more and more soldiers, the line of them broadening to a mass several hundred men wide as they crossed the snowline far below.

‘I may have left it too late,’ I said. I knew I’d left it too late. I spent too long with Coddin. And Arrow’s men had been faster than I thought they would be.

‘Too late?’ Makin shouted. He waved his sword at the army converging on us. ‘We’re dead. We could have done this back down there! At least I would have had the strength to fight then.’

He looked strong enough to me. Anger always opens a new reserve, a little something you’d forgotten about.

‘Keep digging!’ I shouted at the men around me. The entrance to the caves stood wide enough for three men. A black hole in the snow.

‘How many men died in avalanches in the Matteracks last year, Makin?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know!’ He looked at me as if I’d asked to have his babies. ‘None?’

‘Three,’ I said. ‘One the year before that.’

Some of the enemy were trying to flank us, spreading out around the melee to come at us from the side. I unslung my bow and loosed an arrow at the men on the left.

‘We’re done,’ Hobbs laboured across the slope, avoiding the diggers. To

his credit he managed to add, ‘Sire.’

My arrow had hit a man just above the knee. Looked like an old fellow. Some old people just don’t know when to quit. He pitched forward and fell, rolling down the mountainside. I wondered if he’d stop before he reached the Haunt. ‘There’s a reason we lost four men in two years to avalanches,’ I said.

‘Carelessness?’ Makin asked. One of the Prince’s more enterprising men had found his way uninjured around the edge of the battle below us. Makin made a quick parry then cut him down. A second soldier on the heels of the first took an arrow through his Adam’s apple.

The clash of metal on rock. The diggers had found the cave’s edges. The hole stood wide enough for a wagon to pass but it wouldn’t be getting any wider.

When the world is covered in snow it turns flat. All the hollows, all the bumps, are written into one unbroken surface like the white page ready for the quill. You may place on a snowfield whatever your imagination will produce, for your eyes will tell you nothing.

‘Well?’ Makin asked. The men of Arrow were pushing ever closer. He seemed in want of distraction and irritated that I’d drifted off into a daydream.

‘You have to see the shades,’ I said.

‘Shades?’

I shrugged. I had time to waste: the cave was no used to us yet. ‘I thought that the power of being young was to see only black and white,’ I said. I looked on as a man I knew among the Watch fell with the red point of a sword jutting from his back, hands locked on the neck of the blade’s owner.

‘Shades?’ Makin asked again.

‘We never look up, Makin, we never raise our heads and look up. We live in such a vast world. We crawl across its surface and concern ourselves only with what lies before us.’

‘Shades?’ Makin kept stubbornly to his purpose. His thick-lipped mouth knew a thousand smiles. Smiles for winning hearts. Smiles for making friends. Smiles for tearing a laugh from the unwilling. Now he used his stubborn smile.

I shook my arms, willing life back into them. The line buckled here and there: soon enough there’d be call for my sword. ‘Shades,’ I told him. When all you have to look at is white, given time you will see a symphony in shades of pale. The peasants in Gutting told me this – though in their own words.

There are many types of snow, many shades, and even in one shade, many flavours. There are layers. There is granularity, powder. There is power and there is danger. ‘When I stabbed Brother Gemt I pre-empted something,’ I said. ‘You understand, “pre-empt”, Brother Makin?’

A thousand smiles; and one frown. He gave me the frown.

‘I killed him for the hell of it, but also because it would only be a matter of time before he came against me. Before he tried to slit my throat in the night. And not just for the cutting of his hand.’

‘What does bloody Gemt have to do with—’ He cut down another man who slipped the line and I loosed an arrow at the men flanking our right side.

‘There were four deaths in two years rather than forty because the Highlanders pre-empt avalanches,’ I said. ‘They set them off.’

‘What?’

‘They watch the snow. They see the shades. They see the ups and downs, not the flat page. They dig and test. And then they pre-empt.’ I waved my bow overhead, purple ribbon cracking in the wind. ‘In the caves. Now!’

When a slope looks dangerous the Highlanders take themselves above it by ridge and pass and cliff. They take with them straw, stones, a crude bowl of fired clay, kindling, charcoal – often from the burners in Ancrath’s woods – a glazed pot and a sheep’s bladder. They dig themselves a hole at the very top of the most treacherous layers, setting the bowl on top of several inches of packed straw. In the bowl they put kindling and charcoal, and set stones so that the pot will be held above the bowl. They fill the pot with snow and inflate the bladder, blowing into it as hard as they can and tying it off with a strip of gut-hide. They light the kindling and leave.

The men of the Watch started to pack into the caves. I had thought it would be crowded, once upon a time, back when I ordered the spades to be left there. I had wondered if we would all fit. Fewer than a hundred men made it in. We had space aplenty.

So much in life is simply a matter of timing.

I took my place at the cave mouth, eager to cross swords with the men of Arrow. I had the timing wrong. Plain and true. I should have said what mattered to Coddin days ago, months ago. My timing had been off.

Tired men die easy, as if they relish the prospect of infinity. My legs had the trembles but my arms were ready enough. I held my blade two-handed and took the first man in the eye with its point. Makin came to fight beside me. Beyond the enemy I could see forever. I could see the wildness and

wideness of the mountains. Beyond them, the day moon, white like the memory of bone. Faint strains of the sword-song reached me as I crossed blades again, shearing partway through a man's neck. My sword felt lighter, twitching to the song as if it held a life of its own and pulsed with its own blood. *Snicker-snack, snicker-snack*, and men fell away in pieces. The sun flashed crimson on my uncle's sword as if heliographing a message to the Prince of Arrow.

'I'm sorry!' I shouted, for Makin and the others.

Timing.

We weren't far enough ahead. The men of Gutting would have lit the fires in their bowls as they saw us emerge from the neck of the valley onto the mountain's shoulder. I had thought we would reach the caves with a clear margin. That we would dig in and rake the slope with bow-fire. I was wrong. Just a few minutes' error but plenty long enough for the enemy to fill the caves with our corpses.

Makin gave an oath and fell back, throwing himself beyond a swinging blade.

I nearly said 'Sorry' again – but a mountain is a good place to die. If you're going to die, try to make it somewhere with a view.

For moments without time I fought, enfolded with a fierce joy, the heat rising in me until the burns on my face blazed and the wind had no hold on me. Each part of that fight played out to a secret score and the timing that had eluded me returned in the scream of steel against steel. A wildness infected me and I thought of Ferrakind incandescent and consumed, whatever made him human abandoned to the inferno.

A block, a sway, step to the side, the ring and scrape of my sword as it slid from the foe's sheared flesh. When a heavy blade meets the head of a man who has discarded his helm in the long climb a red ruin is wrought. Worse than the neat butchery of the slaughter-man in his abattoir is this destruction. Brain, skull and hair follow the swing of your sword in a wet arc of crimson, white and grey. Pieces of a face hang for a frozen moment: an accusing eye, its juices leaking, then everything falls and the next man stumbles through to battle, wearing scraps of the last.

Fire wrapped me, or so it felt, hot lines of it snaking from Gog's burn, scorching, fierce.

A swordpoint traced its path within a hair of my brow, whispering across the bridge of my nose as I jerked back. Lunging, I thrust out both arms, my

blade a bar held at hilt and end, the point hard against the iron plate in the palm of my leather glove. The Builder-steel divided the man's face horizontally between nose and lip. The grip of his bone tried to take the sword with him as he fell but I kept the hilt and let the motion swing the blade out right, catching a spear thrust and angling it over my shoulder. That man I kicked down the slope and the roar that burst from me rippled the air like a furnace breath. If I'd had the time to look down I would not have been surprised to see the snow shrink back from the heat pulsing off my skin.

Much of me, very nearly all of me perhaps, wanted to surrender to the battle-madness, to be consumed, to throw myself down among the foe and paint the mountain with their blood no matter the cost. But surrender of any kind comes hard to me. Instead I drew back and the fury left me, blown out as swiftly as it ignited. I had a plan to follow and I'd follow it even though all hope seemed lost. And following plans requires a clear head.

More men pressed at me. My arms started to feel as tired as my legs. We just needed a few more minutes, but sometimes you don't get what you want, or what you need. My eyes flickered to the view. Time to die.

In the past I have been saved by a horse. Not borne to safety by a noble steed, but saved by the wild kick of a panicked horse. That had been unexpected. It probably surprised Corion even more. To be saved by a sheep's weak bladder though ... that takes the biscuit. It takes all the biscuits.

High above us slow fires burned, melting the snow in the pots, heating the inflated bladders now floating in the steaming water. The process gives the Highlanders time to retreat to a point of safety. You have to place the pots in the danger zone. You do it as high up as you can for your own preservation, but not so high that it won't have the desired effect.

The hot air expands. The bladders swell further. Stretching beyond the point a man could inflate them. It's just a matter of time. A matter of timing. The water starts to boil. The pressure builds. And bang!

The Highlanders play the bladder-pipe. The things had screeched at my wedding that morning, similar to the bagpipes found further north, less complex but just as raucous. You wouldn't think an exploding bladder would be so loud. The sound is as if every squeal and howl a bladder-pipe might make in its long and unfortunate life has been squeezed into half a moment. It's a noise to wake the dead. But this was a case of a noise to make the dead.

One of the six sheep that donated the six bladders to the six avalanche pots, that the men of Gutting lit on the slopes when we came into view, must have

been a particularly incontinent beast for its bladder exploded several minutes earlier than expected.

You feel an avalanche before you hear it. There's a strange build-up of pressure. It presses into your ears. Even with men trying to slice me into bloody chunks I noticed the pressure. Then there's the rumble. It starts faint and builds without end. And finally, just before it hits, there's the hissing.

My timing came good at the right moment. I threw myself into the cave. Before the men attacking me could follow, the world turned white and they were gone.





## Wedding Day

The cave lay blind dark and silent although it held close on a hundred men.

The last rumbles of the avalanche stilled. In my fall I had bruised my arse on an unforgiving rock and my curse was the first sound.

‘Shitdarn!’ I’d learned that one from Brother Elban and felt a duty to roll it out from time to time since no one else ever used it.

Still no noise, as if a gang of trolls had ripped the head from each man as he entered.

‘There’s lanterns at the back, and tinder,’ I called.

Scuffling now.

More scuffling, the scritch of flint on steel and then a glow cutting dozens of men from the darkness.

I looked at the silver watch on my wrist for the first time in an age. A quarter past twelve. The arm for counting seconds tick tick ticked its way in yet another circle.

‘I know my spade made it in here,’ I said, standing, careful not to brain myself on the low ceiling. ‘Find some more and dig us out.’

‘We should take a roll-call,’ Hobbs said, moving to the front. More lanterns were lit and the wall of snow behind him glistened.

‘We could,’ I said. I knew his wasn’t just a bureaucratic interest. He had lost friends, protégés, the sons of friends, and he wanted to know what remained of the Watch, of *his* Watch. ‘We could, but it’s not the snow that kills men in an avalanche,’ I said. ‘None of those soldiers out there are dead.’

I had their attention now.

‘They’re all busy suffocating whilst the snow has them trapped. And that, my friends, is exactly what’s happening to us. Whilst I explain it to you I’m using up the strictly limited supply of air in this cave. Whilst you’re listening to me you are breathing in the good air and breathing out the bad. Each of those lanterns that lets you see me, is eating up the air.’ Silent thanks to Tutor Lundist and his lessons in alchemy – I might not outlive my wedding day but I had no desire to exit by snuffing out like the candle in the bell-jar.

They took my point. Three men who had found spades hurried to the snow, others searched for more. Soon all the space at the exit was occupied. I could have just told them to dig, but better they know the reason, better they not think I didn't share Hobbs' interest in the Watch's sacrifice.

I saw Captain Keppen leaning against a boulder, clutching his side. Makin had set himself against the rear wall of the cave on his backside with his knees drawn up to his forehead.

'Get the wounded seen to,' I told Hobbs. I clapped a hand to his shoulder. Kings are supposed to make such gestures.

I found my way to Makin's side. The cave floor lay strewn with men but whether they had been felled by exhaustion or injury I couldn't tell. I slid my back down the icy wall and sat beside him. We watched the diggers dig and tried to breathe shallow. He smelled of clove-spice and sweat.

A strange path I had followed to end trapped in a snow-locked cave, buried in the highest of places. From the Tall Castle to the road, from the road to Renar's throne, a year and more roaming the empire until at last the Highlands called me back. And in the Highlands finding the prize less rewarding than the chase, growing into manhood on a copper crown throne, wrestling with the mundane from plague to famine, building an economy like a swordsman builds muscle, recruiting, training, and for what. To have some preordained emperor trample it beneath his heel on his march to the Gilden Gate.

I closed my eyes and listened as my aches and pains announced themselves into the first pause since Father Gomst married me to Miana that morning. The weight of the day settled on me, squeezing words out.

'There's men dead out there because I spent too long talking with Coddin,' I said. 'Renar men and Ancrath men.'

'Yes.' Makin didn't lift his head.

'Well here we are, both dying in a cave like Coddin is. Got anything you need to unburden, Sir Makin? Or do we need more extreme circumstances and even less time?'

'Nope,' Makin looked up, his face in shadow with just the curve of a cheekbone and the tip of his nose catching the lamplight. 'Those men chose to follow you, Jorg. And they'd all be dead if it weren't for your tricks.'

'And why did they choose to follow me? Why do you?' I asked.

I could hear rather than see him lick his teeth before answering. 'There are no simple answers in the world, Jorg. Every question has sides. Too many of

them. Everything is knotted. But you make the questions simple and somehow it works. For other men the world is not like that. Maybe I could have found a way to drag you back to your father years before you took yourself back – but I wanted to see you do what you promised to. I wondered if you really could win it all.’

‘It seemed simple when I had Count Renar to hate,’ I said.

‘You were ...’ He smiled. ‘Focused.’

‘It’s about being young too. I hardly recognize myself in that boy.’

‘You’re not so different,’ Makin said.

The snow around the diggers had a glow of its own now, the daylight reaching down through what remained to clear.

‘I was consumed by me, by what I wanted. Nothing else mattered. Not my life, not anyone’s life. All of it was a price worth paying. All of it was worth staking on long odds just for the chance to win.’

Makin snorted. ‘That’s a place everyone visits on their way from child to man. You just went native.’

I reached into the pouch on my hip and slid my fingers around the box. ‘I have ... regrets.’

‘We’re all built of those.’ Makin watched the diggers. A spear of daylight struck through into the cave.

‘Gelleth I am sorry for ... My father would think me weak. But if it were now – I would find another way.’

‘There was no other way,’ Makin said. ‘Even the way you took was impossible.’

‘Tell me about your child,’ I said. ‘A girl?’

‘Cerys.’ He spoke her name like a kiss, blinking as the daylight found us. ‘She would be older than you, Jorg. She was three when they killed her.’

We could see the sky now, a circle of blue, away to the east beyond the snow clouds.

‘I follow you because I’m tired of war. I would see it stopped. One empire. One law. It doesn’t matter so much how or who, just being united would stop the madness,’ Makin said.

‘Heh, I can feel the loyalty!’ I pushed up and stood, stretching. ‘Wouldn’t the Prince of Arrow make a better emperor?’ I set off toward the exit.

‘I don’t think he’ll win,’ said Makin, and he followed.

*In the long ago, in the gentle days, Brother Grumlow carved wood, worked with saw and chisel. When hard times come carpenters are apt to get nailed to crosses. Grumlow took up the knife and learned to carve men. He looks soft, my brother of the blade, slight in build, light in colour, weak chin, sad eyes, all of him drooping like the moustache that hangs off his lip. Yet he has fast hands and no fear of a sharp edge. Come against him with just a dagger for company and he will cut you a new opinion.*



## Wedding Day

A hundred and twelve men climbed out of the cave below Blue Moon Pass. I let Watch-master Hobbs take his roll-call as they gathered on the new snow. It amazed me that the avalanche which had broken like a wave on the rocks below, and had run like milk into and around the cave, could now support my weight, letting my feet sink no more than an inch or two with each step. I listened to the names, to the replies, or more often to the silence that followed a name.

The new snow glittered below us, perfect and even, no trace of the blood, of the carnage strewn there only minutes before. And as Hobbs made his tally a thousand and a thousand and a thousand men died unseen beneath that fresh white sheet, held motionless, blind, struggling for breath and finding nothing.

Sometimes I feel the need of an avalanche within me. A clean page with the past swept away. Tabula rasa. I wondered if this one had wiped the slate for me. And then I saw a shadow beneath the whiteness at my feet, a child buried so shallow that the snow could not hide him. Not even the force of mountains could clean the stains from my past.

While Hobbs droned on I took the copper box from its place at my hip and sat on the slope, heels dug in.

A man is made of memories. It is all we are. Captured moments, the smell of a place, scenes played out time and again on a small stage. *We are* memories, strung on storylines – the tales we tell ourselves about ourselves, falling through our lives into tomorrow. What the box held was mine. Was me.

‘What now then?’ Makin slumped beside me.

Down beyond the furthest reach of the avalanche I could see movement, tiny dots, the remnants of Arrow’s force retreating to join his main army.

‘Up,’ I said.

‘Up?’ Makin did the surprised thing with his eyebrows. Nobody could look surprised like Makin.

It didn’t seem right to die incomplete.

‘It’s not a difficult concept,’ I said, standing. I set off walking up the slope aimed a little to the left of the peak, where Blue Moon Pass scores a deep path across mount Botrang’s shoulder.

Hobbs saw me go. ‘Up?’ he said. ‘But the pass is always blocked in—’ Then he looked around. ‘Oh.’ And he waved at the men, who had come forward to answer their names, to follow.

I still held the box in my hand, hot and cold, smooth and sharp. It didn’t seem right to die without knowing who I was.

The child walked beside me now, barefoot in the snow, his death resisting even the light of day.

With the nail of my thumb I opened the box.

Trees, gravestones, flowers, and her.

‘Who found you after I hit you?’ I ask Katherine. ‘A man was with you when you recovered your senses.’

She frowns. Her fingers touch the place where the vase shattered. ‘Friar Glen.’ For the first time she sees me with her old eyes, clear and green and sharp. ‘Oh.’

I walk away.

I leave the Rennat forest behind me and walk toward Crath City. The Tall Castle stands behind and above the city. It’s a still day and the smoke rises from the city chimneys in straight lines as if making bars for the castle. Perhaps to keep it safe from me.

From the fields I see the sprawl of the Low City reaching out to the River Sane and the docks, and behind it the land steps upward to the Old City and the High City. The Roma Road cuts my path and I follow it to the Low City, gateless and open to the world. I have a hat stuffed in my tunic, a shapeless thing of faded checks such as the bravos at the river docks wear. I tuck my hair into it and pull it low. I won’t be noticed in the Low City. The people who might know my face do not go there.

I walk through the Banlieu, nothing but slum dwellings and waste heaps, a boil on the arse of the city. Even a fine spring day cannot make these streets bloom. Children root through the mounded filth left by poor folk. They chase me as I make my way. Girls of ten and younger try to distract me with big eyes and kiss-mouths whilst skinny boys work to pull something from my pack, anything they can snatch free. I take my knife in hand and they melt away. Orrin of Arrow might have given them bread. He might have resolved

to change this place. I just walk through it. Later I will scrape it from my shoes.

Where the Banlieu shades into Low City the worst of the taverns crowd around narrow streets. I pass the Falling Angel where I first plotted Gelleth's end, where I first thought to pay for affection. I know better now. Affection is always paid for.

I choose another alehouse, the Red Dragon. A grand name for a dim and reeking place of shadows.

'Bitter,' I say.

The barkeep takes my coin and fills a tankard from the barrel spigot. If he thinks I look young to drink here, among the broken old men with their red noses and watery eyes, he says nothing.

I take a table where I can put a corner at my back and watch the windows. The ale is as bitter as my mood. I take slow sips and wait for the night to come.

I think of Katherine. I make a list.

*She said I was evil and that she hates me.*

*She has set her heart on the Prince of Arrow.*

*She tried to kill me.*

*She destroyed the child she thought was mine.*

*She was defiled by another man.*

I run through it again and again as the sun sinks, as the drunkards come and go, carts and whores and dogs and labourers pass in the street, and still I cycle through my list.

Love is not a list.

Full dark, and my tankard has stood empty for hours. I walk into the street. Here and there a lantern hangs, too high for thieves, casting a parsimonious light that struggles to reach the ground.

Despite all my waiting, despite my resolve, still I hesitate. Can I tread the paths of childhood again without taint? Overhead the stars turn, a slow revolution about the Pole Star, the Nail of Heaven. Part of me doesn't want to go back to the Tall Castle. I push that part away.

I cross the river by the New Bridge and find a quiet corner where I can watch the High Wall. Crath City and its parts have been named with the same lack of imagination the Builders put into the architecture of its castle. As if



the box-like utilitarianism of the castle has leached into the language of the city. If I had the power to build for the ages, to know that what I set in stone would stand for millennia, I would put at least some measure of beauty into the mix.

The High Wall is indeed high, but it is not well lit, and some way west of the Triple Gate the stonework is broken by the remnants of a second wall that once led off at right angles and is now gone. I practised my climbing here when I was little. It seems easy now. Handholds that I struggled to reach can be bypassed entirely in favour of the next. My hands know this surface. I don't need to see it. This is memory. I gain the top well before the next guard makes his rounds. On the far side ill-advised ivy makes the descent a simple matter.

Young Sim taught himself the ways of the assassin. He made a hobby of it, the short knife, drop-leaf in powder or tincture, or once in a while a harp string used to garrotte. Of all my Brothers it is Sim that is the most deadly in the long haul. In a battle I could surely cut him down. But lose sight of the boy and he will not come at you in the next moment, or the next day, but in his own time. When you have forgotten the wrong you did him, he will find you again. Sim taught himself the long game and he passed a little knowledge on to me.

Disguise is not a matter of clothes and artistry with paints and kohl. Disguise lies in how you move. Of course the right uniform, a chin made of putty, a well-applied scar, all these can be of great help in the proper circumstances, but the first step, Sim taught me, the most important step, is exactly that ... how you step. Move with confidence, or at least confidence in your role. Believe you have every right to be where you are. Step with purpose. Then even a prop as small as a hat can furnish a full disguise.

I stride through the streets of Old City, aiming directly for the East Gate, the gate where deliveries are made to the Tall Castle, supplies unloaded, messages handed to runners for carriage to distant quarters. A patrol of my father's soldiers, ten strong, passes the head of Elm Street as I walk it. They spare me a first glance but not a second.

Three torches burn above the East Gate. They call it a gate but it is a door, five yards high, three yards wide, black oak with iron banding, a smaller door set into the middle of it for when it is simply men seeking entrance rather than giants. An armoured knight stands duty before the door. If he wished to see anything he should stand in the dark.

I turn aside and come to the base of the castle wall close to the corner of the great square keep.

A man seeking to protect himself from the assassin's knife concentrates his defence. You cannot stop a single anonymous enemy entering your realm. You cannot stop him entering your city. Unless he is unskilled you would be lucky to stop him finding a way past your castle wall. Your keep may hold him out if it is secure and well guarded – but it would be unwise to bet your life on it. To defeat the assassin you don't spread your defences over your whole estate, you focus them around you. Ten good men tight around your bedchamber can do more to preserve you than ten thousand spread across a kingdom.

My father's keep is secure and well patrolled, but by the time I reached seven I knew the outside of it better than the inside. In the dark of the moon I climb the Tall Castle once more. Builder-stone rough under my fingers, my toes hunting familiar holds through the soft leather of my boots, the scrape of the wall on my cheek as I hug it. I see my knuckles white in the starlight as I grip the corner of the Tall Castle and move up.

I hold still just beneath the battlements. A soldier pauses and leans out watching some distant light. The battlements are new additions, dressed stone atop the Builder-stone. The Builders had weapons that made mockery of castles and of battlements. I don't know what the Tall Castle was when the Builders made it, but it was not a castle. In the deepest part of the dungeons under layers of filth an ancient plaque declares 'No Overnight Parking'. Even when the Builders' words make sense alone they hold no meaning together.

The soldier moves on. I climb up, cross the thickness of the wall and shin down one of the wooden supports for the walkways.

In a dark corner of the courtyard I take off my bravo's hat and return it to my pack. I pull out a tunic, blue and red in the Ancrath colours. I had a woman called Mable tailor it for me at the Haunt, in the style of my father's servant garb. With the tunic on and my hair tucked into it, I enter the Printers' Door. I pass a table-knight about his rounds. Sir Aiken if I remember rightly. I keep my head up and he takes no notice of me. A man with his head bowed is hiding his face and worthy of close inspection.

From the Printers' Door it is left then right along a short corridor to reach the chapel. The chapel door is never locked. I look in. Only two candles still burn, both little more than stubs and making scant light. The place is empty. I move on.

Friar Glen's quarters are close to the chapel. His door is latched but I carry a short strip of steel thin enough and flexible enough to fit between door and frame, strong enough to lift the latch.

His room is very dark but it has a high window that opens onto the courtyard where Makin used to school the squires in the arts of combat. A borrowed light filters in and I let my eyes learn its ways. The place stinks like cheese left too long in the sun. I stand and listen to the friar's snore whilst my eyes hunt him.

He lies hunched in his bed, an inchworm frozen in midcrawl. I can see little of the room, just a cross on the wall with the saviour absent as if he'd taken a break rather than watch this night's business. I step forward. I remember how Friar Glen dug in my flesh for those hooks the briar left in me. How he hunted them. What pleasure he took in it, with his man, Inch, holding me down. I pull my knife from its sheath.

Crouched beside his bed, my head level with his, the snores are loud. So loud you would think he should wake himself. I can't see his face so I remember it instead; flat I would call it, too blunt for deep emotion but well suited to the sneer. At service with Father Gomst holding forth from the pulpit, Friar Glen would watch from the chair by the chapel door, hair like wet straw around a tonsure that needed little shaving, his eyes too small for the broadness of the forehead above.

I should slit his throat and be gone. Anything else would make too much noise.

*You raped Katherine. You raped her and let her think I had done it. You made her pregnant and made her hate me so much she poisoned the child from her womb. Made her hate me enough to stab me.*

Katherine's blow was for Friar Glen, not me.

My eyes have learned the darkness and the room lies revealed in night shades. I trim a long strip from the edge of his sheet. I make only a whisper below the roar of his snoring but he stirs and complains even so. I cut a second strip, a third, a fourth. I bundle the last strip into a tight ball. A candle stand and small table are set near the bed. I move them further back so they will not fall and make a racket. I count his snores and get their rhythm. When he breathes in I stuff the wadded cloth into his mouth. I tie another strip around his head to hold it in place. Friar Glen is slow to wake but surprisingly strong. I snatch the remains of the sheet from him and hammer my elbow down into his solar plexus. The air hisses from him past his gag. I

see the gleam of his eyes. He coils, foetal, and I bind his ankles tight with the third strip. The fourth is for his wrists. I have to punch his throat before I can manage to secure them.

I've lost my taste for the work by the time he is properly trussed. He is an ugly naked man whimpering in the dark and I only want to be gone from here. I take my knife from the table that I moved aside.

'I have something for you,' I say. 'Something that was very nearly misdelivered.'

I drive my knife in low, at the base of his scrotum. I leave it there. I don't want it back. Also, if I pull it free he will bleed to death quickly. I think he should linger.

Also, I have a spare.

I am almost at the door, with Friar Glen wheezing and hissing behind me. He makes a loud thump as he falls from the bed, but it isn't that which stops me.

Sageous appears. He doesn't step through the doorway, he doesn't rise from behind a chest, he is just there. His skin glows with its own light, not bright enough to illuminate even the floor at his feet, but enough to make silhouettes of the endless script tattooed across every inch of him. His eyes and mouth are dark holes in the glow.

'I see you are making a habit out of the clergy. Are you working your way down the list? First a bishop, now a friar. What next? An altar boy?'

'You're a heathen,' I say. 'You should applaud me. Besides, his sins cried out for it.'

'Oh well, in that case ...' His smile makes a black crescent in the light of his face. 'And what do your sins cry out for, Jorg?'

I have no answer.

Sageous only smiles wider. 'And what were the friar's sins? I would ask him but you appear to have gagged him. I do hope the dreams I gave young Katherine have not caused trouble? Women are such complex creatures, no?'

'Dreams?' I say. My hand searches in my pack, hunting my second knife.

'She dreamed she was with child,' Sageous says. 'Somehow the dream even fooled her body. I think they call it a phantom pregnancy.' The writing on his face seemed to move, words pulsing as if spoken. 'Such complex creatures.'

'There was a child. She killed it.' My mouth is dry.

'There was blood and muck. Saraem Wic's poisons will do that. But there

was no child. I doubt there ever will be now. That old witch's poisons are not gentle. They scrape a womb bare.'

I find the blade and I'm moving toward him. I try to run but it's like wading through deep snow.

'Silly boy. You think I'm really here?' He makes no move to escape. I try to reach him, but I'm floundering.

*Schnick.*

Makin's hand on the box. The closed box.

I found myself cold, short of breath, hands tight around each other instead of Sageous's neck. He gone. Just a memory. And I'm in the mountains. Still running.

'What the hell are you doing?' Makin panted.

I looked around. I stood waist-deep in powder snow. Rock walls loomed on either side. The men of the Watch marched behind me ... a hundred yards behind me.

'You can't open that. Not now, not ever. Certainly not now!' Makin shouted. He retched and sucked his breath back. He must have run hard to catch me. I snatched the box back from him and buried it in a pocket.

It's rare for Blue Moon Pass to be open in the winter. Very rare. A good avalanche will clear it out though, and for a few days before new snow chokes it again, a man can escape across the back of Mount Botrang and then, by a series of lower passes that parallel the spine of the Matteracks, that man can leave the range entirely and the empire is his to wander.

'Run.'

A whisper in my ear. A familiar voice.

'Run.'

'Sageous?' I asked, voice low to keep it from Makin.

'Run.'

Drops of pure nightmare trickled down the back of my neck. I shivered. 'Don't worry, heathen. I'll run.'



## Wedding Day

‘So, will we go to Alaric?’ Makin asked.

I kept walking. The sides of the Blue Moon pass rose sheer around us, caked in ice and snow, the black rock showing only where the wind scoured it clean.

‘I guess the roads to the Dane-lore will be difficult in winter. But she did want you to come in winter, that girl of his. Ella?’

‘Elin,’ I said.

‘Your grandfather would offer you sanctuary,’ Makin said.

He knew we’d lost. The dead men stretched out behind us on the mountain, under stone and snow, didn’t change that.

I kept walking. Underfoot the snow left by the avalanche lay firm, creaking as it recorded my footprints.

‘Is it good there? On the Horse Coast? It’d be warm at least.’ He hugged himself.

There are two paths up into the Blue Moon Pass, it’s like a snake’s tongue, forked at the tip. The avalanche had opened both of them. I’d had the Highlanders place their boom-pots to ensure it.

‘What?’ said Makin. ‘You said “up”.’

I carried on making the hard right that led back down the second fork of Blue Moon Pass, picking up the pace. ‘Now I’m saying “down”. I had Marten hold the Runyard for a reason, you know.’

And so with the surviving third of the Watch trailing me I led the way down through the Blue Moon into the high valley above the Runyard. And when the slope lessened and the ground became firmer ... we ran.

We saw the smoke before we heard the cries, and we heard the cries before we saw the Haunt. At last, far below, the Haunt came in view, an island of mountain stone in a sea of Arrow’s troops. His forces laid siege on every side, attacking with ladders and grapple ropes, siege engines hurling rock at the front face of the castle, a covered ram pounding the gates, a legion of archers on the high ridge sending their shafts over the walls.

To my mind siege machinery is more an act of show and determination than it is a well-judged investment of time. Look! We hauled these huge bits of wood and iron to your castle – we mean business, we’re here to stay. The Renar Highlands were perhaps that rare place where there really were enough big rocks lying around for a castle to be reduced to rubble by trebuchets, though it would take forever. But the ram! The ram is the queen of sieges, especially where walls may not be undermined. No mechanics, no counter-weights and escapements, just a simple direct force applied with vigour to the weakest point so that you may set your men against theirs, and that after all is the aim of it all. If you didn’t outnumber the foe you wouldn’t have marched to their castle and they would not be hiding behind walls.

Marten’s men sheltered at the margins of the Runyard, as long and gentle a gradient as could be found in the Highlands, running down from our valley to the left of the Haunt. The ridge from which the Prince’s archers gained their vantage broke the Runyard at its far end.

We could see Marten’s troops, but from lower down the slope they were almost invisible, sheltered by rocks and hidden in their mountain greys. Marten posed little threat to the enemy, though. His hundred men would make no impression on the three thousand occupying the ridge, even if they weren’t shot down as they advanced.

‘Why?’ Makin asked.

‘Why is it called the Runyard?’ I chose to answer the wrong question. ‘Because it’s the only place for miles that you can actually have a horse run without breaking its legs. I’ve seen you at the gallop there many times.’

Makin shook his head. Hobbs and Keppen joined us.

‘We’re going through the east port?’ Hobbs asked.

Not many men knew about the sally ports, one to the east, one to the west. I didn’t recall ever telling Hobbs about the east port but I supposed it was his business to know. We had, after all, led his Watch out of the west port that morning.

‘Yes,’ I said.

We covered the last of the ground with great care, hugging the valley walls and being in no hurry. The archers proved intent on their targets within the Haunt, crouched behind its battlements. We reached Marten without attracting any attention.

‘King Jorg.’ Marten had kept his country accent despite four years at court.



He stood in the entrance to the sally port, a crack just wide enough for a single rider. The rocks above the crack looked natural but an experienced eye could tell they had been set to fall with only slight encouragement, a sufficient number of them to seal the portal with some permanence. A peculiar stink hung around the entrance. I saw Makin wrinkle his nose and frown as if he recognized it.

‘Captain Marten,’ I said. ‘I see you’ve held the Runyard against all odds!’

He didn’t smile at that. Marten had never smiled to my knowledge. It would look odd on his face, long like the rest of him, grey like the short crop above his eyes.

‘The enemy have shown no interest in trying to take it from us. I don’t believe they know we’re here,’ he said.

‘All to the good,’ I said. ‘Keppen, lead the Watch back to the castle.’

Keppen slipped into the crack and the Watch started to file after him. They had a journey of three or four hundred yards ahead of them, most of it through natural caves carved by ancient streams, the last hundred yards through a tunnel hacked out by men with picks in hand and candles to light their work.

I glanced at the timepiece on my wrist, starting to get the habit again. A quarter past two.

‘Come with me,’ I told Marten. Makin and Captain Harold followed too.

We crept across to the rocks that hid us from the slopes below, and edged out to a position that offered a view of the archers on the ridge. I pushed the watch up my wrist so my sleeve hid it. It never pays to sparkle when you’re hoping to be unobserved.

‘There are a lot of them,’ Makin said.

‘Yes.’ In fact even without a single foot-soldier, just with archers, the Prince of Arrow had bought with him four men for every man I had under arms.

We watched. They weren’t raining arrows on the Haunt, just picking targets of opportunity and making sure the men at my walls kept their heads down. They could raise an arrow storm if the need arose, but why waste arrows?

We kept watching.

‘Fascinating,’ Makin said.

‘Wait,’ I said. I looked at my watch again.

‘For—’ Makin stopped asking. A black stain spread from beneath the

ridge.

‘What is it?’ Harold asked.

The archer ranks started to break. A wave of confusion rippling through the order.

‘Trolls,’ I said.

‘What?’ Makin cried. ‘How? Who? How many?’

At our distance it was hard to see the detail but it looked messy. The rocks ran red.

Makin slapped fist to palm. ‘I smelled them back there at the entrance. The same stink you had on you when Gorgoth brought you down that day.’ He frowned again. ‘I guess this explains all those goats we kept buying in – that stuff about holding out for a long siege never made much sense.’

‘Gorgoth brought them south,’ I said. ‘I’ve offered them sanctuary in the Matteracks, though possibly it was the promise of goats that sealed the deal ... He has a hundred and twenty with him. They’ve been tunnelling. Making covered exits below that ridge.’

Marten almost smiled. ‘That would be why you refused to listen when I begged you to defend it.’

‘They can’t win,’ Makin said. ‘Not with a hundred. Not even trolls!’

‘No. But look at them. What a mess they’re making, neh? As Maical would say, it helps to have the elephant of surprise on your side.’ I slid back down into the shadow of the rock. ‘Right, let’s go.’

Marten joined me. ‘Why now though, and how did you know?’

‘Ah. What you should ask is how Gorgoth knew. An hour after the avalanche I told him. And he agreed – but how in hell did he know when the avalanche happened?’

At the sally port the last of the Watch were stepping into the dark.

‘I need you to hold here, Marten,’ I said. ‘Come what may.’

‘We will hold. I don’t forget what you did, and my men will follow where I lead,’ Marten said.

It seemed a small thing that I had done. A toy and something for the pain, to ease a little girl’s passing from the world. I hadn’t even done it for good reasons.

Makin set a hand on Marten’s shoulder as he moved by. They shared a bond these two. Two lost daughters. I saw how deep that ran – so deep I’d known Makin half my life before he even spoke of it. I wondered if I were made for such emotions or if I were just the clever, shallow boy most people

saw. These men carried dead daughters through the years. I had a dead child whose name I had lost, who dogged my trail because I would not shoulder the burden of my guilt. For a small box it surely held a weight of memory. Perhaps more than I could carry.

We trekked the cave trails, worn smooth by years of use. I held a lantern taken from a store just inside the entrance. It flared brighter as I took it, and my cheek pulsed. I'd had me a touch of that magic ever since Gog burned me. I took Ferrakind as an object lesson in not pursuing those paths.

I paused from time to time to gaze upon galleries of stone forests that stretched away left and right. Stalagmites and stalactites Lundist had called them, though he only had pictures in books, and frankly those looked dull as hell. I'm not sure what the difference is – maybe the big ones are stalagmites. Lundist said they grow, but I've never seen it happen. I do know that in the light of flames, beneath immeasurable weight of rock, they hold a beauty that cannot be communicated.

For long moments the wonder of the living rock held me and when it let me go I found myself alone, an island of light in the ancient dark. Quick glances along the path confirmed it. No men of the watch, no Brothers, not even footsteps in the distance.

*Something is wrong.*

'Jorg.' And Sageous stepped from behind a pillar of stone, the light within him writing his tattoos across the walls in shadow, sliding, moving, wrapping over every fold and curve of the cavern.

'Heathen.' I kept my eyes on his. 'You have more churchmen you need killed perhaps?'

He smiled. 'You've been so hard to reach, Jorg. A hedge of thorns around all your dreams.' A frown. '... or a box? Is it a box, Jorg? There's another hand in this. Someone has been keeping you from me.'

I kept my hands still, my eyes on his, but I felt the weight at my hip and his gaze wandered there.

'Interesting,' he said. 'But no matter. Now we're so close I can touch you again.'

'Have you come to play me, heathen? To set me on the path of your choosing?' I drew steel but he seemed unimpressed. 'Don't tell me – you're not here again?'

Again the smile. He inclined his head a fraction. 'I'm beyond your reach, Jorg, and you still walk the path I placed you on long ago. All you have left

to choose is the manner of your death. I took Katherine from you. She would have made you strong. Yin to your yang, if you like. And now you are weak, and she serves instead to place in my hands an Arrow I can point where I will.'

'No.' I shook my head and took a step toward him, careful of my footing.

In the caves a wrong step can leave you broken at the bottom of a long fall. Yet however I chose my steps the heathen had always made me doubt my footing. He carried doubt with him, doubt of self, doubt of motives, the kind of uncertainty that eats at a man like cancer.

'No.' I repeated myself, hunting confidence. 'Gloating is for fools. If I were playing your game you would leave me to play it.' I quested toward him with the point of my sword. 'Perhaps those gentle touches didn't work quite so well as you had hoped and you come in desperation to turn me more boldly from the path I'm walking. Gloating is for fools, and I have never counted you a fool.'

The light flickered across his skin. 'You can't win, boy. You can't win. So why are you still here? What are you planning? Where are you hiding your secrets?' His eyes fell to the box again, though it made but the slightest bulge at my hip.

A quick step and I thrust at him. He hissed as the blade bit in, with no more resistance than if only his robe hung before me.

'I'm not here!' Through gritted teeth, as if insistence made it true. And he was gone.

'Jorg?' Makin at my side, a frown on his brow, his hand on my arm. 'Jorg?'

'Heh. Dreaming on my feet.' I shook my head. 'Lead on!'

The sally tunnels connect to separate cellars beneath the Haunt, their exits disguised as huge wine barrels. I elbowed my way among the Watch and found Hobbs.

'Do what you can about the ram,' I said. 'It looks to be well covered but it needs fresh men to swing it, so shoot a few of the bastards as they come up to take a turn. Also, you'll find there's not much incoming at the moment. At least not of the pointy kind. They'll still be slinging rocks at us. So take advantage and just kill as many of his men as you can.'

Next I took myself to the courtyard where my levies, subjects, and bannermen waited, crowded rank upon rank before the gatehouse. Knights

from Morrow to the left of the portcullis, armour gleaming, swords in hand. To the right more knights, plate-armoured, the noblest sons of Hodd Town, my capital down in the valleys to the north. No doubt they had come to win the king's favour and honour for their houses. Young men in the main, soft with gold and more used to lance and tourney than blood and ruin. I saw Sir Elmar of Golden among them, his armour radiant as his name implied. A warrior, that one, despite his finery.

They had some strength among them. Crowded on the gallery and stairs, crossbow men from the Westfast under Lord Scoolar, hard-eyed and wind-burned. Packed before the splintering gate, men of the Hauntside, tough fighters from the hills, in leather and iron, axes honed, round wooden shields layered in goat-hide. Behind these, warriors from Far Range, their iron helms patterned with silver and tin, each man armed with hammer and hatchet. And to the rear, ranked before the keep wall, Cennat shield dancers, their warboards taller than a man.

I walked among them, Makin at my shoulder, amid the stink and heave of bodies, the tension a taste in the air at once both sour and sweet. I hadn't words for them, no kingly gestures, no speech to shout above the screams from beyond the wall and the crash of the ram. When you fight alongside Brothers you bind them with word and deed. When you fight among subjects you are a figure, a form, an idea. Men will die for many things, lives hoarded with care can be spent for the strangest of reasons. What bound us here, we men of the Highlands, was defiance. All men will dig their heels in if pushed enough. All men will reach the point that they say 'no' for no reason other than opposition, for no reason other than the word fits their mouth, and tastes as good as it sounds. And in the Highlands, among our mountains, the heights breed men who will give no single inch without defiance.

I walked between the men of the Highlands, the old and young, some bearded, others clean-cheeked, some pale, some red, the trembling and the steady, and came to stand before the portcullis, iron-bound timbers splintered, the rush of the ram beyond, the savage cries of the hundred wrestling it toward me. My fingers found my knife hilt and I pulled it clear. Laid against my unburned cheek the metal felt like ice. The portcullis shuddered and groaned before the ram. Men of Arrow screamed and died as missiles rained upon them. The knife blade cut skin soft as a kiss. I took the blood on scarlet fingers and wiped it over the gate timbers. I turned my back on the gate, crouched before my men, and smeared a line of blood across the flagstones.

As I returned to the keep I set my hand to a score of warriors, the eager ones, the ones in who I saw an echo of the same hunger that made me want that gate open every bit as much as those men on the ram.

‘King’s blood!’ Sir Elmar of Golden raised his axe, the crimson smear of my fingers left across his shining helm.

‘King’s blood!’ A hairy Hauntside warrior pressed the heel of his hand to the red imprint I set across his brow.

‘King’s blood!’ A Cennat dancer twirled the huge shield where my handprint sat scarlet across the white moon of his house.

‘King’s blood!’

The roar pulsed back and forth, following us within the keep. A king is a sigil, not a man but an idea. I thought they had the idea now.

I took myself up to my throne-room with Makin at my side, and called for my table-knights, Red Kent, and the captain of the contingent from the House Morrow, Lord Jost.

Lord Jost arrived last, with a second knight and Miana. Queen Miana I supposed I should call her. She still wore her wedding dress, though with the train and veils taken off and a shawl set with pearls added against the cold. Lord Jost looked rather embarrassed by her presence at my council of war.

‘Gentlemen,’ I said. ‘My lady.’

I sat in the throne. Slumped would be more accurate. It felt good to take the weight off my feet. I’d done more running and climbing and descending than I wanted and was ready to sleep for a week.

‘How many of the enemy did you kill, and at what loss?’ Miana asked. The men had been waiting for me to speak. She felt no such need. I would have asked the same question.

‘About six thousand for the loss of two hundred,’ I said.

‘A thirty to one ratio. Better than the rate of twenty to one needed.’ To hear her high sweet voice recite the statistics of our body count seemed wrong.

‘True. But they were two hundred of my very best, and I have played the aces from my hand.’

‘And Chancellor Coddin has not returned,’ Miana said. She was remarkably well informed for a little girl.

A pang of something ran through me at that. I saw Coddin once more in the tomb we made for him. ‘He’s safer than we are,’ I said. He would probably live longer too. He would linger.

I took a goblet of watered wine from a page and a plate with crusted bread and goat cheese.

‘And your plans?’ she asked.

I blew through my lips. ‘We will have to place our faith in stone and mortar, and hope that in the time they buy us fortune decides to smile our way.’ The wine tasted like heaven and made me dizzy after one sip.

‘Perhaps my new father-in-law will send us aid?’ Miana said, her smile faint and years too old for her.

‘I was hoping something similar myself,’ I said.

*More than in muscle heaped on bone, Brother Rike's strength springs from the ability to hate the inanimate.*



*Four years earlier*

‘She’s gone, yes?’ Makin shaded his eyes against the sunrise and squinted back across the marsh. We stood on rolling scrubland now with yellow rock breaking through in sandy patches here and there.

‘I hope so,’ I said. Part of me wanted Chella to find destruction at my hands, the personal touch, but perhaps she ended there in the marsh amongst the burning dead. I hadn’t felt it. No sense of satisfaction, but my uncle’s death had taught me that revenge is far less sweet than it promises to be. An empty meal, however long you take over it.

We took to horse for the first time in what seemed an age. Rike on Row’s roan since his own plough-horse proved too heavy for its own good in the bogs. Kent and Makin on their horses. Grumlow riding double with me since he and I were the lightest of the Brothers and Brath the strongest of the nags.

The sour stink of the marshes followed us for miles. Black mud caking on our clothes, drying grey and flaking away. More persistent than stink or mud, the image of Chella as the flames rose around her, and the echo of her last words. *The Dead King sails.*

In three days we came by moorland and scrub, then by forgotten roads, and finally by country tracks, to the free port of Barlona. Rike made ceaseless complaint about his sunburn until I convinced him to smear pig-shit over the worst affected areas. For some reason it seemed to help though I hadn’t intended it to. Suggestion can be a powerful thing.

The ancient walls shimmered in the summer heat as we approached. They must have been impressive a thousand years ago. Now only the base of the walls remained, twenty foot high and just as thick, spilling black stone in great heaps for the peasants to raid to make huts and boundary walls for their fields.

I liked the city from the moment we rode in. The air held exotic scents, spices and cooking smoke that made my stomach growl. The people

thronged, loud in voice and clothing, bright silks, garish jewellery made of glass and base metals, flesh of all colours on display in wide swathes. Men and women as light as me, as dark as the Nuban, and all shades in between. None as pale as Sindri and Duke Alaric though. Those, I think the sun would melt.

Music came from almost every corner in as many shades as the people. It seemed that the citizens walked in time to the beat and pulse of a thousand drums, horns, voices. I'd not heard such sounds before, so many strange melodies, some reminding me of the marching beats the Nuban used to slap against his thigh as we walked and which he elaborated on around the campfire. Others held remembrances of the curious atonal humming Tutor Lundist lapsed into in empty moments.

A port is an open ear to the world, a mouth ready for new flavours. Approaching my fifteenth year I felt more than ready to explore the wideness of the world that Barlona offered up.

'You know, Makin, you can take ship from here to almost any place you've ever heard of and a thousand that you haven't,' I said.

'Ships make me hurl.' Makin looked as if he were remembering the taste.

'You don't like them?'

'It's the waves. I get seasick. I vomit from one shore to the next. I was nearly sick crossing the Rhyme.'

'Well that's good to know.' With Makin you can keep digging and find a new fact year on year. I hadn't known he'd ever crossed an ocean, or even travelled under sail.

'How is that good to know?' He frowned.

'Well, the only way to get to the Horse Coast is by sea and I'm going alone. Knowing what a bad sailor you are just makes it easier to send you back to the Haunt.'

'We can ride there,' Makin said. 'It's less than a hundred miles.'

'Through the Duchy of Aramas and then the lands of King Philip the nine hundredth,' I said.

'Thirty-second,' Makin corrected.

'Whatever. The point is that those are not places men like us can pass unnoticed, whereas a ship will sail me right to my grandfather's doorstep in a day or two.'

'So we take a ship and I coat the decks in vomit. What's the problem?'

'The problem, dear Makin, is that I don't want Rike there, or Grumlow, or

Kent. I don't even want you there. I want to make my own introductions in my own time. This is family business and I'll do it my way.'

'That tends to mean everyone dies.' Makin grinned.

'Maybe, but I don't need you there for that either. Just get them back to the Haunt. We've lost too many on this trip. I won't say we've lost good men, but ones that I would rather have kept. Though if you misplace Rike on the way back, that would be fine.'

'This is a bad idea, Jorg.' Makin had that stubborn look of his, lips pressed tight, a vertical line between his brows.

'I need you in Renar,' I said. 'I needed you there from the start. If you recall I did my damndest not to have you come in the first place. Coddin's a good man but how long can he hold a kingdom together for? Go back, crack any heads that need cracking, and let my people know I'll be returning.'

'Oi!' Grumlow's cry. A man running away through the crowd. I saw Grumlow's arm flick back and throw. The man fell without a sound twenty yards off, shoving his way through the crowd.

I walked with Grumlow to where he lay. People got out of our way, except for the children who ran everywhere as if we were part of a show. Grumlow pulled his saddlebag from the man's limp hands.

'Cut the bloody strap! That'll cost!' he said.

'I told you to secure it better,' I said. The few bits and pieces Grumlow had managed to bring through the bogs were tied randomly around Brath's tack.

Grumlow grunted and bent to retrieve his knife. It had hit the man hilt-first in the back of the head. A pool of blood glistened beneath the man's face, but it must have come from his nose or mouth hitting the cobbles. We didn't bother turning him over to find out.

'I love this city,' I said, and we went back to the others.

We stabled the horses and sat at a tavern by the docks. I call it a tavern but we sat outside, around tables in the sun if you please, with wine in bottles shaped like tear drops with baskets woven around them. Makin with his bare feet, traces of dried mud still visible. Rike complained of course, about the sun, about the wine, even about the chairs which seemed unable to support his weight, but I paid more attention to the seagulls' chatter. I sat and watched the ships moored at the quayside, bigger than I had thought they would be, and more complex, with rigging and spars and deck ropes and a multitude of sails. I felt better than I had in an age. Even my burns hurt less fiercely as if the hot sun soothed their anger. For the first time in a long time

we relaxed, smiled, and spoke of the dead. Of Brother Row who I would remember, and Brother Sim who I would miss for his harping and for his promise. We raised our bottles to them both and drank deep.

Only Kent put up any resistance to the idea of returning without me. I let him protest a while until he ran out of things to say and in the end convinced himself that my plan was the best one. Red Kent's like that. Give him a little space to turn and he'll come around.

I stood, rolled my neck and stretched in the sunshine. 'Catch you on the road, Brothers.'

'You're going now?' Makin asked, putting down his bottle-in-a-basket.

'Well unless you want to drink till we're all sunburnt and maudlin and then declare undying love for each other and part with drunken hugs?' I said.

Rike spat. He seemed to have inherited the role of spitter from Row.

'In that case, your path lies that way.' I pointed north. 'I should note that the first quarter mile of that path is on a street that boasts several fine-looking whorehouses. So take your time. As for me – I'm going to find out about ships.'

I set off at an amble, following my shadow across the bright flagstones.

'Look after Brath for me,' I called back.

They picked up their bottles and drank to me. 'Catch you on the road,' they replied. Even Rike.

And if Makin hadn't been there I think I really could have ditched them that easily.

*Four years earlier*

In a great port like Barlona there are hundreds of ships at harbour. Most belong to merchants, or collectives of merchants, and hug the coastline loaded with things that are cheap where the ships set out and that command a higher price where they are bound. It's a simple equation and the devil lies in the details. There are warships too, owned in name by the Prince of Barlona and in the service of his people. In reality it is the wealthiest of the merchants who put new princes on the throne, and the warships serve to protect their trade routes. And among the merchant cogs and the Prince's warships, a scattering of ocean-going ships, triple-masted and more, deep-hulled, from the strangest and most distant shores. Even one great vessel of sickwood, twice the size of her largest rival, her grey planks grown one into the next, half-living despite the lumberman's saw. Her hull, crusted with barnacles large as dinner plates even above the wave-line, bore many scars, and on her decks men with copper skin worked at repairs.

I spent a few hours watching the great ships with their foreign crews, yellow men from Utter, black crews from the many Kingdoms of Afrique, turbaned sailors with curling beards, sun-stained, strutting the decks of pungent spice-boats. The Prince of Arrow's words returned to me. His observations on the smallness of my world and the largeness of my ignorance. Even so, every man amongst these travellers knew of the empire, even though it stood in pieces. And so we had us some common ground.

I saw Makin and the others trailing me almost from the start. He'd had the sense to leave Rike behind, most likely in one of the whorehouses I'd suggested. Rike's not one to be missed, even on a crowded street. Makin would have done better to leave himself and Red Kent in the whorehouse too. Grumlow I might not have spotted. Grumlow has quiet ways about him.

The smaller and more shabby of the merchant cogs stood at anchor on the margins of the great harbour. They moored along sway-backed quays that

abutted semi-derelict warehouses separated by dangerous alleys where the stink of rotted fish made my eyes water. I followed two bare-chested men carrying a barrel up the gangplank onto the *Sea-goat*.

‘You! Get off my ship.’ The man shouting at me was smaller and dirtier than the other men on deck but loud enough to be the captain.

‘A ship now is it?’ I looked around. ‘Well I suppose if you set a sail in a rowboat you can call it a ship. But you were unwise to throw away the oars.’

‘I was going to let you choose which side you left by. But that offer is now void,’ the little man said. The mass of black curls framing his ugly face looked to be a wig, but why anyone would want to set ten pounds of stolen sweaty hair on their head in this heat I couldn’t fathom.

I magicked a silver coin into my hand, an Ancrath royal stamped with my father’s head. ‘Customer,’ I said.

The fat man advancing on me stopped. He looked relieved.

‘I want to get to the Horse Coast,’ I said. ‘Somewhere around the ear would do.’

The Horse Coast isn’t named for the stallions that make it famous these days. Apparently the peninsula coastline resembles a horse’s head. I’ve studied the map scrolls in my father’s library and I can say with surety that it looks like a horse’s head in the same way that troll-stones look like trolls, or that the constellation of Orion looks like a belted giant holding a club. They could have called it the Happy Pig Coast or the Crooked Thumb Coast just as well. To give the ancients the benefit of the doubt I will note that the sea has risen twice the height of the Tall Castle since the time of Building and the old maps had to be rewritten many times. Even so, I’d stake a bag of stolen gold on the fact that there was never a time that ‘horse’ was the first thing to spring to mind when contemplating the run of the Horse Coast.

I had plenty of time to think while the little captain favoured me with a sour stare and chewed his lip. I could have picked a ship at random. Any small vessel actively loading would be departing for ports up the coast from Barlona or down the coast. I’d bought a couple of ales for a sailor earlier in the day. He’d gone through his share from his previous trip and was delaying a new signing until the last possible moment. In return for my keeping him from sobriety for a few more hours he’d run off a list of the best bets for a trip south. The *Sea-goat*’s name had taken my fancy. Who wants to sail on the *Maria*, or the *God’s Grace*, when there’s a *Sea-goat* to be ridden?

‘Two silver and you haul rope when told,’ he said.

‘One silver and I get fed with the crew,’ I said and started walking toward the gangplank. I could ride the *Maria* just as well. In fact it sounded better each time I said it.

‘Done,’ he said.

And so I sailed on the *Sea-goat* with Captain Nellis.

Before the *Sea-goat* hoisted sail I took a last walk around the seafront and stopped in at the Port Commander’s office long enough to place a bribe of sufficient weight to considerably lighten my gold supply. Ideally the Brothers would be steered onto a ship that would take them north up the coast and abandon them in a minor port. Makin would be too busy vomiting to notice which side of the boat the land lay off. Failing that, they need only arrest Makin and hold him a week or two – long enough for my trail to grow cold and to remind him that in the end when your king tells you to do something, you do it.

I like the sea. Even with a gentle swell, with the coast in plain view just ten miles to starboard, it sets me in mind of mountains in motion. I like the nautical phrases. Splice this, belay that. If Lundist proves right and we are all reborn, I’ll go once more round life’s wheel as a pirate. Everything about the ocean puts me in a good mood. The smell and the taste of it. The cry of seagulls. God jammed some kind of magic down their throats. No wonder the crows want to murder them and the ravens are unkind.

Captain Nellis didn’t like me being on the quarterdeck, or so he said, but I spent my time there, legs dangling through the rail with him behind me, dwarfed by the wheel. He could have roped it off for all the steering he did, but he seemed to like to hold it while he shouted at his men. To my eye he steered them as little as he did the ship. His curses and instructions rolled off the crew and they went about their tasks oblivious.

‘I’ll buy me a ship one day,’ I said.

‘Surely,’ Captain Nellis spat something thick and unpleasant onto the deck. Without men like him and Row, decks probably wouldn’t need swabbing at all.

‘A big one, mind. Not a barge like this. Something that cuts the waves rather than wallows about in them.’

‘A young sell-sword like yourself shouldn’t set his sights so low,’ Nellis growled. ‘Buy a whole fleet.’

‘A valid point, Captain. Very valid. If my kingdom ever gets a coastline I

will buy a fleet. I'll be sure to name one of them the *Spitting Nellis*.'

And so for the rest of that day, and most of the next, the *Sea-goat* wallowed its way sedately around the shore, stopping once in a small port to unload a huge copper pot and to fill the space with red-finned fish called ... red-fin. I slept a night in a hammock, below decks, rolling in the gentle arms of coastal waters and dreaming of absolutely nothing. I can only recommend hammocks if you're at sea. On dry land there seems no point to them. And sleep above deck if you have the chance. The *Sea-goat* had an appropriately animal smell to it in the stale heat of its hold.

My grandfather's castle is called Morrow. It overlooks the sea, standing as close to a high cliff as a brave child might, but not so close as a foolhardy one. It has an elegance to it, being tall and slender in its towers, and sensibly tiled on its many roofs, having fought fiercer and more prolonged battles with ocean storms than with any army trekking to it overland.

The port of Arrapa lies just two miles north of Castle Morrow and I disembarked there, taking some pleasure in unsettling Captain Nellis with enthusiastic thanks for his services. I left the crew unloading red-fin and taking on crates of saddles destined for Wennith Town. Why the fishermen of Arrapa couldn't catch their own red-fin I never did find out.

A well-maintained cart track winds up from the port to Castle Morrow. I walked, enjoying the sunshine, and turned down the offer of a ride in a charcoal man's cart.

'It gets steep,' he said.

'Steep's fine,' I said. And he flicked his mule on.

I wanted to come incognito to Castle Morrow, wanted it bad enough to see Makin thrown in a cell rather than risk him spoiling my cover. It has to be said that my experience with relations has been a mixed bag. Having a father like mine breeds caution in these situations. I needed to see these new family members in their element, without the complications of who I was or what I wanted.

Add to the mix the fact that my grandfather and uncle were said to hate Olidan Ancrath with a passion for the way he sold the absolution for Mother's death – as if his brother had merely inconvenienced him by sending assassins to kill her. I might be my mother's son but I have more than my fair share of Father's blood and with the tales Grandfather was like to have heard of me it would not be unreasonable for him to see me cast in the image of Olidan rather than the child of his beloved Rowen.



I had a sweat on me by the time I reached the castle gates, but the cliff tops caught a sea breeze and I let it cool me. I stepped up to the archway. Double portcullis, well-crafted merlons topping the gatehouse, arrow slits positioned with some thought – in all a nice bit of castle-building. The smallest of three guardsmen stepped to intercept me.

‘I’m looking for work,’ I said.

‘Nothing for you, son.’ He didn’t ask what kind of work. I had a big sword on my belt, a scorching hot breastplate over my leathers, and a helm at my hip.

‘How about some water then? I’ve sweated my way up from the beach and it’s a thirsty mile.’

The guard nodded to a stone trough for horses by the side of the road.

‘Hmmm.’ The water looked only marginally better than the stuff in the Cantanlona swamp.

‘Best be on your way, son. It’s a thirsty mile back to Arrapa too,’ the guard said.

I started to dislike the man. I named him ‘Sunny’ for his disposition and his repeated claims of fatherhood. I reached inside my breastplate, trying not to touch the metal and failing. My fingers discovered the corner they were hunting and I pulled out a sealed letter, wrapped in stained linen. ‘Also, I have this for Earl Hansa,’ I said, unfolding it from the cloth.

‘Do you now?’ Sunny reached for it and I pulled it back at the same speed he moved his hand. ‘Best let me see that, son,’ he said.

‘Best read the name on the front before you grubby it up too much, Father.’ I let him take it, and used the linen to mop sweat from my forehead.

To Sunny’s credit he held the letter with some reverence by the very corners, and although we both knew he couldn’t read, he played out the pantomime well, peering at the script above the wax seal. ‘Wait here,’ he told me and set off into the courtyard beyond.

I smiled for the two remaining guards then took myself off to a patch of shade where I slumped and let the flies have their way. I set my back to the trunk of the lone tree providing the shade. It looked to be an olive. I’d never seen the tree before but I knew the fruit, and the stones littered the ground. It looked old. Older than the castle perhaps.

Sunny took almost an hour to return and by that time the horse trough had started to look tempting. He brought two house guards with him, their uniform richer, chainmail on their chests rather than the leathers of the wall

guard who had to endure the heat.

‘Go with them,’ Sunny said. I think he would have given a day’s wages to be able to send me back down the hill, and another day’s to be able to send me on my way with the toe of his boot.

In the courtyard a marble fountain sprayed. The water jetted from many small holes in the mouth of a fish and collected in a wide circular pool. I had seen illustrations of fountains in Father’s books. Reference was made to the team of men needed to work the pump in order to maintain pressure. I pitied any men sweltering away in darkness to make this pretty thing function ... but the fine spray made a cool heaven as we walked past.

Many windows overlooked the courtyard, not shuttered but faced with pierced veils of stone, worked with great artistry in intricate patterns that left more air than rock. I couldn’t see into the shadows behind but I felt watched.

We passed through a short corridor, floored with geometric mosaic, into a smaller courtyard where on a stone bench in the shade of three orange trees, a nobleman waited, plain dressed but with a gold band on his wrist and too clean to be anything but highborn. Not Earl Hansa; he was too young for that, but surely someone of his family. Of my family. I kept more of my father’s features but this man shared some of my lines, high cheekbones, dark hair cropped close, watchful eyes.

‘I am Robert,’ he said. He had the letter open in his hand. ‘My sister wrote this. She speaks well of you.’

In truth I spoke well of myself when I set quill to parchment some months ago. I called myself William and said that I had proven a loyal aid to Queen Rowen, honest, brave, and gifted in both letter and number. I copied the slant and shape of the writing from an older letter, a crumpled scrap I kept close to my heart for many years. A letter from my mother.

‘I’m honoured.’ I bowed deeply. ‘I hope that the Queen’s recommendation, God rest her, will find me a place in your household.’

Lord Robert watched me, and I watched him. It felt good to find an uncle that I didn’t long to kill.

*Four years earlier*

‘You look very young, William. How many years are you? Sixteen? Seventeen?’ Robert said.

‘Nineteen, my lord. I look young for my age,’ I said.

‘And my sister has been dead nearly five years. So that makes you fourteen or fifteen when she wrote this?’

‘Fifteen, my lord.’

‘Early in life to have made such an impression. Honest, brave, numerate, literate. So why are you wandering so far from home in such poor circumstances, William?’

‘I served in the Forest Watch, my lord. After Queen Rowen was slain. And when the Watch-master led us against Count Renar who took your sister’s life, Queen Rowen I mean, I fought in the Highlands. But I have family in Ancrath, so when justice was served on the Count, I took to the roads so that I would be thought killed in the battle at the Haunt, and no punishments would fall on my relatives to make me surrender to King Olidan. Since then I have been making my way here, my lord, hoping to continue in service to Queen Rowen’s family.’

‘That’s quite a tale,’ Robert said. ‘To be told in one mouthful without pause for breath.’

I said nothing and watched the shadows of the orange trees dance.

‘So you fought alongside my nephew, Jorg?’ Robert said. ‘Did you come by your injury that way?’ He set his hand to his cheek.

‘I didn’t fight by his side, my lord. But I was on the same battlefield. He wouldn’t know my name and face,’ I said. ‘Not even with this scar. That came more recently. On my travels.’

‘That must be the honesty Rowen wrote of. Many would be tempted to say they fought at his left hand in order to lay stronger claim on my generosity.’ Robert smiled. He rubbed at the small dark triangle of beard on his chin. ‘Can

you use that sword?’ he asked. He wore plain linens, a loose shirt, his chest and arms tanned and hard muscled. Perhaps more a horseman than a swordsman but he would know blades.

‘I can.’

‘And read. And write?’

‘Yes.’

‘A man of many talents,’ Robert said. ‘I’ll have Lord Jost find a place for you in the house guard. That will do for now. I should introduce you to Qalasadi too – he always likes to meet a man who knows his numbers.’ He smiled as if he’d made a joke.

‘My thanks, Lord Robert,’ I said.

‘Don’t thank me, William. Thank my sister. And be sure to show us all how good a judge of character she was.’ He looked up through the orange-tree leaves at the dazzling blue sky. ‘Take him to Captain Ortens,’ he said, and house guards led me away.

I slept that night in a bunk in the west tower guardhouse. Ortens, a man with more scars on his bald head than would seem reasonable or even possible, had grumbled and cursed, but he had a chain surcoat brought up from the armoury and sent for the seamstress to fit me with a uniform in the blues of House Morrow. I also got a service blade, a longsword from the same forge as the other guards, assumed to be superior to the one in my dirt-caked scabbard and certainly more aesthetically pleasing, completing the house guard ensemble as it did.

The older men of the guard offered the traditional doubts about my ability to use a sword, concerns that I would miss my mother, and bets about how long it would be before the captain threw me out. In addition, my foreign heritage allowed for the airing of low opinions of the northern kingdoms in general and Ancrath in particular. Ancrath proved an especially sore point since their Princess Rowen had met a foul end there. I owned that I did miss my mother but it wouldn’t cause me to go running home. I further admitted that I was a citizen of Ancrath, but one who had fought at the gates of the man who killed its queen, and who had seen him pay for his crimes. As to my fighting skills I invited any man who felt overburdened with blood to come and test them for himself.

I slept well that night.

The House Morrow wakes early. Most of it pre-dawn so that some progress can be made before the summer descends and any sensible man

retreats into the shortening shade. I found myself in the practice yard with four other recent recruits. Captain Ortens came from his breakfast to watch in person as an elderly sergeant put us through our paces with wooden swords.

I resisted the urge to put on a show and kept my swordplay basic. An experienced eye is hard to deceive though, and I suspected that Ortens left with a higher opinion of recruit William than the one he brought to the yard with him.

After a couple of hours it grew warm for sword-work and Sergeant Mattus sent us to our assignments. I had always imagined the duties of the guard at the Haunt and at the Tall Castle to be tedious. Not until I tried them myself for half a day did I fathom quite how dull such service is. I got to stand at the Lowery Gate, an iron door affording access to what was little more than an extended balcony garden where the noble ladies cultivated sage grass, miniature lemon trees, and various flowering plants that had lost their blooms months earlier and set to seed. If any intruder were to gain the balcony then I was to refuse him entrance to the castle. An unlikely event since they would need to fall off a passing cloud to reach the balcony. If any lady of the house were to wish to visit the garden, then I was empowered to unlock the door for them and to lock it again when they had taken their leave. I'm bored even scratching it out on this page. I stood there for three hours in an itchy uniform and saw nobody at all. No one even passed down the adjoining corridor.

Another recruit from the morning's training exercise relieved me at noon and I set off to find the guards' refectory. I now know why it's called relief.

'A moment of your time, young man.'

I stopped just a yard from the refectory door and let my stomach complain for me. I made a slow turn.

'I'm told you are numerate.' The man had stepped from the shade of a lilac bush that swarmed up the inner wall of the main courtyard. A Moor, darker than the shadow, wrapped in a black burnoose, the burnt umber of his skin exposed only on his hands and face.

'Count on it,' I said.

He smiled. His teeth were black, painted with some dye, the effect unsettling. 'I am Qalasadi.'

'William,' I said.

He raised an eyebrow.

'How may I help you, Lord Qalasadi?' I asked. He held himself like a noble, though no gold glittered on him. I judged him by the cut of his robe

and the neat curl of his short beard and hair. Wealth buys a certain grooming that speaks of money, even when the rich man's tastes are simple.

'Just Qalasadi,' he said.

I liked him. Simple as that. Sometimes I just do.

He crouched and with an ivory wand, drawn from his sleeve, he wrote numbers in the dust. 'Your people call me a mathmagician,' he said.

'And what do you call yourself?' I asked.

'Numbered,' he said. 'Tell me what you see.'

I looked at his scribbling. 'Is that a root symbol?'

'Yes.'

'I see primes, here, here, and ... here. This is a rational number, this one irrational. I see families.' I circled groups with my toe, some overlapping.

'Real numbers, integers, imaginary numbers, complex numbers.'

He sketched again, flowing symbols that I remembered only dimly. 'And this?'

'Some part of the integral calculus. But it goes beyond my lessons.' It panged me to admit defeat though I should have held my tongue after recognizing prime numbers for him. Pride is my weakness.

'Interesting.' Qalasadi scuffed the dust to erase his writings as if they might prove dangerous to others.

'So do you have me figured out?' I asked. 'What's my magic number?' I had heard tell of mathmagicians. They seemed little different from the witches, astrologers, and soothsayers from closer to home, obsessed with casting futures, handing out labels, parting fools from their coin. If he told me something about the glories ahead for the Prince of Arrow I would have trouble restraining myself. If he suggested I might be born in the year of the goat then there would be no restraint!

Again the black smile. 'Your magic number is three,' he said.

I laughed. But he looked serious. 'Three?' I shook my head. 'There are a lot of numbers to choose from. Three just seems a little ... predictable.'

'Everything is predictable,' Qalasadi said. 'At its core my arts are the working of probability, which produces prediction, and that leads us to timing, and in the end, my friend, everything comes down to a matter of timing does it not?'

He had a point. 'But three?' I waved my hands, groping for outrage.

'Three?'

'It's the first of your magic numbers. They form a series,' he said. 'The

second of them is fourteen.'

'See, now you're talking. Fourteen. I can believe in that.' I crouched beside him since he seemed unwilling to rise. 'Why fourteen?'

'It is your age is it not?' he asked. 'And it is the key to your name.'

'My name?' An uneasiness crept up my back, chill despite the heat.

'Honourous, I should say. With some certainty.' He scratched in the dust and erased it just as quick. 'Ancrath, quite likely. Jorg, maybe.'

'I'm fascinated at how you would calculate all that from fourteen,' I said. I considered breaking his neck and leaving for the docks. But that wasn't the man I wanted to show my mother's father, or her brother. It wasn't the Jorg she had known.

'You have the look of a Steward to me. The right lines. Particularly around the eyes, nose, the forehead too. And you've declared yourself from Ancrath which would fit with your accent and colouring. Almost all Stewards are named after Honourous. You could be a bastard, but who teaches a bastard to even recognize calculus? And if you're legitimate then as a Steward from Ancrath you would be named Ancrath. And what members of that household are young men? Jorg Ancrath springs to mind. And how old is he? Close on fifteen but not yet there.'

I didn't yet know if I was right to like the man but his store of facts and talent for deduction impressed me. 'Spectacular,' I said. 'Wrong, but spectacular.'

Qalasadi shrugged. 'I try.' He nodded to the refectory. 'Your lunch awaits, no doubt.'

I stood and started across the courtyard. Then paused. 'Why three?'

Qalasadi frowned as if trying to recall a lost sensation. 'Three steps outside? Three in the carriage? Three women that will love you? Three Brothers lost on your journey? The magic lies in the first number, the mathematics in the second.'

The 'three steps' put a cold finger down my spine, as if he had rummaged in the back of my skull and pulled out something I would rather keep hidden. I said nothing and walked away, a wild night running through my mind, cut by lightning and glimpses of the empty carriage as I hung in thorns.

I found myself at the refectory table without memory of getting there. I wondered how long it would be before Qalasadi laid his deductions at my uncle's feet. He might spoil my game but it presented no danger.

'Not hungry?' The short guardsman from the gates sat across from me.

Sunny.

I looked down at my lunch and tried to make sense of it. 'What's this stuff? Did someone throw up in my bowl?'

'Spicy squid.' The guardsman kissed his fingertips and spread them. *Mwah.*

I skewered a tentacle, a difficult feat in itself, and set to chewing. The experience wasn't dissimilar from chewing shoe leather. Except that to fully replicate it you would have to set the leather on fire. Spices are all well and good. Salt to taste, a little pepper, a bay leaf in soup, a clove or two in an apple pie. But on the Horse Coast they seem to favour chillies that will take the skin off your tongue. Having been burned on the outside and not liked the experience, I saw no reason to burn on the inside. I spat my mouthful back into the bowl.

'That is truly vile!' I said.

'I would have had it off you,' the guardsman said. 'But you went and spat in it. I'm Greyson by the way.'

'William of Ancrath,' I said. I picked up my hunk of bread and nibbled it, wary that the cook might have mixed a bag of chilli dust in with the flour.

'What's the deal with the Moor?' I asked, and ran my fingers over my teeth as if 'Moor' were not sufficient description.

'You've met Qalasadi now have you?' Greyson grinned. 'He keeps the castle accounts. Works wonders with the local merchants. Gets Earl Hansa the good contracts. Best of all he's in charge of paying the guards and he's never a day late. Five years back we had Friar James keeping the books. We could go a month without coin.' He shook his head.

'He's close with the Earl and his son, this Qalasadi?' I asked.

'Not especially. He's just the book keeper.' Greyson shrugged.

I liked the sound of that, but wondered at a man of such talent occupying a relatively minor role without complaint.

'I like him well enough,' Greyson said. 'Plays cards with the wall guard sometimes. Always loses, never complains, never drinks our ale.'

'You'd have thought he'd be good at cards,' I said.

'Terrible. Not sure he even knows the rules. But he seems to love it. And the men like him. They don't even give him a hard time about being the castle's only Moor. And by rights they should. What with his countrymen set on invading the mainland and turning us all to heathens or corpses.'

'Moors is it?' I asked. 'Should I be expecting to kill some soon?'



Others of the guard leaned in, listening to the conversation as they chewed their squid. I thought perhaps the chilli dissolved the tentacles in the end, because chewing seemed insufficient.

‘You might yet,’ Greyson said. ‘Ibn Fayed, he’s caliph in Liba, has sent his ships three times this year. We’re due another raid.’

Without warning the rumble of conversation died and Greyson put his head down. ‘Shimon, the sword-master,’ he hissed. ‘He never comes in here.’

A man loomed behind me. I focused on the squid but refrained from actually putting it in my mouth.

‘You, boy,’ Shimon said. ‘Ancrath. Out in the yard. I’m told you have promise.’

*Four years earlier*

I knew of Sword-master Shimon. Makin told me stories about him. About his exploits as a young man, champion to kings, teacher of champions, legend of the tourney. I hadn't expected him to be so old.

'Yes, Sword-master,' I said, and I followed him out into the courtyard.

To say he moved like a swordsman would be understatement. He looked as old as Tutor Lundist, with the same long white hair, but he stepped as if he heard the sword-song beating through each moment of the day.

Qalasadi had gone from the shadows and the courtyard lay empty but for a serving girl crossing with a basket of washing, and the men on guard at the gate. Other guards crowded the door of the refectory behind us, but they didn't dare follow us out. Shimon had not extended them an invitation.

The sword-master turned to face me. The bookish look of him surprised me. He could have passed as a scribe, but for the dark burn of the sun and a hawkishness about the eyes. He drew his sword. A standard issue blade the same as mine.

'When you're ready, young man,' he said.

I slid my sword out, wondering how to play this. Qalasadi was probably telling my uncle who I really was right now, so why not make full use of the opportunity?

I slapped at his blade, and he did that rolling-wrist trick the Prince of Arrow used, only better, and took my sword out of my hand. I heard laughter from the doorway.

'Try harder,' Shimon said.

I smiled and picked my sword up. This time I moved in quick with a thrust at his body. He did the trick again but I rolled my wrist with his and kept my blade.

'Better,' he said.

I attacked him with short precise combinations, the moves I had been

working on with Makin. He fended me off without apparent effort, replying at the end of each attack with a counter-attack that I could barely contain. The rapid clash of metal on metal echoed around the courtyard. I felt the music of steel rise about me. I felt that cold calm sensation rolling out over my arms, cheeks, the skin of my back. I heard the song.

Without thought I attacked, slicing high, low, feinting, deploying my full strength at precisely the right moments, all of me moving, feet, arms, hips, only my head still. I increased the tempo, increased it, and increased it again. At times I couldn't see my blade or his, only the shape of our bodies, and the necessity of the dance let me know how to move, how to block. The sound of our parrying became like the *clickety-click* of knitting needles in expert hands.

Shimon's hard old face didn't look made for smiling, but a smile found its way there. I grinned like an idiot, sweat dripping off me.

'Enough.' He stepped away.

I found it hard not to follow him, to press the attack, but I let my sword drop. There had been a joy in it, in the purity, living on the edge of my blade without thought. My heart pounded and sweat soaked me, but I had nothing of the anger that normally builds even in practice sessions. We had made a thing of beauty.

'Could you beat me?' I asked, pulling in a breath. The old man seemed hardly winded.

'We both won, boy,' he said. 'If I'd taken a victory we would have both lost.'

I took that as a yes. But I understood him. I hoped that I would have had the grace to step back if I saw him weaken. Not to do so would have spoiled the moment.

Shimon sheathed his sword. 'Enjoy your lunch, guardsman,' he said.

'That's it?' I asked as he turned to go. 'No advice?'

'You don't try hard enough at the start, and you try too hard at the end,' he said.

'Hardly technical.'

'You have a talent,' he said. 'I hope you have other talents too. They will probably bring you more happiness.'

And he went.

'Unreal,' Greyson said when I returned to the table. 'I've never seen a thing like that.'

And that was all the time I had to bask in my glory. The bell sounded to let us know lunch had ended and I got to go back to guarding the Lowery Gate.

The Lowery Gate nearly broke me. I gave deep consideration to naming myself to my grandfather. In the end though, I wanted to see how this court worked from the inside, how my relatives went about their lives, who they really were. I guess I wanted a window into my past and not to mucky it up with my own surprises.

I slept again in the guardhouse and woke to new duties. Qalasadi didn't appear to have gone to my uncle. I suspected that he thought I would wield some influence once my identity was known and he didn't want to make an enemy of me. If he didn't let my secret slip, who would know that he ever knew it? And so he would face no censure for not revealing me.

My new assignment was as personal guard to Lady Agath, a cousin of my grandfather's who had been living at Castle Morrow for some years. A fat old lady, getting to the point where the weight started to slip from her as it does with the very old. Live long enough and we all die skinny.

Lady Agath liked to do everything slowly. She paid me no attention other than to moan that my scar was ugly to look at and why couldn't she have a presentable guard? To the wrinkles brought by her advanced years she added those that fat people acquire as they start to deflate. The overall effect was alarming, as if she were a shed skin, discarded perhaps by a giant reptile. I followed her around Castle Morrow at a snail's pace, which afforded me the time to look the place over, at least the part of it lying between the privy, the dining hall, Lady Agath's bedchamber, and the Ladies' Hall.

'Be still, boy, you're never still,' Lady Agath said.

I hadn't moved a muscle for five minutes. I continued the habit and held my tongue.

'Don't be smart with me,' she said. 'Your eyes are always flitting from one thing to the next. Never still. And you think too much. I can see you thinking right now.'

'My apologies, Lady Agath,' I said.

She harrumphed, jowls quivering and settled back in her black lace. 'Play on,' she told the minstrel, a dark and handsome fellow in his twenties who had a sufficient combination of looks and talent to hold the attention of Agath and three other old noblewomen at one end of the Ladies' Hall.

The Ladies' Hall appeared to be where Horse Coast women came to die. For certain there weren't any ladies there on the right side of sixty.

‘You’re doing it again,’ Lady Agath hissed.

‘My apologies.’

‘Go to the wine-cellar and tell them I want a jug of wine, Wennith red, something from the south slopes,’ Lady Agath told me.

‘I’m not supposed to leave you unattended, Lady Agath,’ I said.

‘I’m not unattended, I have Rialto here.’ She waved toward the minstrel. ‘I always have my wine from the cellar. I don’t know what they do to it in that kitchen but they ruin it. Leave it open to the air I guess. And the girls always dawdle so,’ she remarked to the other ladies. ‘Go, boy, quick about it.’

I had my doubts as to whether Rialto could protect Lady Agath from an angry wasp let alone any other threats, but I didn’t feel her to be in any danger, and I didn’t much care if she was, so I left without complaint.

It took me a while to find my way down to the right cellar, but after a few wrong turns I located the place. You can generally tell a wine-cellar by the sturdiness of the door, second only to the treasury door in the majority of castles. Even the most loyal servants will steal your wine given quarter of a chance, and they’ll piss the evidence over the wall.

I had another trip to find the day cook and get him to unlock for me. He sat on a chair positioned by the door and set to chewing on the leg of mutton he’d carried down with him in his apron.

‘Jugs are by the door. Go find what you want. Don’t leave the spigot dripping. Wennith reds are at the far end, left corner, marked with a double cross and crown.’

I lit a lantern from his and ventured in.

‘Watch out for spiders,’ he said. ‘The smaller brown ones are bad. Don’t get bit.’ When he said ‘small’ he made a circle with his finger and thumb that didn’t look particularly small.

The cellar stretched on for dozens of yards, the wine casks stacked on shelves, most unbroached, the occasional one set with a spigot. I wound a path along the narrow alleys, squeezing past a loading truck and several empty casks left to trip me.

The Wennith red caskets were all sealed save for an empty one. I suspected most of its contents had swilled through the Lady Agath on their way to the privy. The tools and spare spigots for broaching a new cask weren’t apparent. I noted a door, almost concealed beneath a build up of grime and mould, behind a stack of emptied barrels. It looked too disused to be a store cupboard, but the need of a mallet and spigot provided a good excuse to have

a look behind. I'm an explorer at heart and I'd come to nose around in any case. What noble folk keep in their cellars and dungeons can tell you a lot about them. My father kept most of my road-brothers for torture and execution in his dungeon. I won't say that they didn't deserve it. Harsh but fair, that's what my father's dungeon said about him. Mostly harsh.

I had to lift and heave at the same time to get the door to judder across the flagstones, pushing the empties aside. When a gap had opened large enough to admit me, I went in. A spiral staircase led down. The stairs themselves were carved stone, the work of the castle masons, but the shaft down which they led was poured, Builder-stone. The shaft led down fifty feet or so, into the bedrock. At the bottom an archway led into a rectangular chamber dominated by a grimy machine of cylinders, bolts, and circular plates. Glow-bulbs provided a weak light, three of maybe twenty still working, though not as bright as those in the Tall Castle.

I crossed to the machine and ran a hand along one of its many pipes. My fingers came away black, leaving gleaming streaks of exposed silver metal. The whole machine shook with a faint vibration, little more than heavy footfalls echoing in a stone floor.

'Go away.' An old man stood there, sketched rapidly by an invisible hand. The ghost of an old man I should say, because only light fashioned him. I could see the machine through his body, and he had no colour to his flesh, as if he were made from fog. He wore white clothes, close fitting, of a strange cut, and from one moment to the next his whole form would flicker as if a moth had passed before whatever light was projected to create him.

'Make me,' I said.

'Ha! That's a good one.' He grinned. In looks he could have been brother to Sword-master Shimon. 'Most folk just run screaming when I say "boo".'

'I've seen my share of ghosts, old man,' I said.

'Of course you have, boy,' he said. He looked as though he were humouring me. Which was odd given that he was a ghost himself.

'How long have you haunted this place, and what manner of machine is this?' I asked. It pays to be to the point with ghosts and spirits. They tend to vanish before you know it.

'I'm not a ghost. I'm a data echo. The man I am copied from lived another fourteen years after I was captured—'

'How long?'

'—and died more than a thousand years ago,' he said.

‘You’re the ghost of a Builder?’ I asked. It seemed far-fetched. Even ghosts don’t last that long.

‘I am an algorithm. I am portrayed in the image of Fexler Brews, my responses are extrapolated from the six terats of data gathered on the man during the course of his life. I echo him.’

I understood some of the words. ‘What data? Numbers? Like Qalasaki keeps in his books of trade?’

‘Numbers, letters, books, pictures, unguarded moments captured in secret, phrases muttered in his sleep, exclamations cried out in coitus, chemical analysis of his waste, public presentations, private meditations, polygraphic evidence, DNA samples. Data.’

‘What can you do for me, ghost?’ His gibberish meant little to me. It seemed that they had watched him and written his story into a machine – and now that story spoke to me even though the man himself was dust on the wind.

Fexler Brews shrugged. ‘I’m an old man out of my time. Not even that. An incomplete copy of an old man out of his time.’

‘You can tell me secrets. Give me the power of the ancients,’ I said. I didn’t think he would, or my grandfather would already be emperor, but it didn’t hurt to try.

‘You wouldn’t understand my secrets. There’s a gap between what I say and what you can comprehend. You people could fill that gap in fifty years if you stopped trying to kill each other and started to look at what’s lying around you.’

‘Try me.’ I didn’t like his tone. At the end of it this thing before me was nothing but a shadow-play, a story being told by a machine of cogs and springs and magic all bound by the secret fire of the Builders. ‘What does this do?’ I tapped the machinery with my foot. ‘What is it for?’

Fexler blinked at me. Perhaps he had often blinked so and the machine remembered. ‘It has many purposes, young man, simple ones that you might understand – the pumping and purification of water – and others that are beyond you. It is a hub, part of a network without end, a tool for observation and communication, bunkered away for security. For me and my kind it serves as one of many windows onto the small world of flesh.’

‘Small?’ I smiled. He lived in a metal box not much bigger than a coffin.

Fexler frowned, peevish. ‘I have other things to do: go and play elsewhere.’

‘Tell me this,’ I said. ‘My world. It’s not like the one I read about in the oldest books. When they talk about magic, about ghosts, it’s as if they are fairy-tales to frighten children. And yet I have seen the dead walk, seen a boy bring fire with just a thought.’

Fexler frowned as if considering how to explain. ‘Think of reality as a ship whose course is set, whose wheel is locked in place by universal constants.’

I wondered if a drink would help with such imaginings. All that wine seemed very tempting.

‘Our greatest achievement, and downfall, was to turn that wheel, just a fraction. The role of the observer was always important – we discovered that. If a tree falls in the wood and no one hears it, it both does and doesn’t make a sound. If no one see it, then it is both standing and not standing. The cat is both alive and dead.’

‘Who mentioned a fecking cat?’

The ghost of Fexler Brews sighed. ‘We weakened the barriers between thought and matter—’

‘I’ve heard this before,’ I said. Ferrakind had told me something similar. Could this ghost of a Builder share that same madness? The Nuban had spoken of barriers thinning, of the veil between life and death wearing through. ‘The Builders made magic? Brought it into the world with their machines?’

‘There is no magic.’ Fexler shook his head. ‘We changed the constants. Just a little. Strengthened the link between *want* and *what is*. Now not only is the tree both fallen and unfallen – if the right man wills it so, with sufficient focus, the fallen tree will stand. The zombie cat will walk and purr.’

‘What’s a zombie?’

Another sigh. Fexler vanished and all the lights went out. Even my lantern.

I climbed back up the stairs in the dark, got bitten by a spider, and was very late with Lady Agath’s wine.



*Four years earlier*

I came to the Castle Morrow refectory with a swollen hand and a sore head. Spider venom makes your insides crawl and puts illusions at the edge of your vision, illusions as nasty as you can imagine. And I've been cursed with a good imagination.

The house guards and the wall guards tend to agree on very little, but they all agreed I was a dumb northerner and that I probably wouldn't swing a sword quite so fancy for a while.

It being Sunday, the cook prepared a special treat for us. Snails in garlic and wine, with saffron rice. The snails came from the local cliffs. A big variety as thick as a child's arm. But let's face it, snails are just slugs with a hat on. The main dish looked like large lumps of snot in blood. Why the Horse Coast is obsessed with eating things that squish I'm not sure. Already feeling queasy, I tried the rice. Apparently Earl Hansa had bestowed a great honour upon us, saffron being the spice of kings and trading at silly prices. All I can say is that it tasted of bitter honey to me and turned my stomach. I took the smallest nibble and decided to go hungry.

I slunk off to bed with a heel of bread and fell into vivid dreams.

The fact that I was caught sleeping, or rather that I was caught whilst sleeping, I put down to the spider bite and the truth that if you jumped up swinging at every passer-by in a guards' dormitory you would soon kill off half the castle.

I woke with strong hands clasped around my wrists and ankles, and discovered that no amount of struggling was going to stop them dragging me through several corridors, down a flight of stairs, and into a dungeon cell. They had a healthy respect for my ability to do them harm, so in order to retreat in safety, one of them hit me in the stomach as hard as he could whilst the others stretched me wide for the blow. I heard them running out, and the slam of the door boomed over my retching.

Shouting to be let out always seemed rather silly to me. It's not as if you're going to help the people who put you there to realize that they hadn't meant to do it after all. So I didn't shout. I sat on the floor and wondered. Perhaps Qalasadi had told his secret and my family weren't amused. Or more likely my excursion to the Builder machine below the wine-cellar had been discovered and judged poorly.

It took an hour. A face appeared at the small window in the cell door. A foolish move in my opinion, since if I had been so minded I could have done serious harm to that face with the knife they had left on me.

'Hello, Lord Jost,' I said. I'd met him only for moments before he passed me on to Captain Ortens for the house guard, but he had a pinched face and small dark moustache that was easy to remember.

'William of Ancrath,' he said. He spoke the words slowly as if having trouble giving them credit.

The floor was uncomfortable and quite cold. I felt I might get out of there more quickly if I let him have his say. So I said nothing.

'What poison did you use, William?' he asked.

I looked at my hand in the half-light. The spider bite had turned purple. 'Poison?' I asked.

'I'm not here for games, boy. I'll leave you to rot. If they die before you're ready to talk, then the Earl will hire in Moorish torturers to make an example of you.'

The face drew back.

'Wait!' I got to my feet sharpish. I didn't like the sound of Moorish torturers. In fact it's hard to put any word in front of 'torturers' that doesn't sound unsettling. 'Tell me what happened and you'll have the whole truth from me. I swear by Jesu.'

He turned and walked away.

I threw myself to the door, face at the window. 'I can save them,' I lied. 'But I have to know who was affected.'

Lord Jost turned and I thanked whoever it was that invented lying. 'Every guard on the day shift is falling into delirium,' he said. 'Several have gone blind.'

'And I'm the only one not showing symptoms, so that makes me guilty?'

'You're some kind of assassin, clearly. Probably Olidan of Ancrath's man. If you provide an antidote I can promise you a quick death.'

'I don't have an antidote,' I said. Who would want to poison a whole shift

of guards?

‘What poison did you use? You promised the truth,’ Lord Jost said.

‘If I’m an assassin why would you expect me to keep my promise? And if I’m not, then I can’t, can I? Because I didn’t do it.’

Lord Jost spat in an unlordly fashion and started to walk off again.

‘Wait. It’s got to be Moors, hasn’t it? Why would King Olidan want to poison a few guards? He not going to march an army a thousand miles to knock at your door. The Moors are planning a raid.’

He turned the corner.

‘I’m not sick because I didn’t eat the meal!’ I shouted after him.

The echoes of his footsteps faded away.

‘Because all your food tastes like shit that somebody set fire to!’ I shouted. And I was alone.

The dead baby came to me in the dark, solemn eyes watching, head lolling on a broken neck. For the millionth time I wondered if I had killed Katherine back there in that graveyard. Was this my child, that could never be because I’d murdered his mother, or just one of the many children whose blood stained my hands? Gelleth’s children. It had taken a monster to make them real to me. Not a monster in shape. I’d called Gog and Gorgoth monsters. But Chella and I were the real item, foul in deed if not form.

Why poison the guards? It could be the Moors, but they could hardly take the castle in a single raid, and they couldn’t poison all her defenders. And it’s not wise to give such warning if you’re hoping for a fast strike on outlying towns and churches.

An iron fist clenched around my stomach, taking me by surprise, and I hurled watery vomit across the cell. I fell forward onto my hands.

‘Shit.’

The darkness kept spinning on me, so I pressed my cheek to the cold stone floor. My scar still burned, as if the splinters lodged in my flesh were kept hot.

Maybe I had been poisoned after all. But why would it take longer with me? Not my hardy northern constitution, surely? And I ate almost nothing. A piece of bread. A mouthful of bitter rice.

I had to get out. And that’s the trouble with dungeon cells. Somebody took trouble to make sure you’re not going anywhere, and no amount of wanting will change that.

I stood and went to the door. With Lord Jost and his lantern gone there was

almost no light, but something filtered down, perhaps a whisper of the sun dazzling in the courtyards above if day had swung around, perhaps an echo of torchlight further down the corridors they'd dragged me along. In any event it proved enough for night-tutored eyes to find edges and the occasional detail. I examined the little window in the door. I could fit an arm through it if it weren't for the bars. The wood was three fingers thick, hardwood. It would take a week of whittling with my dagger to make much of a hole.

Something scurried behind me. A rat. I can tell rat noises in the dark. I threw my dagger. It used to be a game amongst the Brothers. Nail a rat in the dark. Grumlow proved a master of that particular game. We would often wake to find a rat skewered to the sod by one of his blades. Sometimes uncomfortably close to my head.

'Got you.'

Being as there was no morning to wait for, I hunted my victim down by hand and retrieved my knife.

I went back to the window and its bars. I pushed against them, trying to imagine how they would be fixed to the wood. There was no give in them. It's funny how often our lives shrink down to a single obdurate piece of metal. A knife edge, a manacle, a nail. Gorgoth might have reached out and twisted those bars off in that blunt hand of his. Not me. I pulled and pushed until my hand bled. Nothing.

I sat back down. I thought, thought, and then thought some more. In the end I went to the window and started hollering for them to let me out.

It took a while. Long enough for my throat to grow raw and my voice to crack, but in the end a glow approached. The swinging glow of a lantern.

'You get one chance to shut your mouth, boy. After that—'

'You're going to shut it for me?' I asked, pressed close to the door.

'Oh you'd like that, wouldn't you? For me to open the door. I heard about you and Master Shimon. I wouldn't open that door for a gold coin. No. You shut your mouth or you'll discover you've taken your last drink of water on God's earth.'

'Hey, don't be like that. I'm sorry.' I reached up and dropped my watch so that it fell into the basket made by the window cage. 'Look, take this, it's worth a hundred coins. Just bring me something good to eat would you?'

I crouched low. Listening. Listening.

The gaoler stepped in to take the bait and bang, I slid my arm out through the feeding slot at the base of the door, skinning my elbow, and caught him

behind his ankle. A sharp yank and he fell. I took a firmer grip hauling his foot toward the slot, but he didn't struggle.

'Damn.'

The bastard had hit his head and knocked himself senseless. I'd been planning to reduce the number of his toes with my knife until he offered me his key. It's hard to intimidate an unconscious man.

I picked up my dead rat. Still warm.

There are quite a few uses for a dead rat. I'll go into them at another time. The use I had in mind proved difficult. It turned out to be harder to make a dead rat scurry again than it did to set Brother Row diving in the mud. It's hard to understand a rat, to wear its skin. I almost gave up but when I focused on hunger, it twitched in my hands. It turns out that being dead doesn't stop a rat thinking about its next meal. Before too long I had the creature marching to my tune, and I pushed it out through the food slot.

In the light of the gaoler's lantern, which helpfully he had hung on a hook before reaching for my watch, I sent the rat out searching.

I sat in the small blob of rat brain telling it to gnaw on the thong holding the ring of keys to the gaoler's belt. When the key ring came loose I had the rat drag it to me. In a truly secure cell you wouldn't be able to unlock from the inside, but all systems have their flaws. I let the rat die again and stepped out into the corridor, a free man after my long hours of incarceration!

My stomach clenched but it didn't feel as if I was dying; a touch lightheaded, a touch unclean, but necromancy will do some of that for you in any case. If I had been poisoned then whoever did it had done a bad job.

I gagged the gaoler with strips of cloth and locked him in my cell. Glancing into the other cells along the corridor it appeared that my grandfather was not the locking-up sort. That meant he was either very keen on executions or that he ruled with a light touch.

Slow steps took me to the gaoler's desk where the ceiling port let the moonlight in. It was late but perhaps not midnight. I had had some time to think and I kept thinking. If I were going to poison my enemies I wouldn't waste my efforts on thirty guardsmen, I'd try to empty the throne and throw the whole place into confusion. But any kind of poisoning is hard to do. Castle kitchens are well watched, the cooks as trusted as the men who shave the royal throat. Fresh provisions are hard to taint, potatoes, carrots, and the like. Dry provisions are bought incognito and escorted to locked pantries.

I left the dungeons. I still wore the household uniform and the single guard

at the exit had been obliging enough to let me knock his head against the wall. Unfortunately a burned face is hard to hide. You can't present your good side to the whole world. I found a window and took to the rooftops.

Sitting against the main chimney stack, legs stretched out across the terracotta tiles of the great hall's roof, I pondered.

Not the slugs – sorry, snails. I didn't partake. So the rice. But poisoning rice? The water and boiling and draining would soak it all away. So the saffron. But that would be purchased from whatever ship next turned up at harbour with stocks on board. How often does a household run out of a spice that costs more per ounce than gold? How many ships carry it? What households other than those of the Hundred would buy such luxury in any case? Bundle all those factors together ... what would the odds be ... what probabilities would emerge? Just thinking about the necessary calculations made my head hurt.

Qalasadi!

I slid down the slope of the roof, hoping no tiles would come with me. I reached the wide stone gutter and edged across it, looking for a place where it was well supported. Ending my reign as king in a gory splat at the bottom of a seventy-foot drop was no part of my ambitions. I could hear muffled voices from several quarters, the sigh of the ocean, waves lapping the foot of the cliffs, and the relentless buzz and chirp of the night insects that haunt the Horse Coast.

Castle Morrow bakes in the southern sun much of the year. The winters can be ferocious but are rarely cold. There may well be old men in the region who have never seen snow. In consequence the windows are large and unscreened, the storm-shutters heavy and locked open from early spring to late autumn. With a firm grip on the gutter's edge and my left ankle locked under the bottom row of tiles, I hung upside-down and looked through a high window into the great hall.

The far end of the single long table had been set with silver and crystal. Wall lamps burning smokeless oil gave a welcoming glow. A servant brought in three decanters of wine, two white, one red. Elite house guards in plumed finery stood watch at six points around the hall.

The servant left. Minutes passed. The blood ran to my head, my eyeballs began to prickle and itch, my fingers grew numb where they gripped the stonework. I heard noise down in the courtyard below. A quick commotion. I decided not to move. Silence returned.

At last the black oak doors opened and two servants stepped through to hold them wide as my uncle walked in, escorting Lady Agath. They took their seats, maids now attending to pull the chairs out and settle the nobility. Two more ladies followed in. Old biddies I recognized from the Ladies' Hall. A young man with a fat gut strode in, wrapped in blue velvet despite the heat. My grandmother, who I saw once at the Tall Castle, came escorted and supported by a pageboy. She looked unsteady, her hair very white, her skin pale, thin, drawn. Then my grandfather, taking his high-backed chair at the head of the table. Earl Hansa surprised me; he looked only a little older than my father, a solidly built man with a short grey beard and long thick hair still streaked with black.

More servants now, bearing covered silver platters.

A drop of sweat left my nose and fell away into the darkness. My head felt fuzzy and full of blood.

The covers came away in a choreographed move, flourished overhead by the servants, and revealing today's delicacies. No snails. No rice.

I slid with less grace than I had hoped and swung clumsily into the window, sitting on the ledge and steadying myself with both hands. I very nearly ended up in the unplanned splat. Hanging upside-down before attempting acrobatics is not to be recommended.

I had hoped to go unnoticed a while longer but perhaps Lady Agath was the only person in the great hall not to look up.

To his credit, while the fat boy jumped to his feet, and several of the ladies shrieked, Lord Robert called for the house guard to shield the Earl. The Earl Hansa himself took a sip from his wine then called out, 'I had a grandson named William Ancrath.'

'And I had a brother of that name,' I called back.

My uncle stood up at that.

I released the edges of the window. With a quick motion I threw my dagger. It struck the centremost platter and yellowed slices of potato sprinkled with sea-salt and crushed black peppercorns leaped across the table. The spider bite had left my finger joints sore and swollen and the knife went far closer to one of the old women's ears than I had intended.

More shrieks. 'It's that damnable boy!' Lady Agath cried, having finally laid eyes on me.

'You don't approve of our meal arrangements ... Nephew?' Lord Robert asked.

‘I think if you ate the contents of that platter I might soon be lacking relatives in the south. In fact, I could even be legal heir to the earldom!’

‘You’d better come down here, Jorg,’ my grandfather said.

To my shame I had to be helped down with a ladder. The drop would have broken my legs and the inner walls of the great hall were plastered smooth. Clambering down a ladder arse first to the room wasn’t the most impressive of entrances, but I *had* just saved their lives.

‘You think our food is poisoned?’ Grandfather asked.

I took a silver fork and speared a slice of the potato. ‘Have Qalasaki brought here and see if he would like a taste.’

Lord Robert frowned. ‘Just because we’re at odds with Ibn Fayed doesn’t mean all Moors are out to get us.’

Earl Hansa nodded to the guardsman at his shoulder and the man set off on an errand.

‘Even so, he is guilty,’ I said. ‘And in such a manner that there is no proof other than to see if he will sample a little of your saffron.’

‘The saffron?’ the Earl asked.

‘You’ll find you’ve recently had a new consignment come to the kitchens, properly sealed and kept safe both for its intrinsic value and for your protection. It is probably part of a larger supply that is busy killing rich folk up and down the coast. A seemingly random act of pointless destruction. But I know a man capable of calculating that part of this same consignment would end up on your table, Earl Hansa. A man who also knew my identity and thought I’d make a perfect villain, and that I would accept the blame with the good graces of my line.’

‘Dig a deeper hole with your sword, you mean?’ Lord Robert asked, a slight smile on his lips.

For a moment I wondered if Qalasaki had factored in even my arrival, wondered if I were not some chance victim to pin his crime on but part of some larger calculation. I pushed that thought aside as both unlikely and unsettling. ‘Our mathmagician made only one mistake. It’s unfair perhaps to even call it a mistake. I expect he considered the possibility and decided it remote enough to chance. He didn’t think it likely you would let the cooks waste such fine ingredients on mere guards.’

The man who left on grandfather’s errand returned. ‘Qalasaki is not in his quarters, Earl Hansa, and neither is he in the observatory.’

It turned out Qalasaki left the castle as soon as news of the guards’



sickness reached him.

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*March 26th, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Rennat Forest. Late afternoon.*

*I had thought I might write about Hanna at her graveside. Sareth says I take this journal everywhere, that I have too little in my life if I can't be without it. People who are truly living, she says, don't need to write about it every minute – they're too busy getting on with real things. But Sareth hasn't left the Tall Castle in a year, and whilst that baby is sucking the milk out of her I'm sat in Rennat forest with monsters!*

*There's an ogre at least ten foot tall with a mouthful of sharp teeth and slit-eyes. It glanced my way at first but now it just stands carving a chunk of deadfall, not with a knife but with the black nail on a finger as thick as my wrist.*

*The second monster is just a little boy really. A skinny one but nearly naked and marked with patterns in red and black, like ripples or flames. He scampers from bush to bush, trying to keep hidden, watching me with big black eyes. When he runs you can see his claws.*

*I'm distracting myself. I don't want to think about what Jorg said.*

*The monster-child is called Gog. He says Jorg named him, after those giants in the bible. I told him there should be a Magog too. He looked so sad at that and the forest felt too hot all of a sudden as if it were the highest of high summers.*

*'And what will you be when you grow up, Gog?' I asked him to take his mind from whatever had upset him.*

*'I want to be big and strong,' he said. 'To make Jorg happy. And I want to be happy, to stop Gorgoth being sad.' He looked at the ogre.*

*'And what do you want for you?' I asked him.*

*He looked at me with huge black eyes. 'I want to save them,' he said. 'Like they saved me.'*

*Jorg's men look as though they've never left the road. They're bandits, not a king's retinue. Sir Makin, who they say is a proper knight, is as filthy as the rest. There's dried muck all over his armour and he stinks like a sewer. He has a way with him though, even with the dirt. Sir Makin has manners at least.*

*The one they call Red Kent tries to be polite, my lady this and my lady that,*

bowing at every turn. It's quite comical. When I thanked him for the water he brought me he blushed from neck to hairline. I think I know how he got his name.

When he's not waiting on me Kent spends most of his time whittling, carving away with his back against a tree and a black knife in hand. It's a wolf he's working on. It looks as though it's climbing out of the wood, snarling at the world. He said he was a woodsman once. A long time ago.

And there's a boy, Sim. Very delicate features like that stage player who performed in court last week. He looks kind, but shy. He won't speak to me but I see him looking when he thinks I can't see. He's the cleanest of all of them. I can't think he would be much of a warrior. Surely he's too slight to swing that sword of his.

I know Sir Makin can fight. I remember that he put Sir Galen to the test when Jorg's father set them against each other, though I think my Galen would have beaten him. Perhaps that's why Jorg pushed over Sageous's tree. To save Sir Makin.

The other two, the two Jorg warned Red Kent to watch, are killers through and through. You can see it in their eyes. There's a giant called Rike who's nearly as tall as the ogre and as broad as a Slav wrestler. He just looks angry the whole time. And there's an old man, maybe fifty, skinny, gristly, with grey stubble on his chin and as wrinkled as Hanna was. They call him Row and he has kind eyes, but there's something about him that says his eyes are lying.

And I'm sitting here scratching the paper with my quill to record rogues and vagabonds because my hand doesn't want to follow where Jorg has gone, or to write what he might be doing, or to frame the words that are pounding through my head.

I tried to stab Jorg but it was like a dream. I both knew and did not know what my hand was doing. I didn't want to hear his pain or see him bleed. I don't recall picking up the knife to take with me. I told myself to stop. But I didn't stop.

And now. If I had Friar Glen here. I would want to hear his pain and see him bleed. I would not tell myself to stop. But I would stop. Because for the first time in a long while my head feels clear, my thoughts are all my own, and I am not a killer.

March 27th, Year 99 Interregnum

Rennat Forest. Before noon. A high wind in the trees.

*Sir Makin has been pacing. He doesn't say it but he's worried about Jorg. We saw a patrol ride by earlier, between the fields. They'll be looking for me. Sir Makin says the more of them looking for me, the fewer for Jorg to worry about in the castle.*

*The big one. The huge one, really. Rike. He's been saying they should go. That Jorg is captured or dead. Kent says Jorg helped them all escape the dungeons and if he's stuck there in those same dungeons himself, they should go free him. Even Sir Makin says that's madness.*

*The night was cold and noisy. They gave me their cloaks, but I'd rather be cold than under those stinking, crawling things. Everything moves in the forest at night, creaking, or croaking, or rustling in dead leaves. I was glad to see the dawn. When I woke up, the boy, Sim, was standing against the tree beside me, watching.*

*Breakfast was stale bread and bits of smoked meat. I didn't like to ask what animal it came from. I ate it. My stomach was grumbling and I'm sure they could hear.*

*Jorg has come back. His men are more scared now than when they thought he was lost. He's a wild thing, his hair torn and spiky with blood, he won't look at anything, his eyes keep sliding, he can hardly stand. He's got blood on his hands, past his elbows, his nails are torn, two of them missing.*

*Makin told him to sleep and Jorg just made this terrible sound. I think it might have been laughing. He says he won't sleep again. Ever. And I believe him.*

*Jorg keeps moving, fending off trees with his hands, colliding with whatever's in his way. He says he's been poisoned.*

*'I can't clean them,' he said. And he showed me his hands. It looks as though he's rubbed the skin off.*

*I asked him what was wrong and he said, 'I'm cracked through and filled with poison.'*

*He scares his men and he scares me too. Of all of us I am the one his eyes avoid the most. His eyes are red with crying but he doesn't cry now, just a kind of dry hacking sob.*

*My great aunt got a madness in her. Great Aunt Lucin. She must have been sixty, a small woman, plump, we all loved her. And one day she threw boiling water over her handmaid. She threw the water and then went wild, spouting nursery rhymes and biting herself. Father's surgeon sent her to Thar. He said*

*there was an alchemist there whose potions might cure her. And failing the potions, he had other methods. The surgeon said that this man, Luntar, could take out pieces of a person's mind until what remained was healthy.*

*My Great Aunt Lucin came back in a carriage two months later. She smiled and sung and could talk about the weather. She wasn't my Great Aunt Lucin any more but she seemed nice enough, and she didn't scald any more maids.*

*I don't want that for Jorg.*

*Jorg has told his men to kill me, and some of them seem ready to do it. Rike looks keen. But Sir Makin has said Jorg doesn't know his mind and they are to leave me alone.*

*Jorg is saying he needs to kill Sareth too. He says it's a kindness. He's insistent. Kent and Makin had to wrestle him to the floor to stop him running back to the castle to do it. Now he's lying in the dirt watching me. He keeps telling me what they do to men in his father's dungeons. It can't be true, any of it. It makes me sick to hear. I can taste vomit at the back of my throat.*

*Jorg soiled himself. Half the time he seems to see something other than the forest about us. He watches nothing, stares with great intent, then screams, or laughs without warning.*

*He's been talking about our baby. I still call it ours. It feels better than saying it was Friar Glen who violated me. He's been saying he killed it, even though it's me that carries that sin, me that will burn for it. He says he killed the baby with his own hands. And now he's crying. He still has tears then. He's bawling, snot and forest dirt stuck to his face.*

*'I held him, Katherine, a soft baby. So small. Innocent. My hands remember his shape.'*

*I can't hear him speak of this.*

*I have told Sir Makin about Luntar and how to reach Thar.*

*This is what Jorg said when they dragged him away and tied him to his horse:*

*'We're not memories, Katherine, we're dreams. All of us. Each part of us a dream, a nightmare of blood and vomit and boredom and fear. And when we wake up – we die.'*

*When they led his horse off, he shouted at me, but it seemed more lucid than what he said before.*

*‘Sageous has poisoned us both, Katherine. With dreams. He puts his hands into our heads and pulls the strings that make us dance, and we dance. None of it was true. None of it.’*

*I walked across the fields to the Roma Road and followed it toward the Tall Castle until soldiers found me and escorted me back. I’ll say back. I won’t say home.*

*As I walked Jorg’s words ran through my head, again and again, as if some of his madness had got inside me. I kept thinking of the dreams I’ve been having. It seems to me I’ve heard Sageous called the dream-witch before, but somehow that fact faded away, became unimportant. It wasn’t that I forgot it, but I stopped seeing it. Just as I stopped seeing that knife I took to stab Jorg with.*

*I’m seeing it now.*

*The heathen has been in my head. I know it. He’s been writing stories there, on the inside of my skull, on the backs of my eyes, like he’s written on his skin. I will need to think on this. To unravel it. Tonight I am going to dream myself a fortress and sleep within its walls. And woe betide anyone that comes looking for me there.*

*The soldiers brought me in through the Roma Gate into Low City, across the Bridge of Change, the river running red with sunrise. I knew something awful had happened. All of Crath City held quiet as if some terrible secret were spreading through the alleys like poison in veins. Shutters – opened for the dawn – closed as we passed.*

*Up in the Tall Castle the dull tone of a bell rang out over and over. The iron bell on the roof tower. I’ve been up to see it, but it’s never rung. I knew it had to be that one though – no other bell could make such a harsh, flat toll. And in answer a single deep voice from Our Lady.*

*I asked the soldiers but they would say nothing, wouldn’t even guess. I didn’t recognize the men, only their colours, not castle guards but army units drafted in for the search.*

*‘Has he killed his father?’ I asked them. ‘Has he killed him?’*

*‘We’ve been hunting for you all night, my lady. We’ve heard nothing from the castle.’ The sergeant bowed his head and pulled off his helm. He was older than I had imagined, tired, swaying in his saddle. ‘Best let the news wait to tell itself.’*

*A cold certainty gripped me. Jorg had killed Sareth. Throttled her for*

*taking his mother's place at Olidan's side. I knew they would take me to her body, cold and white, stretched out in the tomb vaults where the Ancraths lie. I bit my lips and said nothing, only let the horses walk away the distance that kept me from knowing.*

*We came through the Triple Gate, clattering, hooves on stone, grooms on hand to take the reins and help me dismount as if I were some old woman. The iron bell tolled all the while, a noise to make your head ache and jaws clench.*

*In the courtyard someone had lit a myrrh stick, a thick wand of it smoking in a torch sconce by the windlass. If sorrow had a scent it would be this. We burn them in Scorrion too, for the dead.*

*From the window arch high above the chapel balcony, between the pulses of the bell, I heard keening. A woman's voice. My sister had never made such cries before, but still I knew her, and the fear that had sunk its teeth into me back at the Roma gate now twisted cold in my gut. The sounds of hurt, as raw and open as any wound, could not be for Olidan.*

*Four years earlier*

I went to see my grandmother in her chambers. Uncle Robert had warned me that she wore her years less well than Grandfather.

‘She’s not the woman she was,’ he told me. ‘But she has her moments.’

I nodded and turned to go. He caught my shoulder. ‘Be gentle with my mother,’ he said.

Even now they thought me a monster. Once I’d sought to build a legend, to set fear among those who might stand against me. Now I dragged those stories behind me into my mother’s home.

The maid showed me in and steered me to a comfortable chair opposite the one Grandmother occupied.

Of all of them, my grandmother had the most of Mother in her. Something in the lines of her cheekbones and the shape of her skull. She sat hunched with a blanket over her knees despite the heat of the day. She looked smaller than I remembered, and not just because I was no longer a child. It seemed she had closed on herself after her daughter’s death, as if to present a smaller target to a world grown hostile.

‘I remember you as a little boy – the man before me I don’t know at all,’ she said. Her eyes moved across me, seeking something familiar.

‘When I see my reflection I feel the same thing myself, Grandmother.’ And the box at my hip, in a velvet pocket now, felt too heavy to carry. *I don’t know me at all.*

We sat in silence for a long minute.

‘I tried to save her.’ I would have said more but words wouldn’t come.

‘I know, Jorg.’

The distance between us fell away then, and we spoke of years past, of times when we were both happier, and I had my window onto the world that I’d forgotten, and it was good.



And by and by when I sat beside her feet, knees drawn to my chest, hand clasping wrist before them, that old woman sang the songs my mother had played long ago, as she had played them in the music room of the Tall Castle on the black keys and the white. Grandmother put words to music I remembered but couldn't hear, and we sat as the shadows lengthened and the sun fell from the sky.

Later when comfortable silence had stretched into something that convinced me she had fallen asleep, I stood up to go. I reached the door without creak or scrape, but as my hand touched the handle Grandmother spoke behind me.

'Tell me about William.'

I turned and found her watching me with sharper eyes than before, as if a chance wind had stirred the curtains of age and showed her as she once was, strong and attentive, if only for a moment.

'He died.' It was all I could find to say.

'William was an exceptional child.' She pursed wizened lips and watched me, waiting.

'They killed him.'

'I met you both, you're probably too young to recall.' She looked away to the hearth as if staring at the memory of flames. 'William. There was something fierce in that one. You have a touch of it too, Jorg. Same mix of hard and clever. I held him and I knew that if he let himself love me or anyone else, he wouldn't ever give it up. And if someone crossed him, that he would be ... unforgiving. Maybe you were both bound to be a bit like that. Maybe that's what happens when two people so strong, and yet so utterly different from each other, make children.'

'When they broke him ...' The lightning had shown him to me in three quick flashes as they carried him. One frozen moment had him staring at the thorns, into the heart of the briar. Looking at me. No fear in him. The second and he was scooped up by his legs. The third, dashed against that milestone, scarlet shards of skull among blond curls. 'My little emperor' Mother used to call him. The blond of that line in a court filled with Steward-dark Ancraths.

'Broke who, dear?'

'William,' I said, but the years had settled on her again and she saw me through too many days.

'You're not him,' she said. 'I knew a boy like you once, but you're not him.'

‘Yes, Grandmother.’ I went and kissed her brow then and walked away. She smelled of Mother, the same perfume, and something in her scent stung my eyes so I could hardly find the door in the gloom.

They gave me a chamber in the east tower, overlooking the sea. The moon described the waves in glimmers and I sat listening to the sigh of the waters long into the night.

I thought again of the music my mother played, and that I remembered in images, and never heard. I saw her hands move across the keys as always, the shadow of her arms, the sway of her shoulders. And for the first time in all the years since we climbed into that carriage, the faintest strain of those silent notes reached me. Fainter and more elusive than the sword-song, but more vital, more important.

Two days passed before the Earl Hansa summoned me to his throne-room, a chamber built against the hind wall of the castle where a great circle of Builder-glass offers the Middle Sea to gaze upon in all its ever-changing shades. I faced the old man, my back to the distant waves, the setting sun edging each with crimson, and with the faint crash of their breaking ready to underwrite any silence.

‘We stand in your debt, Jorg,’ my grandfather said.

Actually it was my uncle who stood, at the right hand of Grandfather’s throne, whilst the old man sat ensconced in his whalebone seat.

‘We’re family,’ I said.

‘And what is it your family can do for you?’ Earl Hansa may have been my mother’s father but he was shrewd enough to know young men don’t cross half a continent just to visit old relatives.

‘Perhaps we can do things for each other. In troubled times being able to call on military help can make the difference between life and death. It may be that this Ibn Fayed becomes more of a threat and the day comes when the men of the Highlands stand side to side with the House Morrow to oppose him. It may be that my own position is threatened and my grandfather’s troops or horse could be of aid.’

‘Are you threatened now?’ Grandfather asked.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m not here in desperation, begging. I’m looking for a strategic alliance. Something to span years.’

‘Our lands are very far apart,’ he said.

‘That may not always be so.’ I allowed myself a smile. I had plans for growth.

‘It seems strange that you come so far when your father’s armies stand mere days from your gates.’ The Earl ran his tongue over his teeth as if he tasted something rotten.

‘My father is an enemy I will face in the field of battle in due course,’ I said.

The Earl slapped his thigh. ‘Now that’s the kind of alliance I could get behind!’ He watched me for a moment, the laughter leaving him. ‘You are your father’s son, Jorg. I won’t lie. It’s hard to trust you. It’s hard for me to speak of sending my people to fight and die on foreign soil for Olidan’s boy.’

‘It would pain him to hear you call me that,’ I said.

Lord Robert leaned in and whispered in his father’s ear.

‘If you would bind your fate with mine, Jorg, then we need stronger bonds. Lady Agath, is dear to your grandmother and me. Her son rules in Wennith, and he has two daughters. Small girls now, but they’ll be ready for marrying soon enough. On the day you wed one of them, my soldiers will be ready to fight in your cause.’ The Earl settled back in his throne with a grin.

‘What say you, Jorg?’ Uncle Robert asked, also smiling.

I spread my hands. ‘I do?’

Robert nodded to a knight at the door who drew it open and spoke to a servant beyond. The jaws of the trap closed around me. Birds had flown in the two days since Qalasadi fled. Replies returned, carriages had set out.

‘Kalam Dean, Lord of Wennith, third of the name!’ the herald called out, sweating in his silks. ‘And the Lady Miana.’

A stout man, short with thin grey hair, marched in. Near as old as Grandfather, he wore a plain white robe and might have passed as a simple monk but for the heavy-linked chain of gold looped about his neck and down across his chest. A ruby bigger than a pigeon’s egg hung from the chain. Lady Miana trailed in his wake, a child of eight years, bundled into crinoline and crushed velvet, wide-eyed, red-faced in the heat, a ragdoll clutched tight in both hands.

The Lord of Wennith strode right up to me without preamble, craning his neck to look me up and down as if examining a suspect horse. I resisted the urge to show him my teeth. Plump and grey and old he might have been but he had a look about him that said he knew his business, he knew men well enough and the notion of putting his child in my marriage bed pleased him as

little as it did me. He leaned in close to share some confidence or threat not meant for any ears but mine. As he moved forward the ruby swung out on its chain, catching the dying rays of the sun. It seemed to hold them, burning at its heart and that light woke something in my blood. Heat rose through me as I fought to keep my hands from reaching for the gem.

‘Listen well, Ancrath,’ Kalam Dean of Wennith said, and the ruby swung back against his chest ending further conversation. He gave a cry of pain and jerked away, a charred patch smouldering on his robes beneath the stone.

While guards hastened to Wennith’s side and Grandfather called for servants, the child approached me. ‘King Jorg?’ she said.

‘Lady Miana?’ I went down on one knee to be level with her, turning my face so as not to scare her with my burns. ‘And how is your dolly called?’ I’d little enough experience with children but it seemed a safe enough opening. She looked down in surprise as if she hadn’t know the toy was there.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘That’s not mine. I’m near grown. It’s Lolly’s, my sister’s.’ The shape of her mouth told the lie: it tasted sour to her. Her first words to me and already I’d made a liar of her. If we ever wed it would be the least of my crimes. I would be the ruination of her life, this little girl with her rag doll. If she had any sense she would run. If I had any decency I would make her. But instead I would lie to her father, smile, be for the moment whatever man he needed me to be, and all for the promise of heavy horse, of five hundred riders on the Horse Coast’s finest steeds.

A friar from the Morrow chapel helped Lord Wennith from the throne-room with the aid of a guardsman. Miana trailed after them. She paused and turned. ‘Remember me,’ she said.

‘Oh I will.’ I nodded, still kneeling. A proud day like this would stay with me forever if I let it. I gave her my smile. ‘I won’t let your memory go, Miana. I’ve somewhere to keep it in, nice and safe.’

On the next day Kalam Dean and I finished our negotiations. He didn’t bring his ruby to the discussion but promised it as Miana’s dowry. And on that very same evening I found out how to squeeze an unwanted memory from my mind and set it into Luntar’s copper box. All I kept of Miana was her name, the fact I was to marry her, and that half a thousand cavalry would one day come in answer to my call.

The remaining time I spent at Castle Morrow, and my journey back to the Highlands, are tales best kept for another day. Before I left though, in fact on

the day after my engagement, I took myself back to the room beneath the wine-cellar, this time with permission.

My uncle called it the 'grouch chamber'. The machine appeared to have only three tasks. Firstly, to keep alive a number of glow-bulbs dotted around the oldest parts of the castle. Secondly, to suck seawater from beneath the cliffs and turn it into pure drinking water for the fountains around the courtyards. And finally, to allow the grouch, Fexler Brews, to enjoy a kind of half-life in which he generally poured scorn on the ignorance of the living, pitied our existence, and moaned about the things he left unfinished in his own.

'Go away.'

Fexler appeared the moment I entered the chamber and repeated his previous greeting.

'Make me,' I said again.

'Ah, the young man with the questions,' Fexler said. 'I was a young man with questions once upon a time, you know.'

'No you weren't. You're the echo of a man who was. You were never young – only new.'

'And what is your question?' he asked, scowling.

'Can you end your existence?' I asked.

'Not everyone seeks an end, boy.'

'You think I seek my end?'

'All young men are a little in love with death.'

'I would be more than in love with it if I'd spent a thousand years in a cellar.'

'It has been trying,' Fexler admitted.

'Are you even allowed to want to end yourself?' I asked.

'You're obsessed with death, child.'

'You didn't answer the question,' I said.

'I'm not allowed to answer the question.'

'Complicated!' I stepped back and sat on the bottom stairs. 'So. What can you do for me?'

'I can give you three questions.'

'Like a genie,' I said.

'Yes, but they give wishes. Two left.'

'That was an observation, not a question!' I cried.

I chewed my lip. 'Do you swear to give full and honest answers?'

‘No. Two left.’

Dammit. ‘Tell me about guns,’ I said.

‘No. One left.’

‘Point me at the single most useful and portable piece of Builder-magic in this chamber,’ I said.

Fexler shrugged and then pointed to what looked to be one of the valves on the blackened machine. I moved to examine it. Not a valve, something else. A ring set in a depression.

‘It’s hardly portable.’

‘Twist it,’ he said.

I cleaned the area with my sleeve. A silver ring about three inches across topped a stubby cylindrical projection. Shallow grooves around the edge offered some traction. I twisted it. It proved extremely stiff but with the bones in my hand creaking I managed to turn the ring.

Nothing happened.

I twisted again. Easier this time. Again. I spun it several times and the ring came loose in my hand.

‘Pretty,’ I said.

‘Look through it,’ Fexler suggested.

I held it to my eye. Nothing for a second, then an image over-wrote my vision, a blue circle swirled with white patterns, intricate, infinitely detailed. For some reason it put me in mind of Alaric’s snow globe. ‘It’s wonderful,’ I said. ‘What is it?’

‘Your whole world. Seen from a little over twenty thousand miles above the ground.’

‘That’s a ways to fall. What are all the white swirls?’

‘Weather formations.’

‘Weather?’ It seemed incredible that I might be seeing clouds from above rather than below, and over such reaches that their whole cycle and design lay revealed. ‘Weather from when? From your day?’

‘From today. From now.’

‘This isn’t just a painting?’

‘You’re seeing the world as it happens. Your world,’ Fexler said.

I shifted my grip on the ring and I plunged, or felt that I did, racing down and to the left, like an eagle diving. A small curl at the end of one vast cloud swirl now filled my vision and I could see land far below, a sparkling thread wove across the greens and browns. I stumbled but managed to keep my feet.

‘I can see a river!’ An old instinct bit in. Suspicion drew the ring and its visions from my eye. ‘Why?’

‘Why?’ he asked.

I spun the ring between finger and thumb. ‘Beware of ghosts bearing gifts, they say.’

‘You’ll find that’s Greeks, but the principle is sound.’ Fexler frowned. ‘You’re carrying something that interests me. And as it turns out you’re more than you seem. It’s not every day a battleground walks down my stairs.’

‘Battleground?’

‘You’re a nexus for two opposing forms of energy, young man – one dark, one light. I have technical terms for them, but dark and light serve well enough. Given a little more time they’ll tear you apart. Quite literally. It’s an exponential process, the end will be sudden and “violent”.’

‘And you know this because?’ My gaze returned to the ring.

‘A lesson in life, Jorg. Whatever you look into can look back into you. The ring has scanned your brain in quite minute detail.’

My jaw clenched at that. The idea of being measured, being classified, did not appeal. ‘But that’s something unexpected you discovered, not what you were looking for?’

‘You know what I was looking for.’ Fexler smiled. ‘Perhaps you’d be good enough to set the ring to it for me?’

I pulled out my little box of memories. Today it seemed to tremble in my hand. The view-ring clunked against it as if both were lodestones drawn by mutual attraction. For a moment Fexler’s image pulsed more brightly.

‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘Crude but clever. Remarkable even.’

Box and ring fell apart – done with each other. Fexler fixed me with an intense stare.

‘I can help you, boy. Fire and death have their hooks deep in you. Call it magic. It isn’t but this will go easier if we say it is. Your wounds anchor the enchantments, both of them trying to pull you into the domains from which they spring. Alone either one would draw you down in time, make something different of you, something no longer human. You understand me?’

I nodded. Ferrakind and the Dead King waited for me in separate hells.

Fexler’s gaze settled on the box, clenched tight in my hand. ‘All that saves you is that these forces are in opposition. Soon enough, though, that opposition will rip you open.’

He waited for me to speak, to beg or entreat his aid. I held my tongue and

watched him.

‘I can help,’ he said.

‘How?’

He flashed a nervous grin. ‘It’s done. I’ve bound both forces through that interesting little box of yours. It’s far stronger than you are. It may hold indefinitely. And while it holds the process should be halted; neither power should be able to get a better grip on you or able to pull you any further into their domain.’

‘And what is it you want for this ... gift?’ I asked.

Fexler fended the question off with an irritable wave. ‘Just remember this, Jorg of Ancrath. Do not open that box. Open it and my work is undone. Open it and you’re finished.’

The box glinted as I turned it in my hand. ‘Pandora had one of these.’

I looked up for Fexler to share the joke, but he had gone. Several silent minutes passed, alone in the cellar, weighing box and ring in my hands. I had tickled far more than three answers from the ghost, but had a thousand more questions than when I started.

‘Come back.’ I sounded foolish.

The ghost did not return.

I put the ring in my pocket. Interesting or not it seemed odd that the grouch had favoured me above the others that visited him. Uncle Robert never mentioned a gift of any kind, nor any really meaningful answers to questions. Fexler wanted something from me. Something personal. That last nervous grin of his said it. He might be dead a thousand years, might be a Builder, or just the story of a Builder in a machine of cogs and magic, but before all that he was a man, and I knew men. He wanted something – something he couldn’t take but that he thought I could give.

I wondered, despite his mocking, if death held an allure for the ghost too. We aren’t meant to live forever, nor dwell in solitude. A life without change is no life. The spirit beneath Mount Honas agreed with me. Maybe the only way Fexler Brews had to tell me so was to offer me his gift. And to hope that I would help him. He wanted something, that much was sure. Everyone wants something.

I would have to think on it. The machine made Fexler. Grandfather would not thank me for destroying his source of fresh water, and neither would the men who would have to pump the fountains thereafter. Gone or not though, Fexler Brews and I were not finished with each other.



I spoke with my uncle on the night of that visit to Fexler's cellar. We sat in the observatory tower with an earthenware jug of wine that looked old enough to have been excavated from a pharaoh's tomb, and two silver goblets chased with rearing horses. A cool wind sighed through the arches and a bright dust of stars covered the black sky.

'Your mother used to come here when we were children,' Robert said.

'She taught us the star names,' I said. 'Though William was young for it. He could only ever find the dog star and the Pole Star.' I saw Will pointing, arm stretched out as if to touch each star, finger questing.

'Sirius and Polaris.' Robert sipped his wine. 'I can't remember much more. Rowen had the mind for it. In some twins the gifts are not shared out evenly. She got the brains and the looks. I got ... a knack with horses.'

'I got a knack with killing.' The wine ran over my tongue, its flavour dark and layered.

'More than that, surely.' Robert pointed out a constellation through the window arch. 'What's that one?'

'Orion.' I stood and stepped to look out. 'Betelgeuse, Rigel, Bellatrix, Mintaka, Alnilam, Alnitak, Saiph.' I named the giant's parts. 'Did you feel her die? Are twins like that?'

'No.' He stared into his goblet.

'Perhaps.' He set the wine before him. 'Perhaps it was like that for her. When I got trapped against Crab Cliff by the spring tide Rowen knew where to bring the guard with ropes. We were just children, not even ten years old, but she knew somehow. Another talent that didn't split even between us.'

I watched him, half-resentful that he had so many years with her. She was my mother and yet everything about her escaped me, a little more each day, sand through fingers. I couldn't draw her face, tell you the colour of her eyes, or any concrete thing, just angles, glimpses, moments, the scent and softness of her. The security she gave – and the night when I learned it to be a lie.

'I went to the grouch chamber this morning,' I said.

The Builders' view-ring hung on a thong about my neck, under the tunic Robert's dresser had given me. I considered drawing it out to show him, but didn't. Habits learned on the road die hard. I had laid hands on it and it was mine, I would keep my advantage hidden. The metal weighed heavy over my heart. Perhaps guilt feels like that.

'All that dust and spiders just to have an old ghost tell you to go to hell.'

My uncle sipped his wine. 'I used to go down a few times a year. But the grouch never changes, and in the end I did.'

'Do you know what the machinery does?' I asked.

'Who knows what any of that devilry is for? It pumps water – I understand that much, but they say everything the Builders made did ten different things. My father has left it alone for sixty years, his father left it untouched, and his father before him. It's from a world best forgotten. Gelleth should have taught you that.'

My wine tasted sour. The light of that Builders' Sun reached even here into a summer's night on the Horse Coast. He was wrong in any case. The Builders weren't gone, we couldn't forget them. Their ghosts echoed in machinery buried in our vaults, their eyes watched us from above clouds, we fought our little wars in their shadow. Perhaps we even waged those wars at their instigation, something to keep us busy, to have us too focused on the now to think about the then.

'Gelleth taught me a lot of things. That we're children in a world we don't own or understand. That we stand alone and whether I fail or succeed depends on the strength of my will. On how far I will go. And that no one will come to help us in our hour of need.' And that some things can't be fixed even if you bring the sun to earth and crumble mountains.

I thought of Gelleth, of the ghosts Chella drew from me. Since the night of storm and thorns I'd been haunted by what others had done to me. Gelleth taught me I could also be haunted by what I'd done to others.

The dead child watched me, broken against the tower battlements, blood and hair, a reminder of William and the milestone, his eyes two bright points of starlight. Another ghost, another misfortune seeking a home.

'You never came. I thought you would come for me.' In my mind I had seen Uncle Robert ride to the Tall Castle a hundred times, with the cavalry of the House Morrow streaming behind him, to demand an accounting for his sister's death, to claim his nephew and take him home. 'If Morrow had ridden to avenge Mother's death there would have been no Gelleth.' No years on the road. No rivers of blood. No dead child watching.

Robert studied his goblet. 'You fled Ancrath before news of Rowen's death even reached us here. Olidan was slow to send word, and the word was slow to find its way.'

'But you didn't come.' Old anger ignited within me and I went quickly to the stair in case it boiled out. I had climbed the steps a king, a man pressing

fifteen years, and now a hurt and wrathful child shouted through me, through the years.

‘Jorg—’

‘No!’ The hand I raised to keep him in his seat shook with the fierceness of what I held back and the air seemed to shimmer with heat. I hadn’t known the memories would seize me like this.

I ran from the tower, scared that I might find the blood of a second uncle on my hands.

We calmed the hurt between us the next morning, but with pleasantries and empty words of the kind that are layered over rather than used to scour clean. I didn’t let him speak of it again. Instead I spoke of Ibn Fayed and of Qalasadi. I had been to considerable lengths to get an accounting for Mother’s death and for William’s, and yet here were two men who had come within moments of taking Mother’s whole family from me – Uncle, Grandmother, Grandfather. What’s more, the mathmagician had, with a cool head, seen through my secret and chosen to take them all before they even knew I was amongst them, to kill with poison all my mother’s kin and to see me die for it under horrible restitution. There seemed no malice in it, only calculation, but I couldn’t leave such an equation unbalanced. It wouldn’t be proper.

Robert tried to turn me from revenge, ‘Ibn Fayed will come to us in time and break his strength here. That will be the time for his accounting.’ But I had more immediate plans. Revenge can be the easy path to follow though I have often painted it as the hardest.

I left for the last time months later, suntanned, taller, provisioned and laden with gifts. My saddlebags bulged with them, tempting enough for any bandits I might meet. I kept what mattered most about my person. The thorn-patterned box, the Builders’ view-ring, and the weapon that killed Fexler Brews more than nine hundred years previously, a hard and heavy lump strapped beneath my arm. I’ve always seen ‘no’ as a challenge rather than an answer.

Above those treasure though I left with a message, a mantra if you like. *Do not open that box. Open it and my work is undone. Open it and you’re finished.*

Never open the box.

*You won't see Brother Grumlow try to knife you, only the sorrow in his eyes as you fall.*



## Wedding Day

The crash of a rock against the keep wall drowned me out. A shield fell off its hook and clattered to the floor, dust sifted down from above.

‘The gate will not hold,’ I said again.

‘Then we will fight them in the courtyard,’ Sir Hebbbron said.

I chose not to mention that he had surrendered to me in the same courtyard four years earlier, with just Gog and Gorgoth at my back rather than the Prince of Arrow’s fourteen thousand men.

If Coddin were present he would have spoken of surrender himself. Not out of fear but compassion. Perhaps he might say that when we fell back to the keep he would call out for terms, so that the common folk sheltering at the Haunt might be spared.

But Coddin wasn’t present.

The dead child watched me from a shadowed corner, older and more sad with each passing year. At the corner of my vision he seemed to speak, but if I looked his way he said nothing, blue lips pressed tight. What man can hope for victory when his doom watches from every shadow? He was nothing but mine, this ghost, no trick of Chella’s, no sending of the Dead King, just a sad and silent reminder of a crime even Luntar’s little box couldn’t keep entirely secret.

Another crash and I looked away from the corner, shaking off the moment.

The knights and captains watched me, the light from high windows gleaming on their armour. These men were built for war. I considered how many of them I would sacrifice to stop the Prince of Arrow. How many I would sacrifice just to wound Arrow, just to put a bigger hole in his army.

The answer turned out to be all of them.

‘When they come we will fight them in the courtyard. And through the doors of the keep, and up each stair, and to this very room if need be.’ My cheek throbbed where I’d sliced it, aching at each word. I ran my fingers across the line of black and clotted blood.

‘Sir Makin, Sir Kent, I want you leading the defence at the gate. I want

everyone in this room out there.’

They started for the door. Kent stopped.

‘Sir Kent?’ he said.

‘Don’t let it go to your head,’ I said. ‘And don’t expect a ceremony.’

Kent made a slow shake of his head. I could see his eyes shine. I hadn’t thought it would mean much to him.

‘Take the scorpions from the walls and set them in the yard. Put them front and centre. You’ll get one shot and then they’ll just be a barricade,’ I said.

‘And, Makin, get some armour on.’

The Haunt had five scorpions, giant crossbows on wheels that could send a spear four hundred yards. Line enough men in front of them and you might get something like the chunks of meat on skewers served at table in Castle Morrow.

‘Not you, Miana. Stay,’ I said as she made to follow the knights. ‘And Lord Jost!’ I added. ‘I am depending on your help. Everything is in place.’

Lord Jost set his conical helm on his head and flicked the chainmail veil out over the back of his neck. He looked from me to Miana. ‘Our alliance requires that the union be sealed, King Jorg.’

I threw my hands up. ‘Christ bleeding! You saw us married. It’s the middle of the day and we’re fighting a pitched battle.’

‘Even so.’ No room for negotiation on that pinched face. He turned to follow Sir Makin. ‘Your grandfather knows the blood of both your parents runs in you, sire. I cannot act until the alliance is complete.’

And that left me on my throne in an echoing empty room with Miana in her wedding whites and two guards at the door watching their feet.

‘Crap.’ I jumped up and took her hand. Leading her to the door. It felt like taking a child for a walk.

I brushed past the guards and hurried to the east tower staircase. Miana had to hitch her skirts and half run to keep up as I took the steps two and three at a time.

A hefty kick sent my chamber doors slamming open. ‘Out!’ I shouted and several maids ran past me, clutching cloths and brushes. I think they had been hiding rather than cleaning.

‘Lord Jost requires that I remove your virginity from you,’ I said to Miana. ‘Or the House Morrow can’t support me.’ I hadn’t meant to be quite so blunt but I felt angry, awkward even.

Miana bit her lip. She looked frightened but determined. She reached for

the dress ties at her side.

‘Stop,’ I said. I’ve never liked being pushed. Not in any direction. Miana looked well enough, and twelve isn’t so young. I was killing at twelve. But some women bloom early and some late. She may have had the mind of a she-pirate but she looked like a child.

‘You don’t want me?’ She faltered. Now she added hurt and angry to frightened and determined.

I’ve observed on the road that it’s old men who like young girls. Brother Row and Brother Liar would chase the young ones. Younger than Miana. Brother Sim and I had always admired experience. The fuller form. So, no, I didn’t want her. And being told to have something you don’t want, rather like being told to eat spiced squid when what you want is beef and potatoes, will kill your appetite. Any kind of appetite.

‘I don’t want you right now,’ I said. It sounded more politic than calling her spiced squid.

I put my hand to the back of my left thigh. It was throbbing like a bastard after the run up the stairs. I’d opened a wound I didn’t remember taking. I think perhaps I did it falling into the cave just before the avalanche. Six thousand men dead for a morning’s work, and I come away with a self-inflicted wound in the arse. My fingers came back bloody.

Four quick steps took me to the bed. I threw back the covers. Miana flinched like I’d hit her. I wiped my hand over the clean linen; squeezed my leg wound again and repeated the process.

‘There,’ I said. ‘Does that look like enough?’

Miana stared. ‘I never—’

‘It will have to do. It looks like enough to me. Damned if I’m bleeding more than that.’

I ripped the sheet from the bed and thrust it out through the window bars, noting two spent arrows on the floor that must have looped in from the ridge earlier in the day. I tied the sheet to one of the bars and let the wind flutter it out so all the world could see I’d made a woman of Miana.

‘Speak a word of this to anyone and Lord Jost will insist we do it on the high table in the feast hall with everyone watching,’ I said.

She nodded.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked as I made for the door.

‘Down.’

‘Fine,’ she said. She sat on the bed with a slight bounce. Her feet didn’t



touch the floor.

I set my hand to the doorhandle.

‘But they’ll sing songs about Quick Jorg for years to come. Fast with one sword, faster with the other,’ she said.

I took my hand off the doorhandle, turned and walked back to the bed. Defeated.

‘What would you like to talk about?’ I asked, sitting beside her.

‘I’ve met Orrin of Arrow and his brother Egan too,’ she said.

‘So have I.’ Remembering how that swordfight ended still gave me a headache. ‘And where did you meet them?’

‘They came to court in my father’s castle in Wennith, on one of their grand tours of the empire. Orrin had his new wife with him.’ She watched me for a reaction. Someone had been talking to her.

‘Katherine.’ I reacted anyway. It wasn’t as if being married to a child would end my fascination with women, this one in particular. ‘And what did you think of the Prince?’ I wanted to ask about Katherine not Orrin and his brother, but I bit down on the urge, not to save Miana’s feelings but in disgust at the weakness even mention of Katherine put in me.

‘Orrin of Arrow struck me as the finest man I’d ever met,’ Miana said. Clearly she had no compunction to save my feelings either! ‘His brother Egan, too full of himself, I felt. Father said as much. The wrong mix of weak and dangerous. Orrin though, I thought he would make a fine emperor and unite the Hundred in peace. Didn’t you ever consider just swearing to him when the time came?’

I met her gaze, shrewd dark eyes that had no place in a child’s face. The truth was that I’d thought many times what I would do if Orrin of Arrow came back to the Haunt, regardless of whether he brought an army with him or not. I didn’t doubt not one person would find me better suited to the emperor’s throne than Orrin, and yet without my say so thousands had been prepared to bleed to stop him. To get somewhere in life you have to walk over bodies, and I’d paved my way with corpses and more corpses. Gelleth burned for my ambition. It still does.

‘I considered it.’

Miana started, surprised when I spoke. She had thought I wasn’t going to answer.

‘There might have been a time I could have served as steward to Orrin’s emperor, might have let my goatherds and his farmers go about their lives in

peace. But things change, events carry us with them, even when you think you're the one leading, calling out commands. Brothers die. Choices are taken away from us.'

'Katherine is very beautiful,' Miana said, lowering her gaze for once.

Screams from outside, the hiss of arrows, a distant roar. 'Have we been at this long enough?' I hadn't asked about Katherine and I had a battle to fight. I made to stand from the bed but Miana put her hand to my thigh, half-nervous, half-bold.

She reached for her dress again, and I thought that there might have been more determination than fear in her, but she wasn't unlacing. She pulled out a black velvet bag, dangling from its drawstring. Big enough to hold an eyeball.

'My dowry,' she said.

'I hoped for something bigger.' I smiled and took it.

'Isn't that my line?'

I laughed out loud at that. 'Somebody poured an evil old woman into a little girl's body and sent it to me with the world's smallest dowry.'

I tipped the bag's contents into my hand. A single ruby, the size of an eye, cut by an expert, and with a red star burning at its heart. 'Nice,' I said. It felt hot in my hand. It made my face burn where the fire had scarred me.

'It's a work of magic,' Miana said. 'A fire-mage has stored the heat of a thousand hearths in there. It can light torches, boil water, heat a bath, make light. It can even make a spot of heat sufficient to join two pieces of iron. I can show you—'

She reached for the gem but I closed my hand around it. 'Now I know why fire-sworn like rubies,' I said.

'Be gentle,' Miana said. 'It would be ... unwise to break it.'

In the moment that my fingers met around the gem a pulse of heat ran through me, like a shock, burning up my arm. For an instant I saw nothing but the inferno and it seemed I felt Gog's sharp hands on my sides, as if he sat behind me on Brath once more as he had for so many days in that spring long ago. I heard his high voice, almost, like Mother's music, trying to reach me from too far away. Something lit at my core, and the flow of fire reversed, raging unseen down my arm into the gem. A sharp splintering noise sounded from the ruby and I released it with a cry. Miana caught it: quick hands this one. I expected her to scream and drop the gem, but it lay cool in her palm. She placed it on the bed.

I stood. 'It's a worthy dowry, Miana. You will be a good queen for the Highlands.'

'And for you?' she said.

I walked to the window. The ridge where the Prince's archers had arrayed themselves was still in confusion. The trolls would have retreated to their cave defences, but no man wants to be lining up a shot whilst worrying that a black hand is going to twist his head off any second.

'And for you?' she repeated.

'That's hard to say.' I took the copper box from my hip pouch. I had sat before this window the previous night and watched the box. A goblet, the box, a knife. Drink to forget, open to remember, or slice to end. 'It's hard to answer you if I don't know who I am.'

I held the box before my eyes. 'Secrets. I filled you with secrets, and there's one last secret left, blacker than the rest.' Some truths should perhaps be left unsaid. Some doors unopened. An angel once told me to let go of the ills I held too close, to let go of the flaws that shaped me. What remained of me might have been forgiven, might have followed her into heaven. I told her no.

The rockslide, avalanche, the trolls, none of them mattered. Arrow's army would still crush us. To fight so hard and not even come close to victory. That had a bitter taste.

I'd faced death before with odds as slim but never as a broken man, some piece of me locked away in a little box. Luntar in his burning desert had done what the angel couldn't. He'd taken me from me, and left a compromise to walk about in Jorg Ancrath's shoes.

*Do not open that box.*

The dead boy watched me from the corner of the room as if he had always stood there, waiting silent day after silent day for this moment, to meet my eyes. He stood pale but without wounds, unmarked save for hand-prints fish-belly white on his skin, like the scars Chella's dead things left on Gog's little brother long ago.

*Open it and my work is undone.*

I turned the box letting the thorn pattern catch the light. Damn Luntar and damn the dead child too. When I faced Arrow's legions for the last time I would do it whole.

*Open it and you're finished.*

My hands didn't shake on the metal. For that I was grateful. I opened it

wide, and with a quick motion twisted the lid off, flicking it out past the crimson flutter of the sheet.

*Never open the box.*

Friar Glen's chamber once again, lit by the heathen's glow. The need to kill him fills my hands immediately.

'There was blood and muck,' Sageous says. He smiles. 'Saraem Wic's poisons will do that. But there was no child. I doubt there ever will be now. That old witch's poisons are not gentle. They scrape a womb bare.'

I find the blade and I'm moving toward him. I try to run but it's like wading through deep snow.

'Silly boy. You think I'm really here?' He makes no move to escape.

I try to reach him, but I'm floundering.

'I'm not even in this city,' he says.

Peace enfolds me. A honeyed dream of sunlight, fields of corn, children playing.

I wade through it, though each step feels like betrayal, like the murder of friends.

'You think I'm like you, Jorg.' He shakes his head and shadows run. 'Thirst for revenge has dragged you across kingdoms, and you think me driven by your crude imperatives. I'm not here to punish you. I don't hate you. I love all men equally. But you have to be broken. You should have died with your mother.' Sageous' fingers stray to the lettering on his throat. 'It was written.'

And as I reach him he is gone.

I stumble into the corridor. Empty. I close the door, using my metal strip to drop the latch. Friar Glen will have to pray for help. I don't have time for him now and even through the layers of Sageous's lies and dreams I hold the suspicion that he is guilty of *something*.

Katherine didn't bring me to the Tall Castle, and certainly neither did Friar Glen. I didn't turn right where the road forked from the Ken Marshes just to visit my dog's grave. I came to see family. And now I need to be quick about it. Who knows what dreams Sageous might send this way?

Sim taught me about moving quietly. It's not so much about noise. The art is to be always on the move, heading somewhere with purpose. Any hesitation invites a challenge. On the flip side, if there can be no possible reason for your presence, then utter stillness can hide you, even in plain sight.

The eye may see you but if you are stone, the mind may discount you.

‘You there. Hold fast.’

Eventually all tricks will fail and someone will challenge you. Even at this point they will find it hard to believe you’re an intruder. The minds of guards are especially dull, blunted by a career of tedium.

‘Your pardon?’ I cup a hand to my ear.

If you are challenged, pretend not to hear. Move closer, lean in. Be quick as you set your hand over their mouth, palm flat to lips so there’s no edge to bite. Press them back against a wall if there is one. Stab in the heart. Don’t miss. Hold their eyes with yours. It gives them something to think about besides making a noise, and nobody wants to die alone in any case. Let the wall help them to the ground. Leave them in shadow.

I leave the dead man behind me. A second dies at the end of the next hall.

‘You!’ This one rounds a corner with sword in hand. Almost knocking me down.

Sharp hands. That’s what Grumlow said to me. Sharp hands. It’s his tutorial in knife-work. A sword’s all about the swinging, the thrust, the momentum, timing your move against that of your foe – a man with a knife is a man with sharp hands, nothing more. A knife-fight is a scary thing. That’s why men jab and feint, posture, run. Grumlow says the only thing to do is go in fast, go in first, kill him quick.

I go in fast. His sword falls on the long rug and doesn’t clatter.

Around the corner is the door I’m seeking. Locked. I take the key from the guard’s belt. The door opens on oiled hinges. Silent. The hinges never squeak on a nursery door. Babies fight sleep hard enough as it is.

The wet-nurse is snoring in a bed by the window. A lantern glows on the sill, its wick trimmed low. The shadows of the cot bars reach for me.

I should kill the nurse, but it looks like Old Mary who chased after Will and me in the long ago. I should kill her, but I let her sleep. She would be ill-advised to wake.

I drag the guard into the room and close the door. For a long moment I pause, picturing my escape routes. There is a second exit from the room, leading to the nurses’ quarters. As long as I have two ways to run I feel safe enough. There are passages that lead from the castle. Secret tunnels that lead to hidden doors in the High City. I couldn’t open those doors from the outside, but I can leave by them.

I take a deep slow breath. White musk – his mother’s scent. Another. I step

to the cot and look upon my brother. Degran they call him. He's so small. I hadn't thought he would be so tiny. I reach in and lift him, sleeping. He barely fills my hands. He gives a gentle sigh.

The assassin's work is dirty work.

I vowed to take the empire throne, to take the hardest path, to win the Hundred War whatever the cost. And here in two hands I hold a key to the Gilden Gate. The son of the woman who replaced my mother. The son my father set me aside for. The son on whom he has settled my inheritance.

'I came to kill you, Degran.' I whisper it.

He is soft and warm, his head big, his hands tiny, his hair so very fine. My brother.

The lamp glow catches the white scars along my arms as I hold him up. I feel the briar's hooks in me.

I should twist his neck and be gone. In the game of empire this is not a rare move, not even unusual. Fratricide. So common there is a word for it. Oft times carried out in person.

So why do my hands shake so?

Do it and be done.

*You are weak, Jorg.* Even my father tells me to do it. *Weak.*

I feel the hooks so deep, finding the bone as I struggled to save William. The blood runs down me. I can feel it. Streaming down my cheeks, blinding me. The thorns hold me.

DO IT.

No.

I will burn the world if it defies me, carry ruin to every corner, but I will not kill my brother. Not again. I came here to make that choice. To show that I could have chosen to. To weigh the decision in my hands.

And I set Degran back down among his covers. The nurse has put a woolly sheep there with stubby legs and button eyes. Sleep brother, sleep well.

He rolls limp from my hands, white where my fingers have touched him. I don't understand. Ice forms across me, a sick hollowness fills me until I am nothing but a brittle shell. I prod him.

'Wake up.'

I shake the covers under him. Shake the cot. 'WAKE UP.'

He flops, limp, with the white prints of my hands on his soft flesh like accusations.

'Wake up!' I scream it but not even the nurse wakes.

Sageous is there, in the corner of the room, all aglow. ‘Necromancy Jorg. How many edges does that sword have?’

‘I didn’t kill him. He was mine to kill and I didn’t.’

‘Yes you did.’ Sageous’s voice is calm where mine is shrill.

‘I didn’t want this!’ I shout.

‘The necromancy listens to your heart, Jorg. It listens to what you can’t say. Does what the secret core of you wants and needs. It isn’t fooled by posturing. You have the death of small things in your fingers. A small thing died.’

‘Take it back.’ I’m begging. ‘Bring him back.’

‘Me?’ Sageous asks. ‘I’m not even here, Jorg. I can’t do much more than keep that fat slattern asleep. Besides, I wanted you to do it. Why do you think I brought you here in the first place?’

‘Brought me?’ I can’t look at him, or Degran. Or even the shadows, in case Mother and William are watching me from the corner.

‘With dreams of Katherine, to bring you to the castle, and dreams of William to lure you inside. Really, Jorg, I thought a clever child like you would have understood how I work by now. It’s not the killing dreams that are my best weapons – the most subtle tools have the most profound effect. A nudge here, a nudge there.’

‘No.’ As if shaking my head will make it a lie.

‘I bleed for you, Jorg,’ he says, all compassion and mild eyes. ‘I love you, but you have to be broken, it’s the only way. You should have died, and now only breaking you will restore equilibrium, only that will allow matters to take their course as they should.’

‘Matters?’

‘The Prince of Arrow will unite us. The empire will prosper. Thousands upon thousands that would have died will live. Science will return to us in the peace. And I will guide the emperor’s hand so that all might be well. Isn’t that worth more than you, Jorg? Isn’t that worth the life of a single baby?’

I scream and hurl myself at him, as if anger might wash away grief, but what I’ve done has put a crack right through me and into that crack Sageous pours madness, a torrent of it. I stagger blind and howling.

I see nothing more. Nothing until this moment finds me staring into an empty and lidless box.

So much madness and regret poured into me that it left no room for memory, nothing for the box. What instincts, luck, or guidance led me from

the castle without discovery, or how many more corpses I left in my wake, I can't say.

'Jorg?'

I turned and looked at Miana. My cheeks wet with tears. Sageous's magics crawled under my skin, but it wasn't his spells that emptied me. *I killed my brother.*

His ghost lay on the bed, stretched behind Miana. Not the soft babe, but the little boy of four he would have been. For the first time ever he smiled at me, as if we were friends, as if he were pleased to see me. He faded as I watched and I knew he wouldn't return, wouldn't grow, wouldn't heal.

Someone hammered on the door. 'Sire, the gate has given!'

I backed against the wall and slid to the floor. 'I killed him.'

'Jorg?' Miana looked concerned. 'The enemy are within our gates.'

'I killed my brother, Miana,' I said. 'Let them come.'



From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrón

*March 28th, Year 99 Interregnum*

Tall Castle. Chapel.

*Degran is dead. My sister's boy is dead. I can't write of it.*

*March 29th, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Jorg did this. He left a trail of corpses to and from Degran's door.*

*I will see him die for it.*

*There is such anger in me. I cannot unlock my teeth. If Friar Glen were not dead. If Sageous were not absent. Neither of them would live to see the morning.*

*March 31st, Year 99 Interregnum*

*We put him in the ground today. In the tomb where Olidan's family lie. A small white marble casket for him. Little Degran. It looks too small for any child to fit in. It makes me cry to think of him in there, alone. Maery Coddin sang the Last Song for him, my nephew. She has a high, pure voice that echoed in the tomb and it made me cry. My sister's ladies placed white flowers on the tomb, Celadine lilies, one each, weeping.*

*Father Eldar had to come up from Our Lady in Crath City to say the words, for we have no holy men in the castle. Jorg has stolen or killed them all. And when Father Eldar was done, when he'd read the passages, spoken of the Valley of Death and Fearing No Evil, we all walked away. Sareth didn't walk. Sir Reilly had to carry her, screaming. I understood. If it were my baby, I couldn't leave them. Dear God, I can just poison them from my belly, let them fall in blood and slime, but if I had held my child, seen his eyes, touched his lips ... it would take more than Sir Reilly to drag me from him.*

*April 2nd, Year 99 Interregnum*

*I've gone back through this journal and followed the track of my dreams through its pages. At least the ones I wrote about, but I seem to have written about a lot of them, as if they were troubling me. I've no memory of them. Maybe they left me while I scratched them down.*

*I don't want to turn the page back either. It feels as if another's hand is on mine, holding it down. But I won't be kept back.*

*I can see now – how the heathen played me, steered me like a horse with light flicks of a whip, just a turn here and there to set the path across a whole map. I don't believe this magic is beyond me. I can't accept that a thing like Sageous should be allowed such power and that I should not.*

*I can't rule a kingdom like Jorg or Orrin. No soldiers will follow my orders and fight and die on foreign soils at my say so. These things are forbidden me. Because of my sex. Because I can't grow a beard. Because my arm is not so strong. But generals do not need a strong arm. Kings don't need a beard.*

*I may never rule or command, but I can build a kingdom in my mind. And armies. And if I study what the heathen did to me. If I take it apart piece by piece. I can make my own weapons.*

*April 8th, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Orrin of Arrow called upon my brother-in-law today. I said that I would marry him. Though first he had to promise to take me far from this castle, from this place that stinks of the murderer Jorg Ancrath, and never to bring me back.*

*Orrin says he will be emperor and I believe him. Jorg of Ancrath will try to stop him, and on that day I'll see him pay for his crime. Until that time I will work on unpicking the heathen's methods and learning them for myself. It's fear that keeps such power from the common man, nothing more, I don't believe that creature Sageous capable of something I'm not, I won't believe it. Fear keeps us weak, fear of what we don't know, and fear of what we do know. We know what the church will do to witches. The Pope in Roma and all her priests can go hang though. I've seen what happens to holy men in such times. Here's a power a woman can gather into her hands as well as any man, and the time will come when Jorg will find out how it feels to shatter with his dreams.*

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*June 1st, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Arrow. Castle Yotrin.*

*We are married. I am happy.*

*July 23rd, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Arrow. New Forest.*

*We've ridden out from Castle Yotrin to the New Forest. They call it that because some great great grandsire of Orrin's had it planted just after pushing the Brettans back into the sea. It's my first real chance to see Arrow though mostly we're going to be seeing trees. Egan practically demanded Orrin go hunting with him and Orrin wanted me to come. I don't think Egan did. Egan said Orrin had promised a private hunt, no courtiers, no fuss. Orrin said the richer he got the fewer luxuries like that he could afford but promised to keep the hunting party small.*

*Arrow is a lovely country. It might lack Scorrion's mountains and grandeur but the woodland is gorgeous, oak and elm, beech and birch, where Scorrion has pines, pines, and more pine. And the woods are so light and airy with room to ride between the trees, not the dense dark valley-forests of home.*

*We've made camp in a clearing, the servants are setting up pavilions and cooking fires. Orrin invited Lord Jackart and Sir Talbar along, and Lady Jarkart too, and her daughter Jesseth. I think Lady Jarkart is supposed to keep me happy while the men kill things in the woods. She's kind but rather dull and she seems to think she needs to shout in order for me to understand her accent. I have no problem hearing her, I only wish she would just pause for breath and let one word finish before starting the next. Little Jesseth is a darling girl, seven years, always sprinting into the undergrowth and having to be retrieved by Gennin, the Jarkarts' man.*

*I'd like girls, two of them, blonde like Orrin.*

*Orrin came back with Egan riding double behind him, Jackart and Talbar flanking. I stood to ask after the deer but thought better of it, all of them grim-faced save Egan who looked ready for murder. Little Jesseth didn't know any better though and ran in shouting to her father, did he bring her a doe or a buck? Lord Jackart practically fell out his saddle and scooped her up before Egan jumped down. The way Egan stared after the man I thought*

*Jackart might burst into flame. And then I saw the blood, dark and sticky on Egan's hands, like black gloves, and drying splatters up his forearms.*

*'I'll cut some wood.'* That's all Egan said and he stalked off shouting for an axe.

*Lord Jackart carried his daughter to their pavilion, Lady Jackart hurrying on behind. Dull she might be but sharp enough to know when to lie low.*

*'Egan ran Xanthos into a stand of hook-briar,' Orrin told me. He spread his hands. 'I didn't see it either.'*

*'But you told him to go slow – said to watch for it.'* Sir Talbar rubbed at his whiskers and shook his head.

*'It's not in Egan to give up the chase, Talbar. That stag must have been an eighteen pointer.'* Orrin has a way of showing a man's weakness as strength. Perhaps it's the goodness in him. In any case it makes men follow him, love him. He may work the same magic on me too – I don't know.

*'Poor Xanthos.'* The stallion had been a marvellous beast, named for Achilles' horse, black like rock-oil with muscle rippling under a slick hide. I had been wanting to ride him myself but Egan is so hard to talk to, he manages to make me feel as though I've angered him with each word. *'We don't have so many horses in Scorrion but I've never heard of one killed by a briar.'* Then I understood, or thought I did. *'Did he break his leg? Poor Xanthos.'*

*Orrin shook his head, Ser Talbar spat.*

*'Hook briar is foul stuff,' Orrin said. 'It was a miracle he didn't break a leg, but he got torn up along his flanks.'*

*'The horsemaster ... the chirurgeon could have sewn him up?'* I couldn't see that such wounds would be fatal.

*Orrin shook his head again. 'I've seen it before, and the surgeon Mastroles speaks of it in his masterwork, even the footnotes of Hentis's Franco Botany say so. The thorns of the hook briar are barbed, what they leave in the wound sours, the blood is poisoned, the animal dies. Even men can die. Sir Talbar's uncle caught two thorns in the palm of his hand. The wound was cut and cleaned and packed with salve and still it went black with rot. He lost the hand, then the arm, then the rest of his days.'*

*I understood the blood. 'At least Egan offered a quick ending.'*

*Orrin bowed his head. 'Xanthos didn't linger.'*

*Sir Talbar glanced at Orrin then looked away and said no more.*

*I walked with little Jesseth later on, letting her babble as we followed the edge of the glade. Axe blows rang out from somewhere among the trees Egan had split a mountain of logs and the cooks already had ten times the firewood they needed. Now he was felling trees. He came out from a stand of elm an hour later close by where Jesseth and I were playing board-checks. The blood had gone from his arms and sweat ran down a body as muscled and lithe as Xanthos's. He barely nodded our way and strode past, axe on his shoulder.*

*'I don't like him,' Jesseth whispered.*

*'Why not?' I asked, bending in with a conspiratorial smile.*

*'He killed his horse.' Jesseth nodded as if to prove it no lie.*

*'But that was a kindness.'*

*'Mother says he cut its head off with his sword because the deer got away.'*

*July 25th, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Yotrin Castle. Library.*

*I've found certain scrolls in Orrin's library that speak of dreams in terms of tides and currents. There's a woman in the village of Hannam who tells fortunes for her living, but she has more to say than that, to the right person. In a small room at the top of her house she has spoken to me of sailing on the seas of dream.*

*August 18th, Year 99 Interregnum*

*Yotrin Castle. Royal bedchamber.*

*Orrin has left to command his armies in the west. I will miss him. I will make good use of the rest though. It seems we've spent a month in the bedchamber. If it takes more than that to make a baby then I'll be worn out by winter and an old lady by spring.*

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*July 18th, Year 100 Interregnum*

*Castle Yotrin. Library.*

*Orrin is a good man, probably a great man. All the oracles say he will be emperor and wear the all-crown. But even great men need to be disobeyed now and again.*

*When Orrin is here he spends at least half of his days in this library. The knights and captains who hunt him down walk into the reading hall furtively, out of place, eyeing the walls with suspicion as if the knowledge might just leak out of all those books and infect them. They find us, Orrin in one corner, me in another, and he'll look at them over the top of one of those great and worthy leather-bound tomes of his. 'General So-and-so,' he'll say. He lets the kingdoms he's taken keep a general each. He says it's important to let the people have their pride and their heroes. 'General So-and-so,' he'll say. And General So-and-so will shuffle from foot to foot, awkward among so many written words, and not expecting the future emperor to look so scholarly, as if he should be wearing reading lenses.*

*Orrin reads the great books. The classics from before the Builders' time, stretching back to the Greeks and Homer. It's not that he chooses the biggest and most impressive books for show, but that's what he always ends up with. He likes to read philosophy, military history, the lives of great men, and natural history. He's always showing me plates of strange animals. At least when he's here he is. Creatures that you'd think the author just made up on a hot afternoon. But he says the pictures were captured not painted, as if an image were frozen in a mirror, and these things are real. Some of them he's seen. He shows me a plate of a whale and puts his fingernail beside its mouth to give the size of a horse next to it. He says he saw the back of one from a ship off the coast of Afrique. Says it rolled through the water, an endless grey sheen of whaleback, broad enough for a carriage and longer than our dining hall.*

*I read the small forgotten books. The ones found behind the rows on the shelves. In locked chests. In pieces to be assembled. They look old. Some are – a hundred years, three hundred, maybe five, but Orrin's are more ancient. Mine though, they look older, as if what is written in them takes its toll, even on parchment and leather. Mine were set down after the Burning, after the*

*Builders ignited their many suns.*

*The ancient books tell a clear story. Euclid gives us shape and form. Mathematics and science progress in an ordered fashion. Reason prevails. The newer stories are confusion. Conflicting ideas and ideologies. New mythologies, new magics offered with serious intent but in a hundred variants, each wrapped in its own superstition and nonsense, but with a core of truth. The world changed. Somewhere along the line of years it changed and what was not possible became possible. Unreason shaded into truth. To assemble it all into some pure architecture, some new science that delivers control in this present chaos, would be a work of lifetimes. But I am making a start. I find it more to my liking than sewing.*

*Orrin says I should leave it alone. That such knowledge corrupts and if he must make use of it then it will be through others, as Olidan used Sageous, as Renar used Corion. I tell him he mistakes the puppet and the puppeteer. He smiles and says maybe, but if the time comes he will be pulling the strings, not pulled by them. Orrin tells me he is sure I could draw from the same well as Sageous, but such waters would make me bitter and he likes me sweet.*

*I love Orrin, I know I do. But sometimes it's easier to love someone who has flaws you can forgive in return for their forgiving yours.*

*In the red ruin of battle Brother Kent oft looks to have stepped from hell. Though in another life he would have tilled his fields and died abed, mourned by grandchildren, in combat Red Kent possesses a clarity that terrifies and lays waste. In all else he is a man confused by his own contradictions – a killer’s instincts married to a farmer’s soul. Not tall, not broad, but packed solid and quick, wide cheekbones, dark eyes flat with murder, bitten lips, scarred hands, thick-fingered, loyalty and the need to be loyal written through him.*





## Wedding Day

‘Jorg! The Prince’s men are through the gates!’

Miana didn’t have to shout it at me. I could hear them through the windows, the deep resonances of the scorpions as they fired their spears, the screams, the crash of swords, the strum of bowstrings from the men on my walls, firing down into their own castle now. And the drums! The furious pounding of Uncle Renar’s battle-drums. A beat so loud and fierce that it picks up even the meekest of men and makes them part of the beast. They drum courage into you.

Uncle should have played them that day I came a-calling.

None of it mattered. Sageous’s poison dreams bubbled through me, but all their work only played variations around a nightmare of my own making. I killed my brother. After years defined only by the quest for revenge – years consumed by the need to reach William’s murderer – I took the life of my brother, a baby who could barely fill my hands.

‘Jorg!’

I ignored her. I held my hands before my face, remembered the feel of him, remembered the realization that he was dead. Degran. My brother.

Tutor Lundist showed me a drawing once. An old woman’s face. Look again, he said, it’s a young girl. And it was. Just a trick of the mind. Nothing had changed, not one line of the drawing, and yet everything was different. The box gave me Degran back and he had spoken to me across the years. Look again, he had said to me. Look at your life – now look again. And suddenly nothing mattered.

She slapped me, the little bitch slapped me, and for a second that mattered. She’d put her whole body into it. But the anger died quicker than it came.

Then a siege rock hit the window to our right. Fragments of stone flew across the room, smashing on the far wall. Dust rose around us.

‘I’m not going to die here,’ Miana said.

She had her hand in my hair. She turned my head to the window and its torn bars. Part of the wall below the window had fallen away and we could

see the courtyard, where the peasants had gathered to cheer us that morning. A wedge of Arrow's men, marked by their scarlet cloaks, had driven in through the ruins of the portcullis that Gorgoth had once held open for me. My soldiers, half of them goatherds with the swords I'd given them, hemmed the enemy in. I saw the blue of Lord Jost's small contingent and the gleam of their plate armour. The odds were against the intruders, but the weight of numbers behind drove them forward as they died. The Prince of Arrow poured his men into the killing field, my archers and troops reducing them but not stopping them. And under it all, pulsing through it, the throb of the battle drums.

'Do something!' Miana shouted.

'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'Everyone dies.' My past, my ghosts, danced around me, the dead, the betrayed. I considered diving through the shattered wall into the foe over the heads of my men. Could I make such a leap? With a run maybe. A short run, and a long drop into eternity.

She slapped me again. 'Give me the ruby.'

I fished out the bag and put it in her hand. 'You deserved a better husband.'

Miana gave me a look of contempt. 'I deserved a stronger one. There's no victory without sacrifice. My mother taught me that. You have to raise the stakes and raise them again.'

'She was a warrior?' I shook my head hard. Dreams showered from me. The dead held me with cold hands, tearing my insides.

'A card player,' Miana said.

Miana went to the fireplace and picked up one of the two fire screens, an exotic tapestry in an ebony frame. She beat it into splinters against the wall and repeated the process with the second one. Outside the wedge of scarlet developed into a semi-circle around the broken gates. Beyond the walls a blood-red sea would be surging forward.

Miana picked the two heavy stone bases from the wreckage of the fire screens and placed the ruby between them. She tried to tear strips from the tapestries, and finding them too resistant she tore lengths from the hem of her wedding dress.

Despite the emptiness pulsing inside me, a tickle of curiosity scratched at the back of my mind.

A stray arrow struck up through the window on the left and buried itself in the ceiling.

Miana bound both the stone bases together, good and tight, with the ruby between them.

‘Is Lord Jost still fighting?’ she asked.

I crawled to the broken wall, blinking to clear my sight. ‘I can see knights from the House Morrow. I think one of them is Jost.’

Miana bit her lip. ‘Sometimes you can only win if you’re prepared to sacrifice everything,’ she said.

I started to wonder if I didn’t get my darkest streak from my mother’s side of the family.

Her eyes grew bright. Tears for the dead.

‘Miana, what—’

She ran at the gap, feet falling to the drumbeat, and hurled the stone bases out. I wouldn’t have thought she could throw so hard or so far. The package sailed over the heads of the men, fighting, dying, pressing in the crush to be at each other. It flew over the Highlanders, over Jost, over Arrow’s red-cloaked foot-soldiers, bounced once in a clear spot to the left of the gates, and smacked against the outer wall.

I remember only light and heat. The boom was heard as far away as Gutting, but I heard nothing. A hot fist knocked the air from me. I saw Miana thrown back toward the fireplace. The burn on my face ignited as if it were on fire again and I howled. A moment before nothing had mattered, but we are made of flesh before we are made of dreams, and flesh cares about pain.

When I rolled to my hands and knees I could smell my own charred skin, as if the burn really had reignited. I crawled to the hole and looked out. For long moments I saw only smoke. There was no sound, none at all. Then the mountain wind hauled the smoke off-stage and the ruination lay before me. The front walls of the Haunt were gone. All the tanneries, taverns, abattoirs, animal pens before them ... gone. Just smoking rubble. And out beyond that, the Prince’s huge army, tattered, wide avenues of destruction carved through it by chunks of masonry the size of wagons tumbling down the slope.

The damage appeared to have been wrought by the walls exploding. Although most of the force seemed to have been directed away from us, the heat and fire had been confined within the courtyard. Rank upon rank of blackened corpses radiated from the spot where the ruby broke and released, in one moment, the flame magics hoarded inside it over many years. The bodies closest to the release looked crisp. Those further back still burned. The dead where Lord Jost and his men had fought looked red and melted. Further

back still and men rolled in horrific agony. Back further their lungs hadn't been seared and they could scream. And back further still, closer to the base of the keep, survivors struggled up from under the dead who had shielded them.

The timbers supporting the walkways for the archers burned. The shutters on the windows facing the courtyard burned. The remnants of my scorpions burned. Something lodged in the bone of my cheek burned with its own heat and in every flame possibilities danced. I could see them. As if the fire were a window into hot new worlds.

I guessed I had lost three hundred of my remaining eight hundred men. In two heartbeats a twelve-year-old girl had destroyed the prime fighting men of Renar.

I looked out across the slopes. The Prince of Arrow had lost five thousand, maybe seven thousand. In two heartbeats the Queen of the Highlands had cut her foe in half.

I shouted down into the courtyard. I could barely hear myself over the ringing in my ears. I tried again. 'Into the keep! Into the keep.'

My face hurt, my lungs hurt, everything hurt, the air was full of smoke and the screams of the dying, and suddenly I wanted to win again. Very much.

I went over to the fireplace and picked Miana out of the rubble. Dust fell from her hair as I hauled her onto my shoulder, but she coughed, and that was good enough.



## Wedding Day

I laid Miana on my bed and left her there. She had proved tougher than expected so far and it looked as if she'd just been knocked out. Habit put the lidless box back in my hip pocket.

Although I couldn't see the fires in the courtyard, I could feel them. When I woke the Builders' Sun beneath Mount Honas its power had ignited Gog's talent. It seemed that releasing the ruby's fire-magic in one blast had woken in me what echoes of Gog and his skills had lodged in my flesh when he died beneath Halradra. I pushed back against the feeling. I remembered Ferrakind. I would not become such a thing.

The Haunt's keep has four towers, my bedchamber being at the top of the eastmost one. I went to the roof. A young guardsman sat hunched on the top steps just below the trapdoor. A new recruit by the look of him, his chainmail shirt too big for his slight frame.

'Waiting here in case giant birds land on my roof and try to force an entry?' I asked.

'Your Majesty!' He leapt to his feet. If he weren't so short he'd have brained himself on the trapdoor. He looked terrified.

'You can escort me up,' I said. He would have plenty of time to die on my behalf later on. No point chasing him down the stairs myself. 'Rodrick is it?' I had no idea what the coward's name was but 'Rodrick' was popular in the Highlands.

'Yes, Your Majesty.' A relieved grin spread over his face.

He unbolted the door and heaved it open. I let him walk out first. Nobody shot him, so I followed.

From the tower battlements I could see the Prince's army on the slopes, in even more disarray than my own troops. It would be an hour and more before his captains imposed order, the units reformed and merged, before the dead were heaped, the injured carted to the rear. A haze of smoke hung across the remains of the shantytown that had stood before the Haunt's walls. The brisk wind could do little to shift it.

Despite the fires in the courtyard below, it felt cold on the tower. The wind had teeth up there and carried the edged threat of winter. I crept to the east wall and looked out toward the ridge where the Prince had the bulk of his archers positioned. They seemed to be in some confusion. Trolls had emerged from several still-undiscovered exits and were busy parting the lightly-armoured bowmen from their heads again.

I ducked down. I'd had my head up for two heartbeats. It took an arrow three beats to fly from the ridge to the keep. And sure enough, several shafts hissed overhead. They all missed Rodrick who hadn't had the wit to get behind cover. I knocked him flat. 'Stay there.'

I took the Builders' view-ring from inside my breastplate and held it to one eye. Making the image zoom in to one area still made me feel as if I were falling, plunging from unimaginable heights. I knew it must be a matter of moving lenses, as Lundist had shown me in my father's observatory, but it felt as if I rode the back of an angel falling from heaven.

'Jorg! Jorg!' Makin's voice from down below. He sounded worried.

'We're up here,' I called.

A moment later Makin's head poked into view. At least I assumed it was him in the helmet.

'You didn't burn up then,' I said.

'Damn near! I couldn't find Kent. I think he's gone.'

'Watch this.' I waved him over to my side. 'It should be good. But don't stick your head up too high.'

I took Makin's shield from him and held it over my head for extra cover. We peered over the battlements. The battlefield had fallen almost silent after the explosion, still with the screaming of course, but without the crash of weapons, the war-cries, the twangs and thuds of siege machinery. The drums were voiceless too – Uncle's six great battle-drums, brass and ebony, wider than barrels, ox-skinned, now burned-out and smouldering among the corpses in the yard. Beneath it all though I could hear a new drumming, a faint thunder. Makin cocked his head. He could hear it too. It sounded almost like another avalanche.

'That's cavalry! Arrow's bring up his cavalry, Jorg.' Makin started to crawl for the wall overlooking the Haunt's ruined front.

I pulled him back. 'There's only one place for miles a horse can charge, Sir Makin.'

And they came, in a rushing stream of blue and violet cloaks, silver mail,



thundering past Marten's hidden troops, the foremost with their lances lowered for the kill.

'What?' Makin almost stood up.

'I once told Sim about Hannibal taking elephants across the Alps. Well my uncle has bought heavy horse across the Matteracks in the jaws of winter.'

'How?'

I made quick circles with my hand, as if trying to spin the cogs of Makin's mind a little faster.

'The Blue Moon Pass!' Makin grinned, showing more teeth than a man should have.

'Even so,' I said. 'I emptied it out for him. And Lord Jost must have signalled that the marriage was sealed ... and here they are.'

The cavalry of the House Morrow sliced through the ranks of foot-soldiers sent up to hunt out Gorgoth's trolls. It helped that most of Arrow's troops had their backs to the Runyard, since they'd found rather more trolls than they had wanted to. In fact the trolls were making an impressive hole in Arrow's ranks all by themselves. They moved like wild dogs on the attack, hurling themselves into knots of men and leaving scattered limbs in their wake. Whoever bred them for war had surpassed themselves.

Riding onto the archers' ridge required that the cavalry slow, but they could traverse the whole length five and eight abreast at the canter, killing as they went. The archers were no match for armoured knights. Most broke and ran, tumbling back down the mountainside.

There were perhaps five hundred of my grandfather's cavalry. Gorgoth withdrew his trolls as agreed and left the men to fight each other. I couldn't tell what losses the trolls had suffered but they were not insignificant and I knew that Gorgoth would not permit them to rejoin the battle. He had wanted a homeland for his new-found subjects and they had paid the price I asked of them.

'Incredible!' Makin shouted. He kept shaking his head.

'It's not enough,' I said.

The charge left bloody slaughter trampled into the grit, hundreds upon hundreds died before the momentum broke. And even without the cohesion of the charge, the knights wrought havoc, striking down with axe and sword at the heads of running bowmen. But you can't run five hundred men into four thousand and not expect to pay. The knights were wheeling now, finding their way down the back slope of the ridge and turning toward the Runyard

again. Perhaps half of them survived.

‘They were magnificent!’ Makin surged to his feet. ‘Weren’t you looking?’

‘They were magnificent. And when they join us, we will have a little over seven hundred men in this broken castle. Depending on how many of the troops routed in that charge can be rallied and reformed, the Prince of Arrow will have somewhere between five and seven thousand men.’

I went to look out over the Prince’s main army. On the battlefield losses of the sort I’d inflicted would have set any army running long ago. But I’d been cutting away whole chunks of Arrow’s force, one at a time, separating them, drawing them away, destroying them. I had whittled at his numbers, carved them to the bone, but I hadn’t thinned his ranks in the way that erodes an army’s morale. Not until Miana’s explosion had the main bulk of Arrow’s troops even felt the battle.

Now the explosion; that could have set them running, but it didn’t, and that just told me the Prince’s men were every bit as loyal and well trained as reported.

A glance toward the Runyard told me the Horse Coast knights were beginning to enter the sally port. A small number of men remained to lead the horses back up into the mountain passes. Marten and his troops would bring up the rear.

‘Let’s go meet them,’ I said. ‘By the way, this is Guardsman Rodrick. Guardsman Rodrick, Lord Makin of Ken.’

‘Lord now is it?’ Makin grinned. ‘And what would I be wanting with the Ken Marshes, not that they’re yours to give?’

I led the way down. ‘Well if we don’t win, it won’t matter that your elevation is a hollow gesture. And if we do win – well the Prince of Arrow has taken a lot of land recently so I’ll have plenty to hand out.’

‘And I get the squishy bit?’ Makin said behind me.

‘Come meet my uncle,’ I said. ‘He’s got lots of good recipes for frog.’

I looked into my chamber as we passed. Miana sat on my bed, rubbing her head slowly with both hands as if she were afraid it might fall off.

‘Lord Robert has arrived,’ I said. ‘Stay here. Guardsman Rodrick will protect you. He’s one of my best.’ I turned to the guard. ‘Keep her here, Rodrick. Unless she comes up with a plan to destroy the remainder of the enemy. In which case you’re to let her do it.’

Makin and I carried on down. I caught hold of one of my knights, nursing a wounded shoulder and burned whiskers. ‘You! Hekom is it? Go to the cellar

beneath the armoury. The one with the fecking big barrels. You'll find our southern allies coming out of one of them. Send Lord Robert, and any captains he wants to bring, up to the throne-room.'

Hekom – if it was Hekom – looked confused, but nodded and absented himself, so we headed for the throne-room. I caught hold of another man as we pushed past the wounded in the corridors. 'Have my armour brought up to the throne-room. The good stuff. Quick about it.'

Uncle Robert arrived with two of his captains as three pageboys set about strapping me into my armour. Several of my own captains preceded him, Watch-master Hobbs among them.

'There are rather more of the enemy than I was led to believe, Nephew!' Uncle Robert didn't wait on formality. In fact he only just waited to get through the doors.

'There are many thousands fewer than there were this morning,' I said.

'And your castle appears to be broken,' Uncle Robert said.

'You can blame your god-daughter for that. But it was a dowry well spent,' I said.

'Good Lord!' Robert took off his helm. 'The ruby did that?' He shook his head. 'They told us to be careful with it. I didn't realize the danger though!'

'Rubies are hard to break,' I said. 'It's not the sort of thing that you're likely to do by accident.'

He pursed his lips at that. 'So, Nephew, I've come for you. Where do we stand?'

I still liked him. It had been four years since I saw him last but it felt like little more than a lull in the conversation. And he had come for me, just as a skinny boy had dreamed before he ran betrayed from the Tall Castle. Uncle Robert had come, with the cavalry behind him. That drained some poison from the wound.

'We stand about knee-deep, Uncle,' I said.

'It looked more like chest-deep from where we entered those caves.' He sagged slightly, the exertions of the fight catching up with him. Smears of blood crossed the brightness of his breastplate, a deep dent caught the light from odd angles, and the left side of his face had started to darken into a single impressive bruise.

I shrugged. 'Either way we've got shitty boots and the situation stinks. He has thousands to our hundreds. He can besiege us in this keep from the ruins of my own walls. There is no question that he could wear us down within

months, possibly weeks.'

'If the situation is lost. If it were always lost. Why did I spend the lives of two hundred knights out there? Why did we even beat a path through the mountains in the first place?' His brows drew close, furrowing his forehead, a dangerous light in his eyes. I knew the look.

'Because he doesn't want to wait months, or even weeks,' I said.

Makin stepped up from behind the throne. 'The Prince has been attacking as if he intends to crush us in a day.'

'He needs to now,' I said. 'He wanted a quick victory before, but now he needs one. He didn't want to wait the winter out here. He had a huge army to feed, a timetable to keep to, other powers to consider, newly acquired lands to police. Being a prisoner of the Highland winter was never his plan. But now, he needs to win today, tomorrow at the latest. In a day or two his army will start to understand the scale of their losses, his captains will start to mutter, his troops will leak away, and the stories they tell elsewhere will lend Arrow's enemies courage. If he takes us today, then the stories will run a different course. The talk will be of how he crushed Jorg of Ancrath who levelled Gelleth, who humbled Count Renar. Yes the losses were high – but he did it in a day! In a day!'

'And how does all this help us?' Uncle Robert asked.

'I don't think he can take us in a day. And neither does he,' I said.

'Even so, we will still all die, no? It might ruin the Prince's plans, but that's cold comfort from where I'm standing.' Uncle Robert glanced at his captains, tall men burned dark by the southern sun. They said nothing.

'It helps because it will make him accept my offer,' I said.

'Offer? You told Coddin no terms!' Makin stepped off the dais to take a good look at me, as if I might not be Jorg at all.

'No terms!' The echo came from Miana, helped in by young Rodrick. She looked pale but otherwise unhurt.

'I'm not offering terms,' I said. 'I'm offering him a duel.'

From the journal of Katherine Ap Scorrion

*August 27th, Year 101 Interregnum*

*Arrow. Greenite Palace. Red Room.*

*Orrin is campaigning again. The bigger his domain grows, the less I see of him. He took Conaught in the spring with just three thousand men. Now he's marching an army toward Normardy with nine thousand. He even talks of taking the lands of Orlanth into his protection, though there are other realms to consider first.*

*He never speaks with desire, as if he wants those places for himself, to have them bow and scrape before his throne, or to fill his war-chests. He talks of what he can do for the peoples of those lands, of what they will gain, of how their freedoms will increase, their prosperity, their prospects. It would sound false from any other man. But Orrin believes it, and he can do it. In Conaught they already worship him as one of their old heroes reborn.*

*To me he speaks with desire. Since the day we were married he has made me feel treasured. Happy. And I know I make him happy too. Though there is always that touch of disappointment, expertly hidden. If I had not spent so very many days delving into the stuff of men's dreams I wouldn't see it. But I do see it and I'm cut by the knife I have forged and sharpened. Orrin wants a child. I do too. But it has been two years.*

*Sareth says in her letters that sometimes it can take two years, sometimes four. She herself has born no child in the years since Degran, but for little Merrith who sickened and died so quickly. I think grief made Sareth barren. Jilli and Keriam also say it can take two years, just as Sareth said. They say we're young – it will come soon. For the first year they believed it.*

*March 28th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*Arrow. Greenite Palace. West Gardens.*

*Egan is back in the palace. I say 'back' but he has never been here before. Orrin had the palace built after the Duchy of Belpan surrendered to him, and Egan so rarely returns from campaigns that this is the first time he has laid eyes upon it.*

*He's been wounded again. In the side this time, falling off a horse onto something sharp he says. Egan always seems to mend quickly though, as if he just won't tolerate any kind of restraint, even if it's his own body that tries to*

*impose it.*

*I've been reading Roland of Thurtan's On the Dreamlands and Below. I like to read it on the balcony that overlooks the herb gardens. The formal gardens are ... well, too formal, and too large. I like to look over the herb gardens with their little pools, the sundial and the moondial that I had put there, and to breathe in the scents. Also, it's not a book for reading indoors or in the dark. It only takes a paragraph or two of Roland of Thurtan before the walls seem to be closing in on you.*

*Egan practises with his sword in the grand square every day, in front of the statue of his father. There's a sorcery in the way he moves. It reminds me of the dancers out of the Slav lands, those elfin creatures all grace and air, though he adds force to their grace. It's not until he brings in men to spar with that you understand how fast he is. He makes them look silly. Even the best among the palace guard.*

*Something in him scares me though. The passion with which he pursues each victory. Watch him fight and you wonder if there would be anything he might not do in order to have what he wants.*

*April 15th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*Arrow. Greenite Palace. Herb gardens.*

*Egan is still here. He recovered quickly, although they say it was a dire wound. He seemed eager to heal and be back doing what he loves – cutting a path through anyone who opposes Orrin. But now he idles around the palace. He even came into the library today – a place I've never seen him.*

*I both like and don't like the way he looks at me. Some animal part of me relishes it. Every reasonable part of me is offended. Although I can find nothing to like in Egan that does not start with what my eyes give me of him, there is still a mystery there. When he watches me it is with an instinctive understanding of women that is denied to the wise. Denied to Orrin.*

*Orrin and Egan are on campaign again this summer. The days are long and hot and lonely though there must be a thousand souls in this palace of ours, at least fifty of them ladies of quality brought in just to keep me company.*

*I have learned to travel in dreams, keeping every part of me focused and lucid though I walk through the realms of possibility and of impossibility. Or sometimes fly, or swim, or gallop. The path of the world is a line, a single thread through the vastness of dream, and if I follow that line I can scry what*

*is real rather than wallow in the randomness of strangers' imaginations. I have sent messengers out to explore the places that I have visited in this manner, and confirmed the truth of my observations.*

*I dreamed of Jorg of Ancrath last night and in dreaming of him became tangled in the stuff of his own nightmares. The margins of his dreaming are set with briar so thick and sharp I woke expecting my nightclothes to be shredded and soaked with blood. And a storm rages over it all, so fierce it shook the sleep from me. It seemed almost as if he'd set barriers to keep intruders out. Or perhaps it was all my own imagination. I can hardly send out messengers to check.*

*This morning my head aches, the quill shakes in my hand, and I see the page through slitted eyes. They give fennel powder in Arrow rather than wormwood – it works no better. I would swap the pain behind my eyes for the cuts of that briar, but it seems to be the price I pay for pushing into the dreams of others.*

*May 22nd, Year 102 Interregnum*

*Arrow. Greenite Palace. Grand Library.*

*Orrin writes me that he has employed Sageous as an advisor of sorts! The heathen had settled in the court of Duke Normardy after fleeing Olidan's protection. Orrin writes that Sageous has proved useful in foreseeing the lie of the land ahead of their path and in interpreting certain troubled dreams he has suffered.*

*I have written back by fastest rider to beg Orrin to dismiss the heathen immediately. I would have written 'hang' for 'dismiss' but Orrin is too ... even handed for that.*

*June 23rd, Year 102 Interregnum*

*I tried to visit Orrin's dreams as I have done every night since I discovered the capacity for it. Tonight I could find no trace of him, just a space in the dreamscape where I sought him, just blankness and the memory of the spice, the coriander seed that the heathen seems to breathe.*

*In desperation I sought out Egan in his sleep but found no trace of him either. The others in Orrin's retinue I haven't enough familiarity with to find among the hundreds of thousands who shape the dream-stuff.*

*I've a new physician, a dirty little man from the Slav steppes, but his infusions calm my head. He's older than old and what words he has of*

*Empire Tongue are oddly shaped. Even so, Lord Malas makes good report of him and his medicines work.*

*June 26th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*I found Orrin dreaming! I couldn't walk in his dream, a golden thing of many layers, but it seemed to me that he has fought off whatever attempts Sageous has made to control him. Maybe he was right about being the one to hold the strings. It troubles me though that I am kept out. Perhaps it is a barrier fashioned by the heathen, or a defence of Orrin's own making, whether by conscious will or natural resistance to direction.*

*Where Jorg kept me out with thorns and lightning Orrin used a calm and simple refusal. I hope he has sent Sageous scampering back to Olidan Ancrath in the Tall Castle.*

*July 12th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*Arrow. Greenite Palace. Ballroom.*

*This palace has stood for almost two years and no one has danced in the ballroom. Orrin would host a ball to please me, have his lords and ladies descend upon the palace in their carriages. Hundreds would come in satin and lace. He would dance with the precision and grace that amazed his tutors, be attentive to my needs, compliment the musicians. And all the time I would know that behind his eyes grander thoughts were circulating, plans, philosophies, letters being written, and that when the last revellers had been taken home dead drunk across their carriage seats, Orrin would be found in the library scribbling notes in the margins of some weighty tome.*

*Egan has written to me from the celebrations after the capture of Orlanth's last castle. I say it is Egan but I have never seen his hand before. It would surprise me if he has ever written a letter until now. Perhaps a scribe set it down for him, for the characters are formed with practised skill, but the voice is Egan's. He wrote:*

*Katherine,*

*We have Orlanth from the western plains to the borders of the Ken Marshes. Orrin concerns himself with plans for Baron Kennick. He will play politic, offer terms, massage the old man's ego. We should just roll through there without pause and leave it smoking in our wake.*

*Orrin has sent me to Castle Traliegh in Conaught, it stands in the middle of*



nowhere. After the excesses of East Haven he says he worries for me. He says I need rest.

I need rest like I need poison. What I require is to be tempered in the forge of war and to pitch exhausted into dreamless sleep each night.

Conaught is a haunted place. I dream such dreams here. I stare at the walls and fear the night. Even though I dream of you. They are not good dreams.

*I don't know what to do. Orrin will hear no wrong of his brother. I have seen it before. Somehow he always finds an angle from which Egan's deeds can be viewed as excusable.*

*I've never done anything to encourage this passion, this obsession, in Egan. I favoured Orrin from the start. If I had wanted a savage I could have smiled on Jorg of Ancrath, and what a creature I would have been tied to then.*

*Orrin needs to send Egan way, to give him some castle on a disputed border, some war to occupy him. It can't be that he needs his brother always at his side. One blade can't turn a battle, surely, no matter how skilled.*

*July 18th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*I have searched for Egan in the dreamscape and he is still hidden from me. The messages I send go unreplied. I don't even know if the riders are reaching Orrin's army. Report has it that he is closing on the Renar Highlands. Part of me wonders if Sageous is Jorg Ancrath's tool. Has he unleashed his father's pet upon my husband?*

*October 28th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*I found Egan's dreams but they were dark and closed to me. I sensed the heathen's handiwork and worry at his plans. Has Orrin proved too difficult to steer? Egan would be easier, like a bull goaded this way and that by the fluttering of rags. It's maddening to be closeted in this palace with all that matters unfolding three hundred miles away.*

*October 29th, Year 102 Interregnum*

*Still no word from Orrin or from Egan, but reports come in of tens of thousands on the move, men under arms, all converging on the Highlands, and of Jorg Ancrath skulking in his single castle with less than a twentieth part of that force.*

*And still I worry. For Orrin with his cleverness and strength and patience*

*and wisdom. Even for Egan with his fire and his skill. Because I remember Jorg of Ancrath and the look in his eye, and the scars he carries, and the echoes of his deeds that still vibrate through the dreamscape. I remember him, and I would worry if Orrin had ten times the number and Jorg stood alone.*

*November 1st, Year 102 Interregnum*

*I made a dream, a thing of light and shadows, and set it dancing in the head of Marcus Gohal, captain of the palace guard. It made it easier for him to agree with me when I demanded that he assemble a suitable force to guard me on my journey to my husband's side. It made him forget all thoughts of arguing. Instead he nodded, clicked his heels in the way the men of Arrow do, and gathered four hundred lancers to escort me south.*

*We set off early, before the dawn stole shadow from the sky, and we rode out at a gentle pace, the horses' breath puffing in clouds before them, the leaves golden and crimson on the trees as the first light found them.*

*And I felt watched, as if someone on high were paying close attention.*

*Brother Gog I miss. There is no sound more annoying than the chatter of a child, and none more sad than the silence they leave when they are gone.*



## Wedding Day

‘This is madness, Jorg. God made the Prince of Arrow to stand behind a sword. That’s what everyone says about him. He’s not like other men, not with a blade in hand. He’s not human.’ Makin stood before the throne now, as if he were going to block my way.

‘And it will turn out that he was born to die behind one too,’ I said.

‘I’ve seen him fight.’ Makin shook his head. ‘I hope you’ve got something up your sleeve, Jorg.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

Makin’s shoulders fell as he relaxed a touch. Uncle Robert smiled.

‘The best damn sword arm in history is what I’ve got up my sleeve.’

The protests started immediately, a chorus of them, as if my court had filled with disgruntled geese.

‘Gentlemen!’ I stood from my throne. ‘Your lack of faith dismays me. And you wouldn’t like me when I’m dismayed. If the Prince of Arrow accepts my challenge I will meet him on the field and find victory there.’

I pushed past Makin. ‘You!’ I pointed to a random knight. ‘Get my herald here.’ I felt reasonably sure I had a herald. I turned and looked Makin in the eye. ‘I did tell you that I fought Sword-master Shimon, didn’t I?’

‘A thousand times.’ He sighed and glanced at Lord Robert.

‘Shimon said you were good, Jorg,’ Uncle Robert said. ‘One of the best he’s seen in forty years.’

‘You see!’ I cried. ‘You see?’

‘But he met Orrin of Arrow two years later and judged him the better blade. And Orrin’s brother Egan is said to be the more deadly of the two by a considerable margin.’

‘I was fourteen! I’m a man now. Full grown. I can beat Makin here with a chair leg. Trust me. I’ll have the Prince of Arrow down and bleeding before he even sees my sword.’

The levity was something made for show. I would fight the Prince. Win or lose, chance or no chance. The madness Sageous had set in me had been

burned away and I would dare the odds against victory, however slim, but still – I had killed my brother. Flame could not consume that guilt. I would carry it with me to the battlefield and maybe they would bury it with me.

They found Red Kent trapped beneath the charred corpses of Lord Jost's men. I had him brought to the throne-room when I heard.

'You've looked better, Sir Kent,' I said.

He nodded. Two of my guard had carried him in, bound to a chair so he wouldn't fall from it. 'And felt better, Brother.' His voice came as a hoarse whisper from lungs scorched by blistering air.

Even now, when neither of us knew if he would live or die, Kent kept his eyes lowered, humble amongst lords and knights, despite me elevating him to their rank. He would throw himself into the teeth of an army given but slight encouragement, but a throne-room full of men more used to silk than leather made him cower.

I stepped from my throne and crouched before him. 'I would give you something for the pain, Brother Kent, but I want you to make a battle of it. Fight these burns. Win. I'm offering no terms for surrender.' My own burn still screamed at me. Surely only an echo of Kent's pain and that of others from the courtyard, but still, it gnawed at me, throbbing in my cheekbone and the orbit of my eye.

Something on the edge of vision caught my attention and I turned away from Kent, back toward the throne. Two oil lamps stood to either side of the dais, enamelled urns in black and red, set on wrought iron stands. The flame dancing on each wick within its glass cowl looked odd, too bright, too orange, taking on too many flame-shapes at once. I held my hand above the glass and could feel no heat, only a pulsing vital force that raced along my arm making me want to shout out.

*Never open the box.*

'Highness, the herald has returned.'

I snatched my hand back, almost guilty in the action. My herald stood at the doorway between two table-knights. He looked the part, handsome and tall in his livery, gold-spun and velvet.

'And what did the Prince of Arrow have to say to my offer?' I asked.

The herald paused, a gossip's trick to draw in more listeners, though we could be no more intent.

'The Prince will meet you on the field of combat to decide the outcome of

this battle,' he said.

I saw Makin shake his head.

'Well and good,' I said. 'And did he name his ground, or accept my invitation to battle on the Runyard ridge?'

'The Prince felt the ridge to be constructed more from troll than from stone and has identified an area of flattish ground close to Rigden Rock, midway between the castle and the current position of his front line. He will bring five observers to watch from a distance of twenty yards and expects that you will do the same.'

'Tell him his choice is acceptable and I will join him there in an hour,' I said.

The herald bowed and set off to deliver my words.

'Makin, I'll want you there. But first, get Olvin Green or if he's dead then somebody good with arrow wounds. I want him and six strong men to get up to Coddin. Have them treat his injury there if he's still alive and bring him down as soon as it is safe to move him.'

Makin nodded and left the throne-room without a word, just setting a hand to Kent's shoulder as he passed.

'I'll want Lord Robert with me, also Rike, Captain Keppen, and Father Gomst.'

Uncle Robert lowered his head in agreement, then stepping onto the dais and bending close, 'Why a priest? Good swords are what's called for in case of treachery.'

'The Prince of Arrow will bring five good swords. I'm bringing three, plus an archer in case the bastard runs for it, and a priest so that in times to come the truth may be told concerning what occurred.'

I let them strap me into my armour, pieces of silvered steel, well crafted and without adornment. I carried no crest, no emblems on this mail. Decoration is for peacetime, for people playing games but not understanding that they do.

The Hundred War, you must know, is a game. And to win it you must play your pieces. The secret is to know that there is only one game and the only rules are your own. With the memory box gone I had all my plans in mind now. The trick was not to dwell on them – to give no edge of them for Sageous to take hold of. One slip and the game would be over.

Whilst the pageboys bolted and strapped and sweated, I held the Builders' ring to my eye. For a moment I saw Miana through it, across the room, and

wondered if she might fit her hand through the ring and wear it as a bracelet on that tiny wrist of hers. And then the image formed. The whole world before me as a jewel of blue and white. A canvas on which even all of empire would not look large.

A small motion of my fingertip along the ridged edge of the ring and the point of my perception fell to earth, faster than an arrow. Faster than a bullet even. Oh yes – I know of those.

The imaged blurred with speed for a heartbeat, two, three, and then snapped into focus. However vast the telescope that must hang above us, it could offer no closer view than this, an image miles across in which the Haunt's outline could be seen but the details lay hidden. The mass of the Prince's army made a darker smear on the mountainside. I could see the shape of the larger siege engines, and the men around them like specks of dust. I moved my fingertip again and the image went black. By flickers I counted as it jumped through four voids where whatever eyes the Builders once had were now blind, and then, with my finger on the last of the ridges, a new scene. I could see the army and the smoking wreckage of my walls as if I stood on a nearby mountain top. Stroking the metal side to side and moving my fingertip forward by hundredths of an inch I drove the view in closer, zeroing upon the ground by Rigden Rock.

In most places the Builders' ring can see no closer than the miles' high bird's-eye perspective I described, but in maybe one place in five there are other eyes it can use. By exploration and extrapolation I found the location of an eye that I now exploited. It sits on a high ridge in the Matteracks, entirely hidden from view when not in use. When I call upon it, a gleaming steel shaft rises from behind black doors set into the natural rock and lifts a black crystal dome into the air. I have stood below this dome and listened to the faint hum and whir as I change the ring's view. Some mechanical eye must sit within and answer my needs. I left it as I found it. These eyes, in the vaults of heaven and down amongst us, burrowed into the living rock, are a work of genius. Even so, I wonder at a people who felt the need to be watched in every moment and at every place. Perhaps it was what drove them mad. I would not be spied upon so. I would blind such eyes.

Fexler Brews went mad. Fourteen years after his echo was captured and held in that machine, he took a gun and shot himself. A Colt four-and-five they called that gun, though it looks no more like a horse than the Horse Coast does. I found Fexler, but it wasn't easy. I found him on my long and



wandering return to the Renar Highlands and it cost me pain and lives. Lives I valued. A rare commodity. Fexler had put a bullet through his brain but even then the machines wouldn't let him go. They held him trapped between fractions of a second. I pushed away the thought, the image of the weapon in his time-frozen hand, rubies of blood motionless in the air about the exit wound. I forgot about the stasis chamber ... before Sageous saw my remembering.

They say God watches us in every moment. But I think, in some moments, when some deeds are done, he turns his face away.

'What do you see, Jorg?' Miana at my side now.

'That the killing ground is clear.' I took the ring from my eye.

'Can you win, Jorg?' she asked. 'Against this prince? They say he is very good.'

I felt Sageous. I smelled him, picking at the edges of my thoughts, trying to filch my secrets.

'He is very good. And I ... I am very bad. Let's see what comes of that, shall we?' I made a wall of my imagination and kept my mind from wandering forward to what would happen. My hands knew what to do – I did not need to think of it.

There is a strong-box built into the base of my throne at the Haunt. Before they set my helm in place, I knelt in front of the throne and set the heavy key into the lock-plate. I lowered the side and reached in with my right hand, slipping it into the straps of the small iron buckler within, then drawing it out. I closed my fingers around the curious grip of the object that the buckler hid, and smiled. Imagine Fexler Brews thinking I would take 'no' as an answer. I left the box open and stood, stepping off the dais so that the pageboys could reach to strap my helmet on.

'Move my sword belt round, Keven,' I said.

The boy frowned and blinked. He looked like a child. I supposed he was, no older than Miana. 'Sire?'

I just nodded and still frowning he unbuckled the belt and refastened it with the hilt sitting on the steel above my left hip.

Some men name their swords. I've always found that a strange affectation. If I had to call it something I would call it 'Sharp', but I'm no more inclined to christen it than I would my fork at dinner or the helm upon my head.

I walked from the throne-room, taking slow steps, with all eyes on me.

'Red Jorg,' Kent said in a whisper as I passed.

‘Red would be good, Kent. But I fear I am darker than that.’

*When I opened that box I got more back than memory.*

The flames on the torches by the doorway flared as I passed, infecting me with strange passion. I felt watched by more than my court, by more than Sageous and the players who seek to move the Hundred across their board. Gog watched me. From the fire.

I looked back one time, to see Miana beside the throne.

Lord Robert fell in behind me. Captain Keppen and Rike joined us outside.

‘Time to jump the falls, old man,’ I told Keppen as he stepped beside me. He grinned at that, as if he knew the hour was upon us and shared my hunger for it.

I led the way through my uncle’s halls. Degran no longer haunted me from the shadows, the fact of my guilt no longer came bound in the promise of madness, but I knew my crime even so. Death waited for me on the slopes, one way or another. Death would be good enough. Death at the Prince’s hands, death on the swords of his thousands, or the death Fexler had saved me from when he anchored into Luntar’s little box those forces of necromancy and fire with their hooks sunk so deep into me and their pulls opposing.

And that reminded me. I took the empty box out one last time to toss it aside. Pandora’s own casket had hope lurking within, the last among all the ills unleashed upon us by her misguided curiosity. She might have let hope fly, but not my way. Even so I looked into the lidless box once more, hand raised to throw it to the floor. And there, on the polished copper interior, one small stain. One last memory? Reluctant to return? I set a finger to it and the darkness of it soaked through my skin, leaving only bright copper behind.

This memory didn’t seize me, didn’t lift me from the now, but settled in as recollection while I walked the Haunt’s corridors. I remembered that last talk with Fexler, back in Grandfather’s castle. Fexler had been considering the box as I held his view-ring to it.

‘Sageous?’ he had mused over the buzzing of the ring.

‘Sageous? That filthy dream-thief did this to me? Put madness in me?’

‘Sageous has done far worse than that, Jorg. He put you in the thorns.’ Fexler had paused as if remembering. ‘What kept you there is another matter.’

Every thorn-scar had burned at his words. ‘Why?’ I had asked. ‘Why would he do that?’

‘The hidden hands that move the pieces of your empire have prophecies they like to share. They like to talk of the Prince of Arrow and his Gilden future. And then they have foretelling they are less eager to spread. The hidden hands believe that two Ancraths joined together will end all their power. Will end the game.’

‘Two?’ I had laughed at that. ‘They’re safe enough then!’

‘When you survived against all odds it seems some value attached to you,’ Fexler had said.

And I had grown cold, knowing at the last how the players had tried to keep two Ancraths from joining on their board. They would have seen Olidan’s sons die together. And when I escaped that end and became as useful to their games as Father dear himself, did they let me live because they knew I would never join my cause to his? Or had the possibility been considered long ago and had the wedge between father and son not been driven there entirely by our own hands?

‘I will find the heathen and kill him,’ I had promised Fexler.

‘Sageous is nothing but a savage, straining truth through superstition to dabble in dreams.’ Fexler shook his head.

‘Still, he’s hard to catch a hold of,’ I had said.

‘Oh how I wish he’d go away,’ Fexler had replied, his voice half song.

‘What?’

‘An old rhyme. An ancient rhyme I suppose. Sageous puts me in mind of it. *As I was going up the stair I met a man who wasn’t there; he wasn’t there again today; oh how I wish he’d go away.* That’s Sageous for you; the man who wasn’t there. The thing to do of course is to change it around. *Oh how I wish he’d always stay.*’

‘What?’ I wondered if ghosts could grow senile.

Fexler had come in close then and set his ghost-light hand to the box. ‘But none of this is any use to you until the puzzle of this box is done, this Gordian knot unravelled. I’ll put it in the box.’

‘No!’ I shouted it. I wouldn’t let him take this memory from me.

‘No what?’ Fexler had asked.

‘I ... forget,’ I had said.

‘No?’ Makin asked at my side, back in the corridors of the Haunt, the Prince of Arrow waiting outside with his sword and thousands more behind.

I shook my head. My hand held the empty box, crushed now in my grip,

blood on it from old thorn-scars bleeding once more. The box fell from me, and I kicked it to the wall.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Just no.’

Father Gomst waited for us in the courtyard. A path had been cleared through the dead. They lay heaped to either side as if it were the road into hell. And the smell of it, Brothers! It made my stomach rumble. And worse, as I walked that path between the corpses, stacked and charred, they twitched. Hands red in ruin flexed at my passing, burned skin sloughing from fingers. Heads lolled, dead eyes found me. The men with me, focused in their purpose, didn’t see it, but I saw, I felt them all, uneasy in their new slumbers as the Dead King watched me through them.

*Never open the box.*

Death and fire had their hooks in me. Deeper than deep. And each had started to pull.

‘I should be tending the dying,’ Father Gomst said, almost shouting to be heard over the screaming from the circle gallery where they had been taken.

‘Let the dying tend to themselves,’ I said. I knew that Father Gomst would have been no comfort to me when I lay groaning in the Heimrift. I saw Grumlow at the keep doors, hanging back in the shadows. I waved him forward. ‘Show the dying a little mercy, Grumlow,’ I said. He nodded and departed.

I knew I would have appreciated Grumlow’s quick sharp mercy back in the Heimrift rather than a slow exit accompanied by Father Gomst’s moralizing.

We walked along the pathway, cleared of the dead, but not the grease of burned flesh, the pieces of skin, the charred outlines of men. No one spoke; even Rike looked grim. It was appropriate though. My uncle, the Duke of Renar, had been a burner. He had spread his own terror that way. And I had come to take the place from him with Gog at my side, filling the courtyard with cremations. The Prince of Arrow had it right when he called the Ancraths the darkest branch of the Steward tree. I had long wondered if I would stand against Orrin of Arrow when he came a-calling. He was perhaps the brightest fruit from the branches of the emperor’s line. In the four years since I claimed the Highlands I had walked the empire, returning at last to suppress cousin Jarco’s uprising in the west, then battled less tangible foes, sickness in my people and in the economy. In the same span the Prince of Arrow had built his strength and taken five thrones. It was perhaps only the

repeated whispering of the wise, telling me I must cede him the empire throne, that made me think of opposing his march to the Gilden Gate. I do not like to be told.

Now though, with the copper box torn open and my memories and sins returned to me, I felt that more had been restored, as if I had been a shadow of myself, almost me, but with something vital stolen away, something so bonded to my crimes that Luntar had been forced to set it also into his box of memories. I might not live to see the sun set on this day of blood, but if I did, four years would not pass again and find me no closer to my goals.

We walked out through the ruins of the sprawl-town where burning chunks of the Haunt's outer walls had left only wreckage in their path. No trace of Jerring's stables where Makin had once rolled in dung to be ready for the road.

Even now I could end this. The Prince would accept a peace: his progress was too important to him not to. And who would say that he would make a worse emperor than I? I could match the very worst of his crimes with my own then trump them with darker deeds.

There had been times aplenty, in the clarity of high places among the peaks, when I had thought to leave Orrin of Arrow a clear path. But things change. A different Jorg approached the duelling ground, a different Prince of Arrow. This wedding day had seen Jorg Ancrath remade in an older mould. I had that old thirst on me once again. Blood would flow.

Music rose around me, faint at first. A piece my mother used to play on the piano. A rare instrument, a complex thing of wires and keys and hammers, ancient, but the notes she scattered from her right hand were clear and high, pure like stars against the black and rolling melody from her left. Sometimes just a single ice-pure note can catch the breath in your lungs, and a second, off tempo, thrown into the void, can command chills across your skin. A small run, a flutter of the hand over the blue notes, can take you any where, any time, make you feel new, or settle the press of years upon you, heavy enough to stop you drawing breath.

We walked through broken stone, charred timbers. The melody pulsed under the crackle of flame, her left hand running through the deepest notes. Rike towered above me on one side, my uncle walked on the other. I felt the high refrain. I saw my mother's hand finding the high notes, the black keys, the ones that made me ache inside my chest, like the cries of gulls above wild seas. After so many years of watching her hands play in silent memory, I

heard her at last, I heard her music.

Down the mountainside, down toward the serried expanse of the Prince's army. Still the music, the deep slow melody, the high and broken counterpoint, as if the mountains themselves had become the score, as if the glories of hidden caves and secret peaks had been wrapped around the ageless majesty of the ocean and turned into the music of all men's lives, played out by a woman's fingers, without pause or mercy, reaching in, twisting, laying us bare.

To the level ground before the grey bulk of Rigden Rock. The music slowing now, the notes scattered, just the counterpoint played out in the highest octave, sad notes, faltering, faint. I glanced at Makin, remembering that first day when he handed me a wooden sword. All those earnest boys of his ready to learn his game. I'd shown them that it wasn't play, that it's always about winning, but I don't think they understood it even then, even with the best of them lying choking on the floor.

A great trebuchet lay burning by the rock. It must have ignited closer to the walls and been dragged this far before they realized it was a lost cause. I wondered if it were the one that threw the rock at my bedchamber. The flames watched me. They leaned toward me.

The Prince of Arrow stood waiting, the dragons still clutching his namesakes on the rainbow sheen of his Teuton armour. His five knights stood at the agreed distance and I left my seconds at the same remove. They made a funny line, Rike towering at the centre looking like six kinds of bad news. Makin and Robert to either side. Old Gomst on the right wearing every holy thing he owned in the hope that nobody would stick an arrow in him, and old Keppen on the left, a sour face on him as if he had no time for this foolishness.

I walked over to meet the Prince.

'Open your keep to me and we can end this.' The Prince's voice muffled within his helm, dark eyes watching.

'You don't really want me to,' I said. 'Better this way.' I turned my blade to catch the light. 'Stop trying to be your brother. Him I would have opened the gates for. Maybe.'

The Prince lifted his visor. He offered a fierce and joyless smile then pulled the helm clear, running a hand back across hair bristling, thick and short and black.

'Hello Egan,' I said.

‘I liked you better as road-filth,’ he said. ‘It suited you.’

Smoke from the burning siege engine drifted across us. I heard Rike cough.

‘I like your armour. I may take it for myself when they pry it from your corpse,’ I said.

He frowned, black brows meeting. ‘You’re right-handed. What game is this?’

I set my left hand to my sword hilt. ‘I often fight right-handed. I hope you haven’t based your assessment of my skills on spies who saw that ... I’m much better with my left.’

Egan shifted his weight onto his back heel. ‘You fought Orrin with your right ...’

‘True,’ I said. ‘I was sorry to hear that you killed Orrin. He was a better man than both of us. Perhaps the best man of our generation.’

‘He was a fool,’ Egan said, fixing his helm in place again.

‘Too easy with his trust maybe. I heard that you stabbed him in the back and watched him bleed to death?’

Egan shrugged. ‘He would never have fought me. He would have talked. And talked. And talked.’ He spoke as if it were nothing, but it haunted him. I could see it in his eyes.

‘And how did Katherine take news of Orrin’s death?’ I asked.

I saw him pale. Just half a shade. ‘Prepare to defend yourself,’ Egan said. He drew his sword. I paid it no heed.

‘I told Orrin that I would decide about him on the day he came to the Highlands again,’ I said. ‘I think that I would have followed him and called him emperor. I hope that I would have. You should have left it for two weeks – then you could have murdered him after moving through the Highlands. It would have worked out better for you.’

Egan spat. ‘We are two fratricides met for battle. Are you ready?’

‘You know why I’ve practised with the sword every day since we last met?’ I asked.

‘So it would take me a few moments longer to kill you?’ Egan asked.

‘Nope.’

‘Why then?’

‘So you would believe that I’d stand against you in a fair fight,’ I said.

I raised my right hand, pointing the gun at him from beneath the plate-sized buckler.

‘What’s that?’ asked Egan. He took a step back.

‘It has the word COLT stamped into the metal if that helps. Think of it as a crossbow, but all squeezed down into one small tube. You can thank an echo called Fexler Brews for it,’ I said.

I shot Egan in the stomach. The bullet punched a small hole in his armour. I knew from testing on a watermelon that the hole on the other side would be larger.

‘Bastard!’ Egan staggered back.

I made to shoot him in the leg but the gun jammed. ‘Lucky that didn’t happen first try, neh?’ I drew my own blade, in my left hand.

He almost blocked the swing of my sword. I had to admit he was pretty good. The blade crunched into his knee and he went down.

The five knights Egan brought with him started to charge. I fiddled with the gun, banging it against the hilt of my sword. I raised it again and fired, once, twice, three, four, five, times. They all went down with red holes in their faces. I would have missed with my left hand.

‘Bastard!’ Egan tried to crawl toward me.

‘This is not your game!’ I shouted. Loud enough for Arrow’s thousands to hear if they hadn’t been screaming for my blood as they surged forward. I shrugged. ‘I don’t play by the rules you choose.’

I knocked Egan’s sword from his hand and waved my seconds forward. ‘Bring Gomst!’

The gun had no bullets left so I threw it and the buckler aside and crouched behind Egan to pull his helm clear. I had to use my knife on the straps. I may have cut him a little.

‘You don’t have to end like this, Egan.’ I took hold of his neck. ‘There’s death in my fingers, you know? It hurt me when you named me fratricide, but it’s true. I killed poor Degran without even thinking about it. Can you feel it yet? Can you imagine what I can do when I *am* thinking about it? When I actually want to hurt you?’

He screamed then, as loud as I’ve ever heard a man scream.

‘See?’ I said, when there was a gap. ‘I’m not proud of how I learned to do that – but there it is, the devil makes work for idle hands – I can kill parts of your spinal cord and leave you in that much pain for the years before you die. I can paralyse you and take away your speech so no one will know how you suffer and you will not be able to seek or beg for an end.’

The Prince’s soldiers came on at a run, but they had a lot of mountainside



to cover.

‘What do you want?’ he asked.

I had already killed the link between his mind and his muscles so he knew I wasn’t lying. I was only lying when I implied I might be able to restore it. ‘Let’s be friends,’ I said. ‘I know I might not be able to trust you even if you called me brother ... but do it anyway.’

‘What?’ Egan said.

‘Jorg! We need to run!’ Uncle Robert put a hand on my shoulder.

I ignored him and let more pain flood through Egan. ‘Call me brother.’

‘Brother! BROTHER! You’re my brother,’ he cried, then screamed, then gasped.

‘Father Gomst, did you hear that?’ I asked.

The old man nodded.

‘Let’s make it official,’ I said. ‘Adopt me into your family, Brother.’

I hurt him again.

‘Jorg!’ Makin pointed at the thousands coming our way, as if I hadn’t noticed.

‘I ... you’re adopted. You’re my brother,’ Egan gasped.

‘Excellent.’ I let him fall. I stood and wiped his blood from my hands onto Makin’s cloak.

‘We need to run!’ Makin took a few quick steps toward the Haunt to encourage me.

‘Don’t be silly,’ I said. ‘We’d never make it.’

‘What’s your plan?’ Makin asked.

‘I’d hoped they would just give up. I mean it’s not as if they like this pile of dung.’ I kicked Egan in the head, but not too hard: I might yet need that foot for running. ‘I’ve killed more than half of the bastards. Both their princes are gone. You’d think they’d just go home!’ I shouted this last part at their ranks, close enough to see faces now.

‘That’s it?’ Uncle Robert asked. ‘You just hoped?’

I grinned and faced him. ‘I’ve lived the last ten years on hunches, bets, hope, and luck.’

The fire danced behind him as timbers fell from the trebuchet. The flames held that same strangeness as those in the castle, a flat brittle look. Crimson striations flushed through them, a stippled effect ...

‘I am going to watch you die.’ Sageous stood to my left, naked but for a loincloth despite the cold, every inch of him written upon.

He had surprised me but I tried not to let it show. I stepped toward him.

‘I’m not here. Will you never learn, Jorg of Ancrath?’ I could see he hated me. That in itself made a small victory, putting some emotion in those mild cow-eyes of his.

‘Are you not?’ I asked.

He looked at Egan, limp and bleeding in his rainbow armour. ‘I could have done great things with that one. Do you know how long it took to find a man so powerful and yet so malleable? I couldn’t work with Orrin. He had less give in him than your father, and that’s saying a lot.’

‘You set him to kill Orrin?’ I asked.

‘It wasn’t hard. It needed the slightest push in the right direction. Sweet Katherine proved too tempting and poor Orrin was just in the way. Men like Egan have only one answer to things being in their way.’

‘So many little pushes, dream-witch,’ I said.

‘You probably don’t even remember the dream that made you beg to visit Norwood that day, do you Jorg?’

‘What?’ Images bubbled at the back of my mind. The fair at Norwood. The bunting. I had wanted to go. I’d pestered my mother. I’d almost dragged them into that carriage. ‘It was you?’

‘Yes.’ He showed me a tight vicious smile. ‘Your sins cried out for it.’ He mimicked me.

‘I was a child ...’

Sageous looked down at Egan. ‘They cry out for it now.’

A cold fire rose through me. ‘I’ll tell you what my sins cry out for, heathen. They cry out for more. They call for company.’ And I stepped toward him.

‘I am not here, Jorg,’ he said.

‘But I think you are.’

I felt him try to weave my vision, try to walk away in dream. And then I saw her. A ghost of her. Katherine white with anger and the more beautiful with it. A ghost of her at his shoulder, waiting in the place he sought to run to, like a mirage on hot sand, her lips moving without sound, chanting something. I could see her sitting on horseback, with the same knights around her that she brought with her from Arrow’s palace. Somewhere back in the mass of that army Katherine rode her horse blind, her eyes bound by visions as she cast spells of her own. And with each silent word from the tight line of her mouth Sageous grew more solid, more *there*.

I reached for him. ‘I met a man who wasn’t there ...’ My hands almost found the heathen, the stuff of him slipping away as my fingers closed. What had Fexler said? It’s all about will. Put aside the skulls, the smokes, the wording of spells, and at the bottom of it all is desire. ‘He wasn’t there again today.’ Wanting makes it so. ‘Oh how I wish he’d always stay.’ And my grasping hands found him. Whatever may be said about the aftertaste, in the moment revenge tastes sweeter than blood, my brothers.

I seized his head and tore it from his shoulders as though I were a troll and he only human, for he had walked too long in dream and his flesh was rotten with it, tearing like the scribbled parchment it resembled. He made his own silent screams then and tried to die. But I held him there. I let the necromancy bind him into his skull.

‘There is not sufficient hurt in this world for you.’ And the fire that burned in my bones, that echoed in my blood, lit about my hands and he burned with it also, trapped, living, and consumed.

I threw his head toward the oncoming troops. It bounced flaming on the rocks, flesh bubbling, lips writhing.

Burning was too good for him.

I walked toward the flaming wreck of the trebuchet, the fire running up my arms now.

‘Jorg?’ Makin asked, his voice quiet as if at least half of him was hoping not to be noticed.

‘Better run,’ I said.

‘We can’t outrun them,’ Rike growled.

‘From me,’ I said.

The fire leapt as I approached it. It looked like glass, like a window. Behind me Makin and the others ran. I laughed. The joy of it, the roaring joy of destruction. That’s why the flames dance. For joy.

‘There’s only one fire,’ I said, and I knew Gog watched me from it.

I reached into the blaze and found him, flame-made, his white-hot hand in mine, the fragments of his lost body still in my flesh, preserving me. In the core of me this new fire magic – call it magic, or understanding, or empathy – made war on the necromancy that still infected my blood.

The Prince’s troops passed Rigden Rock, a spear flew by my head.

‘Come to me,’ I said, ‘Brother Gog.’

‘Truly?’ he asked. ‘There will be no end to this – like the sun beneath the mountain.’

A million images tumbled through me. Faces, moments, places, brothers of every kind. The weariness of the world. And the fire consumed it. I knew then how Ferrakind felt.

‘Let it all burn.’

And Gog flowed into me. A river of fire, eating the death-magic and making something new, a darker fire that ran like poison, coiling about my limbs.

The first of Egan’s army reached me and the fire lifted from my hands. The men shredded, their flesh lifting from them as sea foam before a wind, their bones igniting as they fell. The dark-fire ran, jumping from man to man as the soldiers tried to flee, tried to turn and run, only to find their comrades not yet understanding, surging forward.

I walked amongst them and death walked with me.

Death and fire. Ferrakind howled at me from the place where fire lives, a song of destruction, stripping away what makes me. Ferrakind and every other lost to flame, all one now, fused, screaming for me to join them. And in the dry place into which the dead fall, other voices, just as compelling, implacable. The Dead-King reached for me, along the paths through which necromancy flowed into my core, flooding me. These two among the many, both of them fought to claim me, dogs over a bone. And while they fought death and flame blossomed about me in conflagration, and men died, in tens, in scores, in hundreds, in stinking, steaming, screaming heaps.



## Wedding Day

The warrior rides a black stallion. Smoke shrouds the castle ruins behind him and the wind gives only glimpses of the corpse-choked gap between high and broken walls. That same wind streams long dark hair across his shoulders, like a pennant, and flutters the remnants of his cloak. To his left and right more riders emerge from the fog of war, warriors all, their armour dented, torn, smeared with soot and blood. A huge soldier in battered plate-mail carries the standard, Ancrath's boar in black upon the red field of Renar. They come by ones and twos, slow in their motion as if the great distance from which they are seen has somehow robbed the urgency from their movement. Each hoof lands with the finality of tomb doors closing, no sound to accompany the action. Each bounce and jolt in the saddle takes an age.

Where the baked dirt flakes from the warrior's plate armour the metal shows the rainbowed hues of oiled steel. Beside him an older, dark-haired knight, half a smile on thick-lips, black curls plastered to his forehead, an eagle's head on his round shield, worked in red copper, fire-bronze, and silver, broadsword at his hip, black iron flail secured to his saddle. A second man in platemail on a white charger rides to their left, at home in his saddle as any sea-dog on a rolling deck. His armour is worked with the gothic engravings of the Horse Coast, his cloak blue in memory of the sea, on his jousting shield the white ship and black sun of the House Morrow.

A priest follows them, perched uneasy on a fractious mule. The wind throws wisps of grey hair across his scowl.

The man at the centre, at the arrowpoint of this emerging army, stares straight ahead. A wolf skull hangs from the pommel of his saddle. A wolf or a large hound. The man's face is scarred, the left side rough and twisted, as if the sculptor had heard the work bell and left in mid-action, leaving his creation unfinished. Over one eye, fixed to the bossed rim and side of his helm by iron rivets, is a silver ring, big enough to rest against his eyebrow and cheekbone. If you knew the edge were ridged you might imagine you could see those ridges, but they are a prisoner of the distance between us, as

is any message in that thousand-yard stare.

I got bored with watching myself and flipped the ring up so my view lay unobstructed.

They had found me naked, every item on me seemingly burned away, except for my sword on which flames still danced. That fire held to the blade for hours and even now from time to time I see reflections of flames in the steel. I've named my first sword. I call it Gog, though I think it holds only an echo of him, like that echo of Fexler Brews, a man who shot himself in a stasis chamber long ago with a Colt 45. The world turned, he said. And it left him behind.

I had opened my eyes as Makin wrapped me in his cloak. The wound on my chest was just pink edges and white seams – the fire burned every trace of the necromancer from me, and in the end, as it failed, that death quenched Gog. I felt the absence of both, like holes in the world. Gog is ended. I won't see him again.

The fire has left me for it was always his, never mine, and the necromancy too. I may have clothes and armour now, but I am naked against the world once more, with nothing but the sharp wit, tongue, and blade of the Ancraths to see me through.

I think if they had not fought each other over me, Ferrakind and the Dead King, if either had his sole attention on me as I opened myself to their realms and let those places burst through me in such reckless abandon, I would have been claimed. Such powers can't be mastered, not without cost, and that cost would seem to include losing all those reasons you wanted that strength for. And it is a sacrifice I would have paid in the moment, with the arms of thousands raised against me. In the end, my brothers, there is no price I will not pay to win this game of ours. No sacrifice too great that it will not be paid to stop another placing their will over mine.

We ride for Arrow. I feel they owe me a castle at the very least. A palace might be nice too. And all those dead soothsayers and seers of the future – we're friends now. I *am* the Prince of Arrow. Ask Father Gomst. He was there, looking whilst God turned away. Egan adopted me into his family. And he's dead now. Not at my hand, but trampled by his own men. So, I'm the Prince of Arrow, homeward bound, destined by right and vision to be the emperor and to sit upon that golden throne beyond the Gilden Gate.

We ride for Arrow, an avalanche that thunders from the Highlands. This world will bend to my dominion. The box is open, its memories free, old wickedness and sins loosed once more. I am not that boy, the wild boy on the edge of manhood who filled it. He stands in my past and soon the curvature of the earth will hide him as the years carry us apart. I am not that boy and his crimes don't stain my hands. I'm riding for Arrow. I will delve shoulder-deep in gore if the need arises, so deep no river could scour me clean though they cut through mountains. My dreams are my own now, dark and pure. If you would know them, Brother, stand in my way.

I told Sageous my sins cried out for more, and I intend to give them company. I will burn and I will harrow and Orrin's lands, Egan's blood-stained inheritance, will be delivered into my hands. I will stand King of Arrow, of Normardy, of Conaught, of Belpan, of the Ken Marshes, of Orlanth, and of the Renar Highlands. I will take these lands and make a weapon of their peoples. In fire and in blood I will bend them to my will, because this is a game with no rules, and I will be victorious if it beggars hell.

I write this as we camp after a hard day's riding. I make a crabbed hand across pages as white as gold can buy. Perhaps they were destined for more worthy thoughts, but I set mine here. Sageous wrote his words across his skin and it left him weak. My father keeps them to himself and it leaves him less than human. I write mine here, as if ink and paper can take the blame from me. The surgeons like to bleed a man, to let ill humours out, so that he may face the world anew. Perhaps they should just hand him a quill and let the poisons spill from him whilst he keeps his blood for its intended purpose.

Beside my pages are Katherine's, scavenged from the ruination below Rigden Rock. I saw her burn. I saw her among the flames, her horse screaming. Or was that a dream in the darkness that followed? In any event the wind scattered her words across the dead and I followed them to the corpse of a baggage mule. I said once, these feelings are too fierce to last. They can only burn. Make us ash and char. And we burned, both of us – but still I want her. Though if she stood here now, she would only hate me and pride would edge my tongue to cut her in return.

Pride has ever been my weakness and my strength, but there are three things only of which I'm proud. The first – I climbed God's finger to stand alone in that high place and find a new perspective. Second – I went to the mountain for Gog, even though I couldn't save him from his fire, just as no one can save me from mine. Third – I fought the all-sword, Master Shimon



with the sword-song all around, and we made a thing of beauty.

There will be pride to come, enough to drown in, but perhaps there will be no more things of which to be proud.

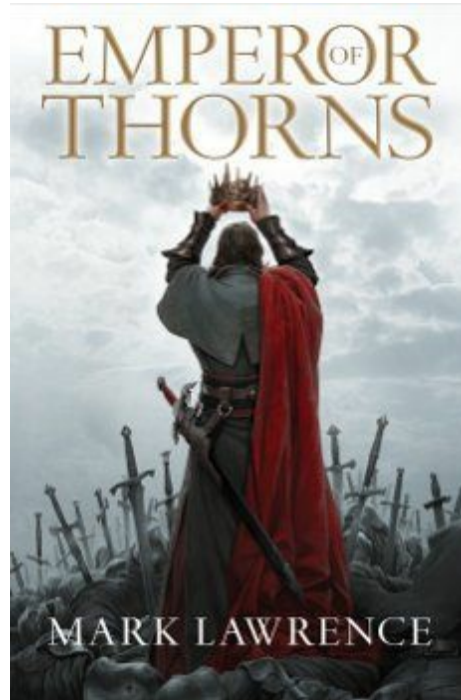
A time of terror comes. A dark time. The graves continue to open and the Dead King prepares to sail. But the world holds worse things than dead men. A dark time comes.

My time.

If it offends you.

Stop me.

Continue Jorg's story. Click [here](#) to buy **EMPEROR OF THORNS**, book three of **THE BROKEN EMPIRE**.



## Acknowledgments

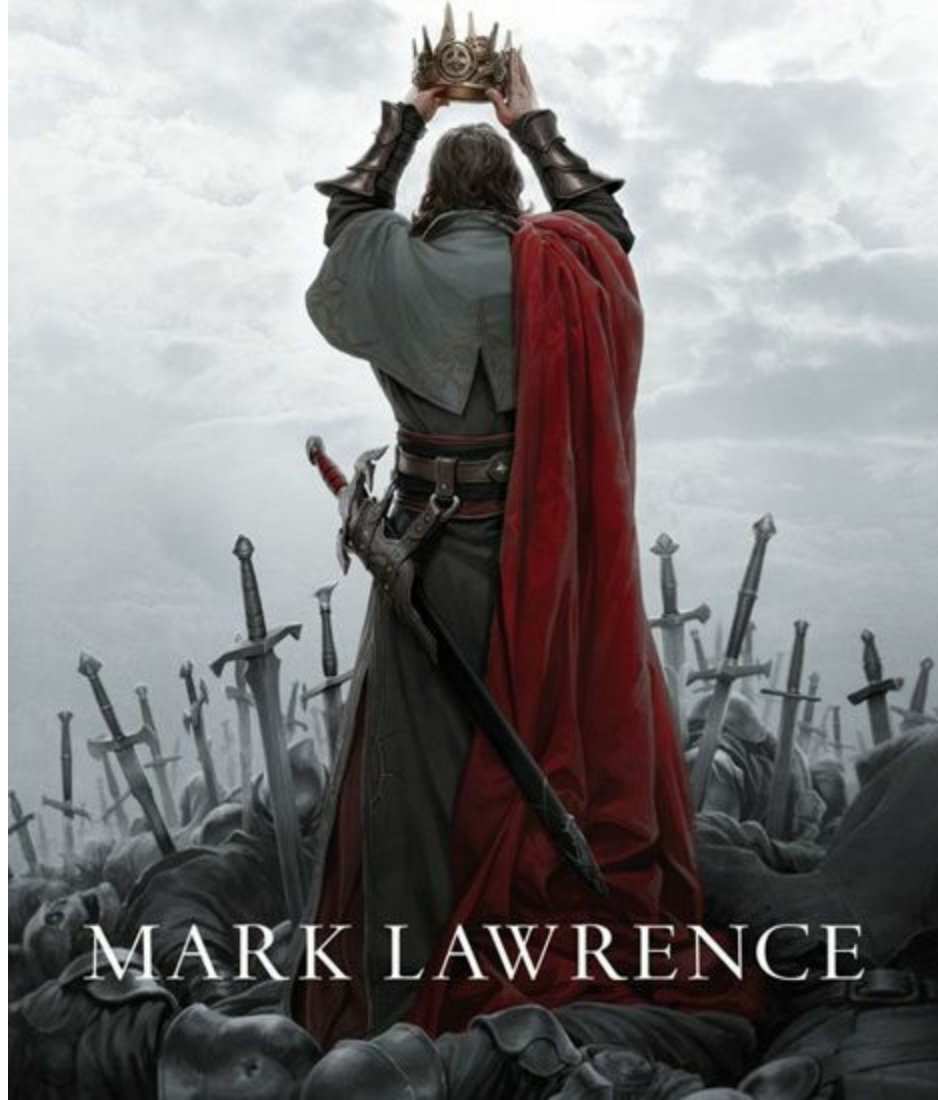
I need to thank my reader, Helen Mazarakis, for reading *King of Thorns* one chunk at a time as I wrote it, and telling me what she thought.

My editor, Jane Johnson, deserves huge thanks for all her splendid efforts to date. There are many ways to praise her input but perhaps the whole story can be told by noting that from ten thousand lines she picked out my favourite, unprompted, and loved it. I read one of her books this year too – when the person editing you writes wonderful novels you know you’ve fallen on your feet.

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And finally, my agent Ian Drury must be thanked for getting me the gig in the first place and for continuing to sell my books across the world. Gaia Banks and Virginia Ascione, working with Ian at Sheil Land Associates Ltd, also need thanking for their efforts in getting Jorg’s story into so many translations.

# EMPEROR OF THORNS



MARK LAWRENCE

# **EMPEROR OF THORNS**

# **Book Three of The Broken Empire**

# *Mark Lawrence*



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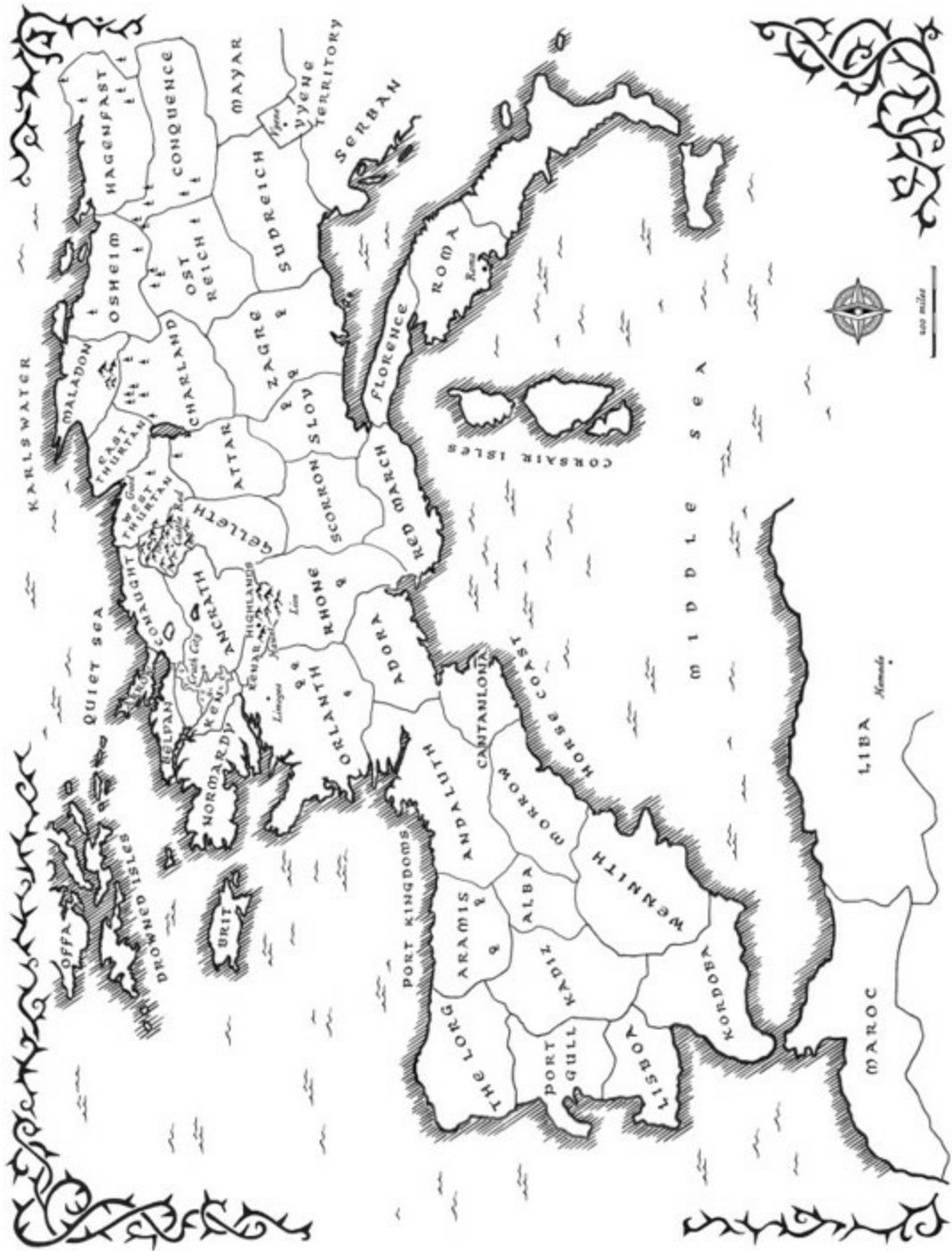
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*Dedicated to my son, Bryn.*



KARLSWATER

QUIET SEA

OFFA

DROWNED ISLES

BEIT

NORMARDY

KELPAN

CONARIGHT

TRUAST

THURSTAN

OSHEIM

HAGENFAST

CONQUENCE

MAYAR

SUDREICH

ZAGRE

SUDRON SLOV

SERBAN

FLORENCE

ROMA

CORSAIR ISLES

RED MARCH

MIDDLE SEA

ADRA

ORLANTHI

SCRON SLOV

CHARELAND

OST REICH

VEYENE TERRITORY

THE LOGG

ARAMIS

ALBA

KADIZ

LIBOA

KORBBA

WANNITH

MORKOW

ANDALITH

CANTANLOIA

HORSE COAST

LIBA

MAROC



100 miles

## The Story So Far

For those of you who have had to wait a year for this book I provide a brief synopsis of books 1 and 2, so that your memories may be refreshed. Here I carry forward only what is of importance to the tale that follows.

1. Jorg's mother and brother, William, were killed when he was nine: he hung hidden in the thorns and witnessed it. His uncle sent the assassins.
2. Jorg's father, Olidan, is not a nice man. He killed Jorg's dog when Jorg was six, and stabbed Jorg in the chest when he was fourteen.
3. Jorg's father still rules in Ancrath, married now to Sareth. Sareth's sister Katherine is Jorg's step-aunt and something of an obsession for him.
4. Jorg accidentally (though not guiltlessly) killed his baby step-brother Degran.
5. A man named Luntar put Jorg's memory of the incident in a box. Jorg has now recovered the memory.
6. A number of magically-gifted individuals work behind the many thrones of the Broken Empire, competing with each other and manipulating events to further their own control.
7. We left Jorg still on his uncle's throne in Renar. The princes of Arrow lay dead, their army shattered and the six nations gathered under Orrin of Arrow's rule ripe for the picking.
8. We left Jorg the day after his wedding to twelve-year-old Queen Miana.
9. Jorg had sent men to recover his badly-wounded chancellor, Coddin, from the mountainside.
10. Katherine's diary was found in the destruction outside the Haunt – whether she survived where her baggage train did not is unknown.
11. Red Kent was badly burned in the fight.
12. Jorg discovered there are ghosts of the Builders in the network of machines they left behind.
13. Jorg learned from one such ghost, Fexler Brews, that what he calls magic exists because the Builder scientists changed the way the world works. They made it possible for a person's will to affect matter and energy directly.

14. The gun Jorg used to conclude the siege on the Haunt was taken from Fexler Brews' suicide.
15. The powers over necromancy and fire were burned out of Jorg when they nearly destroyed him at the finale of the battle for the Haunt.
16. The Dead King is a powerful individual who watches the living from the deadlands and has shown a particular interest in Jorg.
17. Chella, a necromancer, has become an agent of the Dead King.
18. Every four years the rulers of the hundred fragments of empire convene in the capital Vyene for Congression – a truce period during which they vote for a new emperor. In the hundred years since the death of the last steward no candidate has managed to secure the necessary majority.
19. In the earlier thread 'Four Years Earlier' we left Jorg at his grandfather's castle on the Horse Coast. The mathmagician, Qalasadi, had escaped after failing to poison the nobles. The Builder-ghost, Fexler, had given Jorg the view-ring that offers interactive views of the world from satellites and other optical resources.

## Prologue

Kai stood before the old-stone, a single rough block set upright in the days when men knew nothing but wood and rock and hunting. Or perhaps they knew more than that, for they had set the old-stone in a place of seeing. A point where veils thinned and lifted and secrets might be learned or told. A place where the heavens stood a little lower, such that the sky-sworn might touch them more easily.

The local men called the promontory ‘the Finger’, which Kai supposed was apt if dull. And if it were a finger then the old-stone stood on the knuckle. Here the finger lay sixty yards across and at the edges fell a similar distance to meet the marsh in a series of steep and rocky steps.

Kai took a deep breath and let the cold air fill his lungs, let the dampness infect him, slowed his heart, and listened for the high, sad voice of the old-stone, less of a sound than a memory of sound. His vision lifted from him with just a whisper of pain. The point of Kai’s perception vaulted skyward, leaving his flesh beside the monolith. He watched now from a bright valley between two tumbling banks of cloud, watched himself as a dot upon the Finger, and the promontory itself a mere sliver of land reaching out into the vastness of the Reed Sea. At this distance the River Rill became a ribbon of silver running to the Lake of Glass.

Kai flew higher. The ground fell away, growing more abstract with each beat of his mind-born wings. The mists swirled, and the clouds held him again in their cool embrace.

*Is this what death is like? A cold whiteness, for ever and ever amen?*

Kai resisted the cloud’s pull and found the sun again. The sky-sworn could so easily lose themselves in the vastness of the heavens. Many did, leaving flesh to die and haunting the empty spaces above. A core of selfishness bound Kai to his existence. He knew himself well enough to admit that. An old strand of greed, an inability to let go. Failings of a kind perhaps, but here an asset that would keep him whole.

He flew above the soft brilliance of the clouds, weaving his path amongst their turrets and towers. A seris broke the pillowed alabaster, ghost-faint even to the eye of Kai's mind, its sinuous form plunging in and out of sight, a hundred feet long and thicker than a man. Kai called to it. The cloud-snake coiled on itself; describing lazy circles as it drew ever closer.

'Old friend.' Kai hailed it. As many as a hundred seris swarmed amid the thunderheads when the land-breaker storms came, but each seris knew what every seris knew, so to Kai's mind there was only one. Perhaps the seris were remnants of sky-sworn who had forgotten themselves, forgotten all that they were to dance among the clouds. Or maybe they had always been, requiring no birth and knowing no death.

The seris fixed Kai with the cold blue glow of its eye-pits. He felt the chill of its mind-touch, slow and curious. 'Still the woman?'

'Always the woman.' Kai watched the light on the clouds. Architectural clouds, just ready for God's hand to shape, ready to be cathedrals, towers, monsters ... It amused him that the seris thought he always brought the same girl to the Finger.

*Maybe seris think there's just one man, one woman, and lots of bodies.*

The seris moved around Kai in a corkscrew, as if he were there in person, cocooning him in its coils. 'You would have one shadow?'

Kai smiled. The seris thought of human love as clouds coming together, sometimes brushing one to another, sometimes building to a storm, sometimes lost one in the other – casting one shadow.

'Yes, to have one shadow.' Kai surprised himself with the heat in his voice. He wanted what the seris had. Not just a roll in the heather. Not this time.

'Make it.' The voice of the seris spoke beneath his skin, though he had left that far below.

'Make it happen? It isn't that easy.'

'You do not want?' The seris rippled. Kai knew it for laughter.

'Oh, I want.' *She just has to walk in the room and I'm on fire. The scent of her! I close my eyes and I'm in the Gardens of Bethda.*

'A storm comes.' Sorrow tinged the seris's voice.

Kai puzzled. He'd seen no sign of a storm brewing.

'They rise,' the seris said.

'The dead?' Kai asked, the old fear creeping over him.

'Worse.' One word, too much meaning.

‘Lichkin?’ Kai stared, he could see nothing. *Lichkin only come in the dark.*  
‘They rise,’ the seris said.

‘How many?’ *Don’t let it be all seven! Please.*

‘Many. Like the rain.’ The seris left. The mist from which it wove its body drifted formless. Kai had never seen a seris fall apart like that. ‘Make one shadow.’ The voice hung in the air.

Kai’s vision arrowed toward the ground. He dived for the Finger. Sula stood at the fingertip, on the very edge, a white dot, growing swiftly. Sight slammed into body, hard enough to make him fall to his knees. He scrambled up, disoriented for a moment, then tore off toward Sula. He reached her in less than a minute, and bent double before her, heaving in his breath.

‘You were a long time.’ Sula turned at his approach. ‘I thought you’d forgotten about me, Kai Summerson.’

‘Forgive me, my lady?’ he gasped, and grinned, her beauty pushing away his panic. It seemed silly now. From on high he’d seen nothing to worry him.

Sula’s pout became smile, the sun reached down to light her face, and for a moment Kai forgot about the seris’s warning. *Lichkin travel at night.* He took her hands and she came to him. She smelled of flowers. The softness of her breasts against his chest made his heart skip. For a moment he could see only her eyes and lips. The fingers of one hand locked with hers, the other ran along her throat, feeling the pulsing heat of her.

‘You shouldn’t stand so close to the edge,’ he said, though she stole his breath. Just a yard behind her the tip of the Finger crumbled away into two hundred feet of cliffs, stepping sharply down into the surrounding marsh.

‘You sound like Daddy.’ Sula cocked her head and leaned into him. ‘You know, he even told me not to go with you today? That Kai Summerson is low-born trash, he said. He wanted me to stay cooped up in Morltown while he did his business deals.’

‘What?’ Kai let go of Sula’s hands. ‘You said he agreed.’

Sula giggled and put on a gruff voice. ‘I’ll not have my daughter gallivanting with a Guardian captain!’ She laughed and returned to her normal tones. ‘Did you know, he thinks you have a “reputation”?’

Kai did have a reputation, and a man like Merik Wineland could make things very difficult for him.

‘Look, Sula, we’d better go. There may be trouble coming.’

The tight little lines of a frown marred Sula’s perfect brow. ‘Trouble coming?’



‘I had an ulterior motive for bringing you here,’ Kai said.

Sula grinned where other girls might blush.

‘Not that,’ Kai said. ‘Well, that too, but I was scheduled to check the area. Observe the marsh.’

‘I’ve been watching from the cliff while you were gone. There’s nothing down there!’ Sula turned from him and gestured to the green infinity of the mire. Then she saw it. ‘What’s that?’

Across the Reed Sea a mist was rising. It ran in white streams, spreading from the east, blood-tinged by the setting sun.

‘They’re coming.’ Kai struggled to speak. He found his voice and tried a confident smile. It felt like a grimace. ‘Sula, we have to move fast. I need to report to Fort Aral. I’ll get you over the Mextens and leave you at Redrocks. You’ll be safe there. A wagon will get you to Morltown.’

The darts flew with a noise like somebody blowing out candles, a series of short sudden breaths. Three clustered just below Sula’s right armpit. Three thin black darts, stark against the whiteness of her dress. Kai felt the sting in his neck, like the bite of horseflies.

The mire ghouls swarmed over the tip of the Finger, grey and spider-like, swift and silent. Kai ripped his short sword from its scabbard. It felt heavier than lead. The numbness was in his fingers already and the sword fell from his clumsy grasp.

*A storm’s coming.*

# 1

*I failed my brother. I hung in the thorns and let him die and the world has been wrong since that night. I failed him, and though I've let many brothers die since, that first pain has not diminished. The best part of me still hangs there, on those thorns. Life can tear away what's vital to a man, hook it from him, one scrap at a time, leaving him empty-handed and beggared by the years. Every man has his thorns, not of him, but in him, deep as bones. The scars of the briar mark me, a calligraphy of violence, a message blood-writ, requiring a lifetime to translate.*

The Gilden Guard always arrive on my birthday. They came for me when I turned sixteen, they came to my father and to my uncle the day I reached twelve. I rode with the brothers at that time and we saw the guard troop headed for Ancrath along the Great West Road. When I turned eight I saw them first hand, clattering through the gates of the Tall Castle on their white stallions. Will and I had watched in awe.

Today I watched them with Miana at my side. Queen Miana. They came clattering through a different set of gates into a different castle, but the effect was much the same, a golden tide. I wondered if the Haunt would hold them all.

'Captain Harran!' I called down. 'Good of you to come. Will you have an ale?' I waved toward the trestle tables set out before him. I'd had our thrones brought onto the balcony so we could watch the arrival.

Harran swung himself from the saddle, dazzling in his fire-gilt steel. Behind him guardsmen continued to pour into the courtyard. Hundreds of them. Seven troops of fifty to be exact. One troop for each of my lands. When they had come four years before, I warranted just a single troop, but Harran had been leading it then as now.

'My thanks, King Jorg,' he called up. 'But we must ride before noon. The roads to Vyene are worse than expected. We will be hard pushed to reach the

Gate by Congression.’

‘Surely you won’t rush a king from his birthday celebrations just for Congression?’ I sipped my ale and held the goblet aloft. ‘I claim my twentieth year today, you know.’

Harran made an apologetic shrug and turned to review his troops. More than two hundred were already crowded in. I would be impressed if he managed to file the whole contingent of three hundred and fifty into the Haunt. Even after extension during the reconstruction, the front courtyard wasn’t what one would call capacious.

I leaned toward Miana and placed a hand on her fat belly. ‘He’s worried if I don’t go there might be another hung vote.’

She smiled at that. The last vote that was even close to a decision had been at the second Congression – the thirty-third wasn’t likely to be any nearer to setting an emperor on the throne than the previous thirty.

Makin came through the gates at the rear of the guard column with a dozen or so of my knights, having escorted Harran through the Highlands. A purely symbolic escort since none in their right mind, and few even in their wrong mind, would get in the way of a Gilden Guard troop, let alone seven massed together.

‘So Miana, you can see why I have to leave you, even if my son is about to fight his way out into the world.’ I felt him kick under my hand. Miana shifted in her throne. ‘I can’t really say no to seven troops.’

‘One of those troops is for Lord Kennick, you know,’ she said.

‘Who?’ I asked it only to tease her.

‘Sometimes I think you regret turning Makin into my lord of Kennick.’ She gave me that quick scowl of hers.

‘I think he regrets it too. He can’t have spent more than a month there in the last two years. He’s had the good furniture from the Baron’s Hall moved to his rooms here.’

We fell silent, watching the guard marshal their numbers within the tight confines of the courtyard. Their discipline put all other troops to shame. Even Grandfather’s Horse Coast cavalry looked a rabble next to the Gilden Guard. I had once marvelled at the quality of Orrin of Arrow’s travel guard, but these men stood a class apart. Not one of the hundreds didn’t gleam in the sun, the gilt on their armour showing no sign of dirt or wear. The last emperor had deep pockets and his personal guard continued to dip into them close on two centuries after his death.

‘I should go down.’ I made to get up, but didn’t. I liked the comfort. Three weeks’ hard riding held little appeal.

‘You should.’ Miana chewed on a pepper. Her tastes had veered from one extreme to another in past months. Of late she’d returned to the scalding flavours of her homeland on the Horse Coast. It made her kisses quite an adventure. ‘I should give you your present first though.’

I raised a brow at that and tapped her belly. ‘He’s cooked and ready?’

Miana flicked my hand away and waved to a servant in the shadows of the hall. At times she still looked like the child who’d arrived to find the Haunt all but encircled, all but doomed. At a month shy of fifteen the most petite of serving girls still dwarfed her, but at least pregnancy had added some curves, filled her chest out, put some colour in her cheeks.

Hamlar came out with something under a silk cloth, long and thin, but not long enough for a sword. He offered it to me with a slight bow. He’d served my uncle for twenty years but had never shown me a sour glance since I put an end to his old employment. I twitched the cloth away.

‘A stick? My dear, you shouldn’t have.’ I pursed my lips at it. A nice enough stick it had to be said. I didn’t recognize the wood.

Hamlar set the stick on the table between the thrones and departed.

‘It’s a rod,’ Miana said. ‘Lignum Vitae, hard, and heavy enough to sink in water.’

‘A stick that could drown me ...’

She waved again and Hamlar returned with a large tome from my library held before him, opened to a page marked with an ivory spacer.

‘It says there that the Lord of Orlanth won the hereditary right to bear his rod of office at the Congressional.’ She set a finger to the appropriate passage.

I picked the rod up with renewed interest. It felt like an iron bar in my hand. As King of the Highlands, Arrow, Belpan, Conaught, Normardy, and Orlanth, not to mention overlord of Kennick, it seemed that I now held royal charter to carry a wooden stick where all others must walk unarmed. And thanks to my pixie-faced, rosy-cheeked little queen, my stick would be an iron-wood rod that could brain a man in a pot-helm.

‘Thank you,’ I said. I’ve never been one for affection or sentiment, but I liked to think we understood each other well enough for her to know when something pleased me.

I gave the rod an experimental swish and found myself sufficient

inspiration to leave my throne. ‘I’ll look in on Coddin on the way down.’

Coddin’s nurses had anticipated me. The door to his chambers stood open, the window shutters wide, musk sticks lit. Even so the stench of his wound hung in the air. Soon it would be two years since the arrow struck him and still the wound festered and gaped beneath the physician’s dressings.

‘Jorg.’ He waved to me from his bed, made up by the window and raised so he too could see the guard arrive.

‘Coddin.’ The old sense of unfocused guilt folded around me.

‘Did you say goodbye to her?’

‘Miana? Of course. Well ...’

‘She’s going to have your child, Jorg. Alone. Whilst you’re off riding.’

‘She’ll hardly be alone. She has no end of maids and ladies-in-waiting. Damned if I know their names or recognize half of them. Seems to be a new one every day.’

‘You played your part in this, Jorg. She will know you’re absent when the time comes and it will be harder on her. You should at least make a proper goodbye.’

Only Coddin could lecture me so.

‘I said ... thank you.’ I twirled my new stick into view. ‘A present.’

‘When you’re done here go back up. Say the right things.’

I gave the nod that means perhaps. It seemed to be enough for him.

‘I never tire of watching those boys at horse,’ he said, glancing once more at the gleaming ranks below.

‘Practice makes perfect. They’d do better to practise war though. Being able to back a horse into a tight corner makes a pretty show but—’

‘So enjoy the show!’ He shook his head, tried to hide a grimace, then looked at me. ‘What can I do for you, my king?’

‘As always,’ I said. ‘Advice.’

‘You hardly need it. I’ve never even seen Vyene, not even been close. I haven’t got anything that will help you in the Holy City. Sharp wits and all that book learning should serve you well enough. You survived the last Congression, didn’t you?’

I let that memory tug a bleak smile from me. ‘I’ve got some measure of cleverness perhaps, old man, but what I need from you is wisdom. I know you’ve had my library brought through this chamber one book at a time. The men bring you tales and rumour from all corners. Where do my interests lie

in Vyene? Where shall I drop my seven votes?’

I stepped closer, across the bare stones. Coddin was ever the soldier: no rugs or rushes for him even as an invalid.

‘You don’t want to hear my wisdom, Jorg. If that’s what it is.’ Coddin turned to the window again, the sun catching his age, and catching the lines that pain had etched into him.

‘I had hoped you’d changed your mind,’ I said. There are hard paths and there are the hardest paths.

The stench of his wound came stronger now I stood close. Corruption is nibbling at our heels from the hour we’re born. The stink of rot just reminds us where our feet are leading us, whichever direction they point in.

‘Vote with your father. Be at peace with him.’

Good medicines often taste foul, but some pills are too bitter to swallow. I paused to take the anger from my voice. ‘It’s been nearly more than I can do not to march my armies into Ancrath and lay waste. If it’s a struggle to keep from open war ... how can there be peace?’

‘You two are alike. Your father perhaps a touch colder, more stern and with less ambition, but you fell from the same tree and similar evils forged you.’

Only Coddin could tell me I was my father’s son and live. Only a man who had already died in my employ and lay rotting in my service still, out of duty, only such a man could speak that truth.

‘I don’t need him,’ I said.

‘Didn’t this ghost of yours, this Builder, tell you two Ancraths together would end the power of the hidden hands? Think, Jorg! Sageous set your uncle against you. Sageous wanted you and your brother in the ground. And failing that he drove a wedge between father and son. And what would end the power of men like Sageous, of the Silent Sister, Skilfar, and all their ilk? Peace! An emperor on the throne. A single voice of command. Two Ancraths! You think your father has been idle all this time, the years that grew you, and the years before? He may not have your arching ambition, but he is not without his own measure. King Olidan has influence in many courts. I won’t say he has friends, but he commands loyalty, respect, and fear in equal measures. Olidan knows secrets.’

‘I know secrets.’ Many I did not wish to know.

‘The Hundred will not follow the son whilst the father stands before them.’

‘Then I should destroy him.’

‘Your father took that path – it made you stronger.’

‘He faltered at the last.’ I looked at my hand, remembering how I had lifted it from my chest, dripping crimson. My blood, father’s knife. ‘He faltered. I will not.’

If it had been the dream-witch who drove a wedge between us then he had done his job well. It wasn’t in me to forgive my father. I doubted it was in him to accept such forgiveness.

‘The hidden hands might think two Ancraths will end their power. Me, I think one is enough. It was enough for Corion. Enough for Sageous. I will be enough for all of them if they seek to stop me. In any event, you know in what high esteem I hold prophecy.’

Coddin sighed. ‘Harran is waiting for you. You have my advice. Carry it with you. It won’t slow you down.’

The captains of my armies, nobles from the Highlands, a dozen lords on petitioning visits from various corners of the seven kingdoms, and scores of hangers-on all waited for me in the entrance hall before the keep doors. The time when I could just slip away had ... just slipped away. I acknowledged the throng with a raised hand.

‘My lords, warriors of my house, I’m off to Congression. Be assured I will carry your interests there along with my own and present them with my usual blend of tact and diplomacy.’

That raised a chuckle. I’d bled a lot of men dry to take my little corner of empire so I felt I should play out the game for my court, as long as it cost me nothing. And besides, their interests lay with mine, so I hardly lied.

I singled Captain Marten out amongst the crowd, tall and weathered, nothing of the farmer left in him. I gave no rank higher than captain but the man had led five thousand soldiers and more in my name.

‘Keep her safe, Marten. Keep them both safe.’ I put a hand to his shoulder. Nothing else needed to be said.

I came into the courtyard flanked by two knights of my table, Sir Kent and Sir Riccard. The spring breeze couldn’t carry the aroma of horse sweat away fast enough, and the herd of more than three hundred appeared to be doing their best to leave the place knee-deep in manure. I find that massed cavalry are always best viewed from a certain distance.

Makin eased his horse through the ranks to reach us. ‘Many happy returns, King Jorg!’

‘We’ll see,’ I said. It all felt a little too comfortable. Happy families with my tiny queen above. Birthday greetings and a golden escort down below. Too much soft living and peace can choke a man sure as any rope.

Makin raised an eyebrow but said nothing, his smile still in place.

‘Your advisors are ready to ride, sire.’ Kent had taken to calling me sire and seemed happier that way.

‘You should be taking wise heads not men-at-arms,’ Makin said.

‘And who might you be bringing, Lord Makin?’ I had decided to let him select the single advisor his vote entitled him to bring to Congression.

He pointed across the yard to a scrawny old man, pinch-faced, a red cloak lifting around him as the wind swirled. ‘Osser Gant. Chamberlain to the late Baron of Kennick. When I’m asked what my vote will cost, Osser’s the man who will know what is and what isn’t of worth to Kennick.’

I had to smile at that. He might pretend it wasn’t so, but part of old Makin wanted to play out his new role as one of the Hundred in grand style. Whether he would model his rule on my father’s or that of the Prince of Arrow remained unclear.

‘There’s not much of Kennick that ain’t marsh, and what the Ken Marshes need is timber. Stilts, so your muddy peasants’ houses don’t sink overnight. And you get that from me now. So don’t let your man forget it.’

Makin coughed as if some of that marsh had got into his chest. ‘So who exactly are you taking as advisors?’

It hadn’t been a difficult choice. Coddin’s final trip came when they carried him down from the mountain after the battle for the Haunt. He wouldn’t travel again. I had grey heads aplenty at court, but none whose contents I valued. ‘You’re looking at two of them.’ I nodded to Sirs Kent and Riccard. ‘Rike and Grumlow are waiting outside, Keppen and Gorgoth with them.’

‘Christ, Jorg! You can’t bring Rike! This is the emperor’s court we’re talking about! And Gorgoth? He doesn’t even like you.’

I drew my sword, a smooth glittering motion, and hundreds of golden helms turned to follow its arc. I held the blade high, turning it this way and that to catch the sun. ‘I’ve been to Congression before, Makin. I know what games they play there. This year we’re going to play a new game. Mine. And I’m bringing the right pieces.’



## 2

Several hundred horsemen throw up a lot of dust. We left the Matteracks in a shroud of our own making, the Gilden Guard stretched out across half a mile of winding mountain path. Their gleam didn't survive long and we made a grey troop as we came to the plains.

Makin and I rode together along the convolutions of the track on which we once met the Prince of Arrow, headed for my gates. Makin looked older now, a little iron in the black, worry lines across his brow. On the road Makin had always seemed happy. Since we came to wealth and fortune and castles he had taken to worry.

'Will you miss her?' he asked. For an hour just the clip and clop of hooves on stony ground, and then from nowhere, 'Will you miss her?'

'I don't know.' I'd grown fond of my little queen. When she wanted to she could excite me, as most women could: my eye is not hard to please. But I didn't burn for her, didn't need to have her, to keep her in my sight. More than fondness, I liked her, respected her quick mind and ruthless undercurrents. But I didn't love her, not the irrational foolish love that can overwhelm a man, wash him away and strand him on unknown shores.

'You don't know?' he asked.

'We'll find out, won't we?' I said.

Makin shook his head.

'You're hardly the champion of true love, Lord Makin,' I told him. In the six years since we came to the Haunt he had kept no woman with him, and if he had a mistress or even a favourite whore he had them well hidden.

He shrugged. 'I lost myself on the road, Jorg. Those were black years for me. I'm not fit company for any woman I'd desire.'

'What? And I am?' I turned in the saddle to watch him.

'You were young. A boy. Sin doesn't stick to a child's skin the way it clings to a man's.'

My turn to shrug. He had seemed happier when murdering and robbing

than he did thinking back on it in his vaulted halls. Perhaps he just needed something to worry about again, so he could stop worrying.

‘She’s a good woman, Jorg. And she’s going to make you a father soon. Have you thought about that?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It had slipped my mind.’ In truth though it surfaced in my thoughts in each waking hour, and many dreaming ones. I couldn’t find a way to grip the idea and it did indeed slip from me. I knew a squalling infant would soon appear, but what that would mean to me – what it was to be a father – I had no hold on. Coddin told me I would know how to feel. Instinct would tell me – something written in the blood. And perhaps it would come to me, like a sneeze arriving when pepper’s in the air, but until it did I had no way of imagining it.

‘Perhaps you’ll be a good father,’ Makin said.

‘No.’ Whether I somehow came to understand the process or not I would make a poor father. I had failed my brother and I would doubtless fail my son. Somehow the curse Olidan of Ancrath bestowed on me, and got most likely from his own sire, would infect any child of mine.

Makin pursed his lips but had the grace or the wisdom not to argue.

There’s not much of the Renar Highlands that lies flat enough to grow crops on, but close to the border with Ancrath the land stops leaping and diving long enough for farming and for a city, of sorts. Hodd Town, my capital. I could see the stain of it on the horizon.

‘We’ll camp here,’ I said.

Makin leaned in his saddle to tell Sir Riccard, and he raised my colours on his lance.

‘We could make Hodd Town,’ Makin said. ‘We’d be there an hour or so past sunset.’

‘Bad beds, grinning officials, and fleas.’ I swung out of Brath’s saddle. ‘I’d rather sleep in a tent.’

Gorgoth sat down. He let the guard work around him, tethering their horses, organizing their feed, setting up pavilions, each big enough for six men, with two ribbons streaming from the centre-point, the emperor’s black and gold. Keppen and Grumlow threw their saddlebags beside the leucrota and sat on them to play dice.

‘We should at least pass through town tomorrow, Jorg.’ Makin tied off the feedbag on his mount’s nose and turned back to me. ‘The people love to see

the guard ride past. You can give them that at least?’

I shrugged. ‘It should be enough that I keep court in the Highlands. Do you think they’ve forgotten that I’ve a *palace* bigger than the whole of Hodd Town down in Arrow?’

Makin kept his eyes on mine. ‘Sometimes it seems you’ve forgotten it, Jorg.’

I turned away and squatted to watch the dice roll. The ache in my thighs told me I’d been too long in the throne and the bed and the banquet hall. Makin had it right, I should travel my seven kingdoms, even if it were only to spend time on the road and keep its lessons sharp in my mind.

‘Son of a bitch!’ Keppen spat. All five of Grumlow’s dice showed sixes. Keppen started to empty his coin pouch, spat again, and threw the whole lot down at Grumlow’s feet. I shook my head. It seemed a waste of good fortune to buck such odds for a pouch of coin.

‘Don’t use up all your luck, Brother Grumlow. You might need it later.’ I stood again, biting back a curse at my legs.

I hadn’t wanted to live in the palace Prince Orrin had built for Katherine. I spent a few weeks there after we had secured the allegiance of Arrow’s surviving lords. The building reminded me of Orrin, austere but splendid, high arches, pillars of white stone, it could have been copied from the ruins of Macedon where Alexander grew to greatness. I rattled around in its many rooms with the brothers as my guards, and my captains planning the capture of Arrow’s remaining conquests. The palace felt deserted despite a staff of hundreds, strangers all of them. In the end I’d been glad to ride out to secure Normardy, somehow a relief though it proved the bloodiest of that spring’s campaigns.

If life in the Haunt had left me too soft for a day in the saddle then I was wise to avoid the luxury of that palace. Better the mountains than the plains, better the howl of the wind about snow-clad peaks than the foul air blowing off the Quiet Sea laden with the stench of the Drowned Isles. Besides, in Ancrath and in Renar the blood of my line ran thickest. I might not hunger for the warmth of family but in troubled times it’s wiser to be surrounded by subjects who follow out of habit rather than out of new-found fear.

A gentle rain began to fall as the light faded. I pulled my cloak tighter and moved to one of the campfires.

‘A tent for the king!’ Sir Riccard shouted, catching the arm of a passing guardsman.

‘A little wet won’t hurt me,’ I told him. A good swordsman, Riccard, and brave, but rather too taken with his rank and with shouting.

Time spent around a fire, among the bustle of warriors, was more to my liking than watching the walls of a tent twitch and flap, and imagining what might lie behind them. I watched the guards organize their camp and let the aroma of the stew-pots tease my nose.

When you are a troop of more than three hundred, a small army by most reckonings, all the simple matters of the road require discipline. Latrine trenches must be dug, a watch organized on a defensible perimeter, horses taken to graze and water. Gone the easy ways that suited our band of brothers on the roads of my childhood. Scale changes everything.

A guard captain came with a chair for me, a piece of campaign furniture that would fold down again to a tight flat package with brass-bound corners to weather the knocks and bumps of travel. Captain Harran found me sat in it with a bowl of venison and potatoes in my lap, food from my own stores at the Haunt, no doubt. The guard expected to provision wherever they stopped – a kind of highway robbery legalized by the last echoes of empire.

‘There’s a priest wanting to see you,’ Harran said. I let him drop ‘King Jorg’ into my expectant silence. The captains of the Gilden Guard hold the Hundred in mild contempt and are wont to laugh at our titles behind their oh-so-shiny helmets.

‘A priest? Or perhaps the Bishop of Hodd Town?’ I asked. The Gilden Guard have little respect for the church of Roma either, a legacy of centuries punctuated by vicious squabbles between emperors and Popes. For the emperor’s loyalists Vyene is the holy city and Roma an irrelevance.

‘Yes, a bishop.’ Harran nodded.

‘The silly hat gives them away,’ I said. ‘Sir Kent, if you could go and escort Father Gomst to our little circle of piety. I wouldn’t want him coming to grief amongst the guard.’

I sat back in my chair and swigged from a tankard of ale they’d brought me, sour stuff from the breweries of the Ost-Reich. Rike watched the fire, gnawing on a bone from his meal. Most men watch the flames as if seeking answers in the mystery of that bright dance. Rike just scowled. Gorgoth came across and elbowed a space close enough that the glow lit him. Like me he had a measure of understanding when he stared into the flames. The magic I’d borrowed from Gog burned out of me on the day we turned the men of Arrow from the Haunt – it was never truly mine. I think, though, that Gorgoth

had wet his hands in what Gog swam through. Not fire-sworn like Gog, but with a touch of it running in his veins.

Grumlow alerted us to Bishop Gomst's approach, pointing out the mitre swaying above the heads of guardsmen lined for the mess tent. We watched as he emerged, arriving in full regalia with his crook to lean on and a shuffle in his feet, though he had no more years on him than Keppen who could run up a mountain before lunch if the need arose.

'Father Gomst,' I said. I'd been calling him that since I could call him anything at all and saw no reason to change my ways just because he'd changed his hat.

'King Jorg.' He bowed his head. The rain started to thicken.

'And what brings the Bishop of Hodd Town out on a damp night like this when he could be warming himself before the votive candles banked in his cathedral?' A sore point since the cathedral stood half built. I still poked at old Gomsty as if he were stuck in that cage we found him in years back on the lichway. My uncle had over-reached himself when he commissioned the cathedral project, a poorly judged plan conceived the same year my mother squeezed me into the world. Perhaps another bad decision. In any event, the money had run out. Cathedrals don't come cheap, not even in Hodd Town.

'I needed to speak with you, my king. Better here than in the city.' Gomst stood with the rain dripping from the curls of his crook, bedraggled in his finery.

'Get the man a chair,' I shouted. 'You can't leave a man of God standing in the muck.' Then in a lower voice, 'Tell me, Father Gomst.'

Gomst took his time to sit, adjusting his robes, the hems thick with mud. I expected him to come with a priest or two, a church boy to carry his train at least, but my bishop sat before me unattended, dark with rain, and looking older than his years.

'There was a time when the seas rose, King Jorg.' He held his crook white-knuckled and stared at the other hand in his lap. Gomst never told stories. He scolded or he flattered, according to the cloth of his audience.

'The seas rise each day, Father Gomst,' I said. 'The moon draws on the deep waters as it draws on women's blood.' I knew he spoke of the Flood, but tormenting him came too easy.

'There were untold years when the seas lay lower, when the Drowned Isles were one great land of Brettan, and the Never Lands fed an empire, before the Quiet Sea stole them. But the waters rose and a thousand cities drowned.'

‘And you think the oceans ready themselves for another bite?’ I grinned and held a hand out to accept the rain. ‘Will it pour for forty days and nights?’

‘Have you had a vision?’ A question rasped from scorched lungs. Red Kent had come to squat beside Gomst’s chair. Since surviving the inferno at the Haunt Sir Kent had got himself a bad case of religion.

‘It seems I chose well when making court in the mountains,’ I said. ‘Perhaps the Highland will become the richest island kingdom in the new world.’

Sir Riccard laughed at that. I seldom made a joke that didn’t find an echo in him. Makin twisted a grin. I trusted that more.

‘I speak of a different rising, a darker tide,’ Gomst said. He seemed determined to play the prophet. ‘Word comes from every convent, from Arrow, Belpan, Normardy, from the cold north and from the Port kingdoms. The most pious of the faith’s nuns dream of it. Hermits leave their caves to speak of what the night brings them, icons bleed to testify the truth. The Dead King readies himself. Black ships wait at anchor. The graves empty.’

‘We have fought the dead before, and won.’ The rain felt cold now.

‘The Dead King has overwhelmed the last of Brettan’s lords, he holds all the Isles. He has a fleet waiting to sail. The holiest see a black tide coming.’ Gomst looked up now, meeting my eyes.

‘Have you seen this, Gomst?’ I asked him.

‘I am not holy.’

That convinced me, of his belief and fear at least. I knew Gomst for a rogue, a goat-bearded leech with an eye for his own comfort and a taste for grand but empty oratory. Honesty from him spoke more than from another man.

‘You’ll come to Congression with me. Set this news before the Hundred.’

His eyes widened at that, rain stuttered from his lips. ‘I— I have no place there.’

‘You’ll come as one of my advisors,’ I told him. ‘Sir Riccard will cede his place to you.’

I stood, shaking the wet from my hair. ‘Damn this rain. Harran! Point me at my tent. Sir Kent, Riccard, see the bishop back to his church. I don’t want any ghouls or ghosts troubling him on his return.’

Captain Harran had waited in the next fire circle and led me now to my pavilion, larger than the guards’, hide floors within, strewn with black and

gold cushions. Makin followed in behind me, coughing and shaking off the rain, my bodyguard, though a pavilion had been set for him as Baron of Kennick. I shrugged off my cloak and it landed with a splat, leaking water.

‘Gomst sends us to bed with sweet dreams,’ I said, glancing around. A chest of provisions sat to my left and a commode had been placed on the opposite side. Silver lamps burning smokeless oil lit me to my bed, carved timber, four posted, assembled from pieces carried by a dozen different guards.

‘I’ve no faith in dreams.’ Makin set his cloak aside and shook like a wet dog. ‘Or the bishop.’

A chess set had been laid on a delicate table beside the bed, board of black and white marble, silver pieces, ruby-set or with emeralds to indicate the sides.

‘The guard lay their tents grander than my rooms at the Haunt,’ I said.

Makin inclined his head. ‘I don’t trust dreams,’ he repeated.

‘The women of Hodd Town wear no blues.’ I started to unbuckle my breastplate. I could have had a boy to do it, but servants are a disease that leaves you crippled.

‘You’re an observer of fashion now?’ Makin worked at his own armour, still dripping on the hides.

‘Tin prices are four times what they stood at when I took my uncle’s throne.’

Makin grinned. ‘Have I missed a guest? You’re speaking to somebody but it’s not me?’

‘That man of yours, Osser Gant? He would understand me.’ I let my armour lie where it fell. My eyes kept returning to the chessboard. They had set one for me on my last journey to Congression too. Every night. As if no one could pretend to the throne without being a player of the game.

‘You’ve led me to the water, but I can’t drink. Tell me plain, Jorg. I’m a simple man.’

‘Trade, Lord Makin.’ I pushed a pawn out experimentally. A ruby-eyed pawn, servant to the black queen. ‘We have no trade with the Isles, no tin, no woad, no Brettan nets, not those clever axes of theirs or those tough little sheep. We have no trade and black ships are seen off Conaught, sailing the Quiet Sea but never coming to port.’

‘There have been wars. The Brettan lords are always feuding.’ Makin shrugged.

‘Chella spoke of the Dead King. I don’t trust dreams but I trust the word of an enemy who thinks me wholly in their power. The marsh dead have kept my father’s armies busy on his borders. We would have had our reckoning years back, father and me, if he were not so tied with holding on to what he has.’

Makin nodded at that. ‘Kennick suffers too. All the men-at-arms who answer to me are set to keep the dead penned in the marshes. But an army of them? A king?’

‘Chella was a queen to the army she raised in the Cantanlona.’

‘But ships? Invasions?’

‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Makin, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ I sat on the bed and rotated the chessboard so the white queen and her army faced his way. ‘Make a move.’

Makin had six victories before I set him to snuffing out the lamps. That he took his six to the floor and I took my single win to the luxury of a bed proved scant comfort. I fell asleep with the pieces flashing before my eyes, black squares, white, the twinkle of rubies and emeralds.

A storm came in the night, raging against the canvas. Tents are boosters, telling exaggerated tales of the weather they save you from. The sound was of a deluge fit to drown the kingdom and a wind that could scour the rocks from mountain slopes. Under a weather blanket, curled below a hedge, it might not have woken me, but beneath the great drum of the pavilion roof I lay staring into darkness.

Sometimes it’s good to hear the rain, but not be wet, to know that the wind is howling but to feel no breath of it. I waited in that timeless comfortable dark and at last the scent of white musk rose, her arms folded about my chest, and she drew me down into dreams. There seemed an urgency to it tonight.

‘Aunt Katherine.’ No doubt my lips twitched toward the words while I slept.

In the beginning Katherine sent me only nightmares, as if she counted herself my conscience and needed to torment me with my crimes. Time and again baby Degran died in my hands and I woke screaming, sweat-soaked, a danger to any who shared my bed. I spent nights roasting over the slow fire of Sareth’s grief, shown from every angle by the arts her sister taught herself while married to the Prince of Arrow. Miana could not keep to my chambers and set herself a bed in the east tower.



Dream-sworn, I told myself. She's a dream-witch. Sageous's ilk. But it didn't stop me wanting her. I painted Katherine's image across the dark storm of my imagination. She never showed herself and so I brought forth my first sight of her, that time-locked memory when we collided in the corridors of the Tall Castle.

Katherine showed me her loved ones – those I had killed. Sir Galen championing her through the bright days of her youth in Scorrion, and her maid Hanna at a time when she looked less sour and offered a child-princess comfort in a loveless court. In dreaming, Katherine made me care about her cares, about her people, twisting me with the strange logic of the sleeping mind such that they seemed important, real, as real as the memories from before the thorns. And all of this in the too-bright light of the Gelleth sun, the flesh-stripping glare of that Builder Sun, always behind me, throwing my shadow like a black finger into the midst of their lives.

I let her arms draw me down through midnight. I had never fought her, though I felt I could, and I think perhaps she wanted me to. Even more than she wanted to show me the wrongs I had wrought, even more than she needed to make me feel it as she felt it, I think she needed me to fight her, to struggle against her spell, to close my dreaming eyes and try to escape. But I didn't. I told myself that I chose to face what I feared. That her torments would burn me clean of sentiment. But truly – I liked her arms around me, the feel of her close at hand, touching yet untouchable.

Whispers of light reached me through the starless night. Of late the dreams she drew me to were more confused, unfocused, as if she dreamed also. I would see her, or touch her, but never both. We would walk the Tall Castle, or the Palace of Arrow, her dresses flowing, silence binding us, the walls aging and crumbling as we passed. Or I would smell her, hold her, but be blind, or see only the graves of Perechaise.

Tonight though, the dream came cold and clear. Broken stone crunched beneath my shoes, the rain lashed me. I climbed a slope, bent against the gale. My fingers moved blind across natural rock, a wall rising before me. I knew every sensation but held no control as if I were a puppet and another kept the strings.

'What lesson is this, Katherine?'

She never spoke to me. Just as I never fought her – she never spoke. At first the dreams she wrought on me were all anger and revenge. Still they often carried that edge but I thought also that she experimented, trained her

talent – as a swordsman crafts his technique and adds new strokes to his repertoire. These had been Sageous’s skills and now that my aunt kept once more beneath Father’s roof it might be she filled the heathen’s role, though whether like him she spread a subtle web of influence and with touches turned the Hundred along Olidan Ancrath’s paths, or indeed her own, I didn’t know.

The storm fell away without warning and the wind died, though I heard it moaning behind me. A cave of some sort. I had passed through the narrow mouth of a cave. I crouched and swung the pack from my shoulder. Sure fingers found a flint and tinder. Within moments I lit the lantern fished from a pocket within the bag. I would have been proud of my work, but the hands that carried it out, the hands I held the flint in and struck flame with, were not mine. The lantern showed them to be pale, like flesh too long under water, and long-fingered. I have long fingers, but these were white spiders, crawling in the lantern’s shadows.

I moved on, or rather the man whose skin I shared moved on and bore me with him. The lantern’s glow reached out and found little to return it. My vision stayed where directed by the owner of the eyes I watched through – on the floor for the most part, natural rock smoothed by the passage of many feet. An occasional glance to the left and right showed waterfalls of frozen stone and unearthly galleries where stalagmites reached up to stalactites. And I knew where I walked. The Haunt’s eastern sally port. The pale man had climbed the Runyard in the dark of the storm and entered the sally port through the concealed slot high on the Runyard’s flank.

The man moved with confidence. Although many twists and turns led off to dark unknowns it took no special skill to find the way, polished as it was by countless predecessors. The dream seemed accurate, drawing on my memories to make substance. A shiver ran through me, though not through the pale man. If Katherine strove for accuracy then soon a black hand would close around the intruder, reaching from the shadow, and pull him with inexorable strength and merciful speed into the gaping maw of a troll. I hoped not to feel those black teeth close in my flesh, but it seemed likely. Already their stink hung in my nose and his collar chafed my neck.

He walked his path and no hand came reaching. If I had been able to hold a breath I would have let it sigh through my teeth. For a while the dream had convinced me I was there, but no; Gorgoth’s trolls guarded the subterranean paths to the Haunt and many more secret routes besides.

We came now through hand-hewn tunnels, gouged into the rock to join the Haunt to the natural caves. The man stopped, not far from the lowest of the Haunt's cellars. Ahead a clot of darkness swallowed the lantern light and gave nothing back. For long moments he held still, no motion in him, almost inhuman in his lack of twitch or tremor. When he advanced he moved on swift feet, the hilt of a knife cool in his grip though I couldn't see the blade. A single troll lay across the rough stone, sprawled out with its long limbs reaching. The beast's face nestled, hidden against the black knob of its shoulder. It might have been dead, but with careful observation the pale man and I saw the slow rise and fall of its back as breath came and went.

Without haste the man stepped around the sleeping troll, ducking where the tunnel's roof curved low, picking his way over black legs.

'A poor dream, Katherine.' I spoke without needing his lips. 'Trolls are made for war. It's written through them. This man's scent would have woken a dozen by now and set their mouths running with hunger.'

My escort found the wooden door that gives onto the Haunt's wine cellars. He worked the lock with heavy picks suited to such an old and solid mechanism. A drop of oil to take any squeak from the hinges and he pushed it open, stepping through without hesitation. I caught sight of his knife then, an assassin's tool, long and thin, its handle of turned white bone.

He emerged from the false front of the huge barrel that disguised the exit. Propped against a real barrel, opposite the false one and of nearly equal size, a guardsman in my colours sat, helm to one side, legs stretched in front of him, head forward in slumber. I crouched before him. I felt my haunches settle on my heels, I felt the strain in the muscles of my thighs, the coarseness of the guard's dirty blond hair as I pulled his head back. I knew him. The name fluttered behind my thoughts. Rodrick, a little fellow, younger than me, I once found him hiding in my tower when Arrow besieged the castle. My knife lay cold against his throat now, and still he didn't stir. I'd half a mind to open his neck just for being such a useless guard. Even so it came as a shock when my hand slipped lower and drove the blade into his heart. That woke him! Rodrick watched me with hurt eyes, mouth twisting but silent, and he died. I waited. All trace of motion left the boy but still I waited. And then I pulled the knife free. Very little blood flowed. I wiped my blade clean on his tunic.

The pale man had black sleeves. I noticed that much before his gaze found the stairs and he went to them. He left his lantern beside Rodrick and his

shadow led the way.

The man walked through the Haunt's corridors and halls as if he belonged there. The castle lay in darkness with only the occasional lamp set to light a corner or doorway. Shutters rattled, shaken by the wind, rainwater pooled below, driven past lintels and running over stone floors. It seemed my people huddled in their beds while the storm howled, for none of them wandered, no servant tending lamps, no dun-man for the night-soil, not a nursemaid or guardsman's harlot slipping from the barracks ... not a guardsman come to that.

At last, as the assassin reached the internal door to the east tower, we found a guard who hadn't abandoned his post. Sir Graeham, knight of my table, asleep on his feet, held upright by a combination of plate armour, a halberd, and the wall. Pale hands positioned the long knife at the gap between gorget and shoulderplate. The assassin set the heel of his palm over his knife's bone hilt, positioned so a sharp blow would puncture both leather and chainmail, and find the jugular beneath. He paused, perhaps sharing my thought that the knight might create quite a clatter if he fell. We held, close enough that I could draw Sir Graeham's ripe stink in with each breath. The wind howled and I drove the knife home. Its hilt stung the hand that wasn't mine, the business end stung Sir Graeham worse, and he fell, twitching. His weight pulled him from the knife.

Again the assassin cleaned his blade. This time on the knight's red cloak, smearing it with a brighter shade. Fastidious, this one.

He found the key on Graeham's belt and unlocked the oak door, iron-bound and polished by the touch of hands. Old as the door was, the archway held more years. My uncle's scrolls spoke of a time when the Haunt was nothing but the east tower, a single watchtower set on the mountain's shoulder with a military camp about its base. And even those men, who fought the tribes of Or and forged a stronghold in the Highlands, did not build the tower. There is writing on that arch, but time has forgotten even the name of the script. Its meaning has passed beyond knowing.

The assassin stepped beneath the archway and beneath the runes deep-set upon the keystone. Pain shot through me, thorns found my flesh, hooking through skin and blood in a manner that promised no easy release, like the barbed arrow that must be dug free, or the lock-hound that needs killing before the muscles and tendons along its jaw can be sliced and its teeth pried from the bone. It hurt, but I found my freedom, torn from the body that had

held me. He walked on without pause and I staggered in his wake, following as he mounted the stair. Across the back of his black cloak a cross had been sewn in white silk. A holy cross.

I ran at him, but passed through as if I were the ghost, though in truth it was me that shivered at the contact. Lamp light offered me his face as I turned, just for a moment before he walked through me and left me standing on the steps. The man held no colour, his face the same pale, drowned hue as his hands, hair oiled to the scalp, the iris of his eyes matching the ivory of the whites. He bore a cross embroidered in white silk across the front of his tunic to echo the one on his back. A papal assassin then. Only the Vatican sends assassins out into the world bearing a return address. The rest of us would rather not be caught using such agents. The papal assassin however is merely an extension of the Pope's infallibility – how can there be shame in executing the word of God? Why would such men cloak themselves in anonymity?

Sprawled in an alcove off the stairwell, Brother Emmer lay dead to the world. The assassin knelt and applied his knife to make sure it was a permanent state of affairs. Emmer had shown little interest in women on the road and had seemed a good choice to watch over my queen. I watched the Pope's man climb the stairs until the turn of the tower took him from view. Emmer's blood washed down, step by step, in crimson falls.

I never fought Katherine, never tried to escape her illusions, but that didn't mean I had to cooperate. Somehow I had broken free of the assassin and I had no reason to watch what else he might do. Murder my queen, no doubt. Miana would be sleeping in the chamber at the top of the stairs if Katherine kept to the castle plan she had mined from my memories. Should I follow like a fool and watch Miana's throat slit? See her thrash in her blood with my child dying inside her?

I stood in the darkness with just the echoes of lamplight from beyond the winding of the stair above and below.

'Truly? You think you can show me anything that would hurt me?' I spoke to the air. 'You've walked my remembering.' I let her wander where she pleased when she came with her nightmares. I thought perhaps that daring the long corridors of my memory was more torment to her than her punishments were to me. Even with the key to each of my doors in her hand I knew there were places in me she didn't go. Who in their right mind would?

'Let's play this game, Princess, all the way through. Let's discover if you find the end too bitter.'

I ran up the stairs, the contacts between foot and stone were light and without effort, as if only in the assassin's flesh could I properly touch this dream. I caught him within moments, passed him and won the race to the top.

Marten waited there, crouched before the queen's door, his sword and shield on the floor, his eyes bloodshot and wild. Sweat held dark hair to his brow and ran down the straining tendons of his neck. In one fist a dagger, making constant jabs into his open palm. His breath came in short gasps and blood brimmed crimson from the cup of his hand.

'Fight it,' I told him. Despite my resolve I found myself drawn in by his struggle to stay awake and guard Miana.

The assassin came into view, my view, not Marten's. He stopped, sniffed the air without sound, and cocked his head to catch the faint gasp of Marten's pain. Whilst he paused I dived into him, determined to settle around his bones, clinging to anything tangible. A moment of blind agony and I stared once more out of his eyes. I tasted blood. He had shared the hurt of reunion with me and although he hadn't cried out, a sharp intake of breath had passed his lips. Perhaps it would be enough to warn Marten.

The Pope's man reached into his robe, replacing the long bone-handled blade and drawing forth two short and heavy daggers, cruciform and weighted for throwing. He moved very fast, diving into Marten's line of sight whilst at the same time releasing the first of his knives, just a flick of the wrist but imparting lethal force.

Marten launched himself almost in the instant we faced him, slowed for a heartbeat perhaps by the weight of sleep he denied. The assassin's dagger hit somewhere between neck and belly – I heard chain links snap. He passed us with a roar and the assassin's foot lashed out, catching Marten's chin, propelling him into the curved wall. Momentum carried him feet over head over feet, clattering down the stairs. We hesitated, as if unsure whether to pursue and check if any bones remained unbroken. The hot wetness below our knee convinced the assassin otherwise. Somehow Marten had sliced the assassin as he passed. The Pope's man hobbled on toward the door, hissing at the pain now spreading from the cut Marten had left on us. He paused to tie a bandage, a silk sash from an inner pocket, pulled it tight, then advanced up the steps.

Any key had clattered down the stairs with Marten and the Pope's man took out his picks once more to work the lock. It took longer than before, the queen's door boasted a tricky mechanism perhaps as old as the tower. Before

it yielded to our patient work the flagstones were pooled with the assassin's blood, red as any man's despite the pallor of his skin.

We stood, and I felt his weakness – blood loss and something else – he strained some muscle I didn't share, but I knew the effort wearied him. Perhaps the all-encompassing sleep had cost him dear.

The door opened without sound. He took the lamp from its hook where Marten had crouched and stepped in. The strength of his imaginings began to reach me as at last his excitement mounted. I saw the pictures rising in his mind. All of a sudden, dream or no dream, I wanted him to fail. I didn't want him to slice Miana open. I had no wish to see the red ruin of my unborn child drawn from her. The fear surprised me, raw and basic, and I knew it to be my own, not some sharing with Katherine. I wondered if it might be an echo of what Coddin warned I would feel for my son or daughter when I first saw them, held them. If that were true then I had my first inkling of how dangerous the bond might be.

On the dresser by the bed a glimmer from the silver chain I gave Miana on her name day. Under the covers a mounded form caught in shadows, wife and child, soft in sleep.

'Wake up.' As if saying it would make it happen. 'Wake up.' All my will and not even a tremble of it on his lips.

Cold certainty gripped me by the throat. This was real. This was now. I slept in my bed in a tent, Miana slept in hers miles from me, and a pale death approached her.

'Katherine!' I shouted her name inside his head. 'Don't do this!'

He stepped toward the bed, the second of his throwing knives raised and ready. Perhaps only the size of the lump beneath the covers prevented him from flinging the blade at it immediately. Miana could not be said to be a large woman, even with a baby straining to get out of her. It looked as though she had company in there. I might even have thought it, but for Marten at the door.

Another step, his injured leg numb and cold now, his lips muttering some spell in silence, as if his magics mirrored his unsteady gait and needed support. I had no warning, my arm – his arm – drew back to throw. In that moment the covers fluttered, I heard a muted 'choom' and a fist hit my side, hard enough to throw me back, spinning twice before slamming into the wall. I slid to the floor, legs stretched before me and looked down. Both pale hands covered my side, blood spurting between my fingers, pieces of flesh hanging.

The covers lifted and Miana faced me, crouched around the black mass of the Nuban's crossbow, eyes wide and fierce above it.

My right hand found the bone handle of the longer knife. Spitting blood I crawled to my feet, the world rotating around me. I could see that no bolts remained in the crossbow. Inside the assassin I strained with every piece of my being to still his legs, to lay down the weapon. I think he felt it this time. He moved slowly, but keeping between Miana and her door. His eyes fell to her belly, taut beneath her nightgown.

'Stop!' I held to his arm with all my will, but still it crept forward.

Miana looked angry rather than scared. Ready to do bloody murder.

My hand started forward, lunging with the knife, aimed low, below the swing of Miana's bow. I couldn't stop it. The gleaming blade would pierce her womb, and slice, and in a welter of gore she would die. Our child with her.

The assassin thrust, and a hand span from finding flesh our arm shuddered off course, all its power cut clean away by a blow that sheared through my shoulder. I twisted as I collapsed, the ironwork of the crossbow smashing into my face. Marten stood behind me, a devil clothed in blood, his snarl veiled in scarlet. My head hit the carpet, vision turning black. Their voices sounded far away.

'My queen!'

'I'm not hurt, Marten.'

'I'm so sorry – I failed you – he passed me.'

'I'm not hurt, Marten ... A woman woke me in my dreams.'



### 3

‘You’re quiet this morning, Jorg.’

I crunched my bread: from the Haunt, a day old and slightly stale.

‘Still brooding over the chess?’ The smell of clove-spice as he came close. ‘I told you I’ve played since I was six.’

The bread snapped and scattered crust as I broke it open. ‘Get Riccard in here will you?’

Makin stood, downing his java, a cold and stinking brew the guards favour. He left without question: Makin could read people.

Riccard followed him back in moments later, tramping mud over the floor hides, crumbs of his own breakfast in his yellow moustache.

‘Sire?’ He offered a bow, probably warned by Makin.

‘I want you to ride to the Haunt. Take an hour there. Speak to Chancellor Coddin and the queen. Catch us up as soon as you can with any report. If that report makes mention of a white-skinned man, bring the black coffer from my treasury, the one whose lid is inlaid with a silver eagle, and ten men to guard it. Coddin will arrange it.’

Makin raised an eyebrow but came no closer to a question.

I pulled the chessboard near and took an apple from the table. The apple sprayed when bitten and droplets of juice shone on the black and white squares. The pieces stood ready in their lines. I set a finger to the white queen, making a slow circle so she rolled around her base. Either it had been a false dream, Katherine designing better torments than of old, and Miana was fine, or it had been a true dream and Miana was fine.

‘Another game, Jorg?’ Makin asked. All around, from outside, the sounds of camp being struck.

‘No.’ The queen fell, toppling two pawns. ‘I’m past games.’

## 4

*Five years earlier*

*I took the Haunt and the Highland's crown in my fourteenth year and bore its weight three months before I went once more to the road. I ranged north to the Heimrift and south to the Horse Coast, and approached fifteen in the Castle Morrow under the protection of Earl Hansa, my grandfather. And though it was his heavy horse that had drawn me there, and the promise of a strong ally in the Southlands, it was the secrets which lay beneath the castle that kept me. In a forgotten cellar one small corner of a lost world broke through into ours.*

'Come out come out wherever you are.' I knocked the hilt of my dagger against the machine. In the cramped cellar it rang loud enough to hurt my ears.

Still nothing. Just the flicker and buzz of the three still-working glow-bulbs overhead.

'Come on, Grouch. You pop out to badger every visitor. You're famed for it. And yet you hide from me?'

I tapped metal to metal. A thoughtful tempo. Why would Fexler Brews hide from me?

'I thought I was your favourite?' I turned the Builders' view-ring over in my hand. He hadn't made me work very hard for it and I counted it a gift above any my father had ever given me.

'It's some kind of test?' I asked. 'You want something from me?'

What would a Builder ghost want from me? What couldn't he take, or make? Or ask for? If he wanted something, wouldn't he ask?

'You want something.'

One of the glow-bulbs flickered, flared, and died.

*He needs something from me but can't ask.*

I held the view-ring to my eye, and once again I saw the world - the whole world as viewed from outside, a jewel of blue and white hung in the blackness that holds the stars.

*He wanted me to see something.*

'Where are you, Fexler? Where are you hiding?'

I moved to pull the view-ring away in disgust when a tiny point of light caught my eye. A single red dot in all that swirling blue. I pushed the ring tight against the bones of brow and cheek. 'Where are you?' And dialled the side of the ring so the world grew beneath me as though I fell into it. I steered and dialled, homing in on my prey, a constant red dot, drawing me to it now, faster and faster until the ring could show no more and the dot held steady above a barren hill in a range that stretched across badlands to the west of the Horse Coast.

'You want me to go here?' I asked.

Silence. Another glow-bulb flared and died.

I stood a moment in the trembling light of the last glow-bulb, shrugged and made my way up the narrow spiral of stairs toward the castle above.

My grandfather's map room is in a tall tower that overlooks the sea. The map scrolls are held in oiled leather tubes, a wax seal on each set with his sigil. Seven narrow windows admit the light, at least in the months when the storm shutters are not closed against the elements. A scribe is employed to tend the place, and spends his days there from dawn to dusk, ready to open the tubes for anyone authorized to view the contents, and to seal them away again when the work is done.

'You've never thought to suggest a different room?' I asked the scribe as the wind tried to steal the map for the twentieth time. I had been there an hour, chasing documents across the chamber, and was ready to commit murder. How Redmon hadn't taken a crossbow and opened up on the folk below through his seven windows I didn't know. I caught the map before it left the table and replaced the four paperweights it had shrugged off.

'Good ventilation is essential for preserving the vellum,' Redmon said. He kept his gaze on his feet, his quill turning over and over in his hand. I think he worried I might damage his charges in my temper. Had he known me he would have worried about his own health. He looked narrow enough to fit through one of the windows.

I located the hills I had seen through the view-ring, and found the general area of the particular hill where the red dot had sat so patiently. I had wondered if there might truly be a red light blazing on that hillside, so bright it could be seen from the dark vaults of heaven, but I reasoned that it had grown no brighter as my view closed in upon it and so it must have been some clever artifice, like a wax mark on a looking glass that seems to override your reflection.

'And what does this signify?' I asked, my finger on a symbol that covered the region. I felt pretty sure I knew. There were three similar symbols marked on the maps of Ancrath in my

father's library, covering the regions of Ill Shadow, Eastern Dark, and Kane's Scar. But perhaps they served a different purpose in the southlands.

Redmon stepped to the desk and leaned in. 'Promised regions.'  
'Promised?' I asked.

'The half-life lands. Not a place to travel.'

The symbols served the same purpose as they did in Ancrath. They warned of taints lingering from the Builders' war, stains from their poisons, or shadows from the day of a thousand suns.

'And the promise?' I asked.

'Noble Chen's promise, of course.' He looked surprised. 'That when the half-life has spent itself these lands will be returned to man, to till and plough.' Redmon pushed the wire-framed reading lenses further up his nose and returned to his ledgers at the big desk before the towering shelves of pigeonholes, each crammed with documents.

I rolled the scroll up and took it in my hand like a baton.  
'I'm taking this to show Lord Robert.'

Redmon watched with anguish as I left, as if I'd stolen his only son to use as target practice. 'I'll look after it,' I said.

I found my uncle in the stables. He spent more time there than anywhere else, and since I'd met his shrew of a wife I had come to understand. Horses made her sneeze I heard it told, worse and worse minute by minute, until it seemed she would sneeze the eyes from her head. Robert found his peace amongst the stalls, talking bloodlines with his stable-master and looking over his stock. He had thirty horses in the castle stables, all prime examples of their lines, and his best knights to ride them, cavalymen billeted away from the house guard and wall guard in far more luxury, as befits men of title.

'What do you know of the Iberico?' I called out as I walked toward him between the stalls.

'And good afternoon to you, young Jorg.' He shook his head and patted the neck of the black stallion leaning out at him.

'I need to go there,' I said.

He shook his head with emphasis this time. 'The Iberico are dead land. Promised but not given. You don't want to go there.'

'That's true. I don't want to. But I *need* to go there. So what can you tell me?' I asked.

The stallion snorted and rolled an eye as if venting Robert's frustration for him.

'I can tell you that men who spend time in such places sicken and die. Some take years before the poison eats them from within, others last weeks or days, losing their hair and teeth, vomiting blood.'

'I will be quick then.' Behind the set of my jaw second thoughts tried to wrest control of my tongue.

'There are places in the Iberico Hills, unmarked save for the

barren look of them, where a man's skin will fall from him as he walks.' My uncle pushed the horse away and stepped closer to me. 'What grows in those hills is twisted, what lives there unnatural. I doubt your need exceeds the risks.'

'You're right,' I said. And he was. But when was the world ever so simple as right and wrong? I blinked twice and the red dot watched me from the darkness behind my eyelids. 'I know you're right, but often it's not in me to take the sensible path, Uncle. I'm an explorer. Maybe that itch is in you too?'

He rubbed his beard, a quick grin showing through the worry. 'Explore somewhere else?'

'I should take my foolish risks while I'm young, no? Better now than when that little girl you've found for me is grown and looking to me to keep her in silks and splendour. If my mistakes prove fatal, find her another husband.'

'This is nothing to do with Miana. You just shouldn't do this, Jorg. If I thought it would stop you I would tell you "no" and set a guard to watch you.'

I bowed, turned, and walked away. 'I'll take a mule. No sense risking good horseflesh.'

'On that we're agreed,' he called after me. 'Don't let it drink from any standing water there.'

I stepped back into the brightness of the day. The wind still raked across the courtyard, cold from the sea, but the sun would burn you even so.

'Visit Carrod Springs first!' Robert's shout reached me as I started for my quarters.

'Qalasadi and Ibn Fayed.' The names tasted exotic.

'A man of power and a powerful man.' My grandfather rested in the chair where the Earls of Morrow had sat for generations, facing the sea.

A circle of Builder glass, stronger than the walls around it and a full three yards in diameter, showed us the Middle Sea, the curvature of the Earth making it an azure infinity, white-flecked with waves. Out beyond sight across those depths, across the Corsair Isle, no further from us than Crath City, lay Roma and all her dominions.

Caliph Ibn Fayed might keep his court in the heart of a desert but his ships reached out across that sea, Moorish hands seeking to reclaim these lands that had been passed back and forth between Christendom and the Moslems since forever. Ibn Fayed's mathmagician, Qalasadi, had likely returned to the shadow of the caliph's throne to calculate the optimal timing for the next strike, and the odds of its success.

Far below us a wave slapped the cliffs, no tremor of it reaching the room but a high spray beading the glass. Twice a day

they lowered a stable-boy with bucket and cloth to ensure that nothing but age dimmed Grandfather's view.

'Four sails,' he said.

I had only seen three. The merchant cog, red-hulled, hauling cargo along the coast, and two fishing boats, bobbing further out.

Grandfather saw my frown. 'Out there, on the horizon.' A soft-voiced man despite the creaks of age.

A white flash. The sails of some wide-ranging vessel. A warship? A pirate cutter from the Isle? Or some flat-bellied scow out of Ægypt, treasure-laden?

I went closer to the glass, pressed a hand to its coldness. How many centuries ago had it been looted and from what ruin? Redmon surely had a scroll in his windy tower that held the secret.

'I can't allow them to live,' I said. The caliph was just a name to me, Qalasadi filled my thoughts. The numbered man.

Grandfather laughed in his chair, the whale-ivory back of it spreading above him like the spray of a breaking wave. 'Would you hunt down every man who wronged you, Jorg? However far-flung? However long they run? Seems to me a man like that is a slave to chance, always hunting, no time for living.'

'They would have seen you die screaming while the poison ate you,' I said. 'Your wife too. Your son.'

'And would have had you take the blame.' He yawned wide enough to crack his jaw and ran the heels of both palms across the grey stubble of his beard.

'Poison is a dirty weapon,' I said. Not that I had been above its use in Gelleth. I maintain a balanced view of the world, but that balance is always in my favour.

'We play a dirty game.' Grandfather nodded and watched me from his wrinkles with those dark eyes so like Mother's.

Perhaps it wasn't the poison that irked me. Or setting me up for the fall - a chance inspiration surely and none of Ibn Fayed's doing. I recalled Qalasadi in that courtyard the only time we met, his assessment, his calculation as he considered the probabilities. Maybe that lack of malice had made it so personal; he reduced me to numbers and played the odds. Fexler's ghost had been constructed by reducing the true man to numbers. I found I didn't like the process.

'They struck at my family,' I said, and shrugged. 'I've built a kingdom on not allowing such acts to go unpunished.'

He watched me then, with the sunlight streaming around me from the sea window, making me a shadow cut from light. What went on beneath that thin circlet of gold, I wondered, what calculations? We all make them. Not so cold-blooded as Qalasadi's but an arithmetic of sorts nonetheless. What did he make of me, this watering-down of his seed, beloved daughter mixed with detestable

Ancrath? Nothing but a name to him a month ago. No child to remember, no soft toddling innocence from years past to blunt the sharp angles of the young killer before him – blood of his blood.

'How would you do it? The Caliph of Liba lives in lands that are not like ours. You would be a white man where almost no white men are. A stranger in a strange land. Marked at every turn. Reported from the moment you set foot on the Afrique shores. You'll find no friends there, only sand, disease, and death. I would gladly have Ibn Fayed and Qalasadi die. Fayed for striking at me in my halls, the mathmagician for his treachery. But if a lone assassin, especially a lone white assassin, could have accomplished it I would have dispatched one. Not in answer to Fayed's raids – as a man of honour I meet war with war – but in response to his assassin.'

All men of ambition must pray to be pitted against men of honour. Although I pitied my grandfather at that moment, also it made me happy to know that at least somewhere in the mix from which I sprung there lurked a dash of such a man.

'You're right to say it would not be easy, Earl Hansa.' I bowed. 'Maybe I'll wait until it becomes easy ... certainly I need to learn more, consider more.'

Grandfather came to a decision. I saw the change as his face hardened into it. He would make a terrible player of poker.

'Leave Ibn Fayed and his creatures to me, Jorg. They struck at Morrow, at me and mine in the Castle Morrow. The vengeance is mine to take and I will take it.'

The old man had weighed his odds. In one hand the life of an unknown relative, tainted by bad blood, in the other the chance of destroying an enemy. Whether 'unknown relative' had grown into 'Rowan's son, my daughter's child' and outweighed the gain, or whether he judged my chances of success so feather-light as to be outweighed by any claim on kinship, I didn't know.

'I will leave them, then.' I bowed again. The lie came easily. I chose to believe he saw me as his daughter's son.

I provisioned well, loading my mule with water-skins and dried meat. I would find fruit on the way: on the Horse Coast in high summer you had only to stretch out an arm to find an apple, apricot, plum, peach, pear, or even an orange. I packed a tent, for shade is a rarity in the dry hills behind the coastlands, and without the sea breezes the land bakes. I'm told the Moors have held the southern kingdoms time and again, Kadiz, Kordoba, Morrow, Wennith, Andaluth, even Aramis. They find it not so different from the dusts of Afrique.

'So the Iberico, is it?'

I finished cinching the load-strap beneath my mule and looked up.

'Sunny!' I grinned at his scowl. Months back I chose the name for the guardsman after he did his best to keep me out of the castle that first day when I arrived incognito.

'Minding my own business I was and up comes Earl Hansa. "Greyson," he says. He likes to know all the men's names. "Greyson," he says, and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Young King Jorg is making a trip and I'd like you to go along with him." "Volunteering", he called it.'

'Sunny, I can't think of a man I'd rather have with me.' I stood and patted the mule's haunches. It seemed a sturdy beast, shabby but strong. The ostler said he was forty years and more, and wise with it. I thought it good to have at least one greybeard in the party.

'This is revenge for making you drink from the horse trough, ain't it?' Sunny said. He had a sour look to him that made me think of Brother Row.

I waggled my hand. 'Little bit.' In truth I hadn't known I was getting an escort, let alone picked the man. 'In any case, you'll enjoy getting out and about,' I said. 'Surely even the Iberico Hills beat a day standing guard at the Lowery Gate?'

He spat at that, strengthening his resemblance to Row still further. 'I'm a wall guard, not a house flower.' A stretch of his arm showed off the sun's nut-brown stain. House guards are never so tanned.

With the mule's tether in hand I set off for the gate. Sunny followed. His packhorse stood outside the castle wall in the shade of an olive tree, high laden as if we were bound for a crossing of the Aups.

However reluctant the show Sunny put on, my mule had him beaten. I had to haul the beast past the horse trough. I named him Balky and encouraged him with a stick. In the end I had my way, but the fact that Balky did not want to go where I led was never in doubt. I guess he really was the wise one after all.



## 5

### *Five years earlier*

Castle Morrow, like the Haunt, is set apart from the region's main town. Both castles are placed for defence of their occupants. In the Hundred War the conquering of kingdoms is the business of avarice. The Hundred want their new lands to be rich and plentiful, full of taxpayers and recruits. Most attacks will aim to kill the land's ruler so the aggressor may claim his throne and take the kingdom unharmed. Wars of attrition where the peasantry are slaughtered, cities burned, crops destroyed, are less common and happen most often when the two sides are evenly matched, both struggling to gain the advantage required to assault the foe's castles.

The city of Albaseat rests on fertile plains maybe fifty miles inland from Castle Morrow. It took Sunny and me three days to walk the distance, having started late on the first day, and pausing for frequent stick-based negotiations with Balky. The River Jucca feeds the surrounding farmlands. We approached the city along the Coast Road, which for the last few miles leads along the riverbank, past orchards of every sort, through vineyards, along the foot of slopes thick with olive groves. Turning for Albaseat's gates we walked between tilled fields heavy with tomatoes, peppers, beans, onions, cabbage, potatoes, enough food to feed the world.

The walls and towers of Albaseat shone in the southern sun.

'Makes Hodd Town look like a pile of offal,' I said.

'Where?' Sunny asked.

'Capital city of the Renar Highlands,' I said. 'The only city really. More of a big town. Well a town anyhow.'

'The Renar Highlands?'

'Now you're just trying to irk me.' I didn't think he was, though. He blinked and looked away from Albaseat's towers.

'Oh *that* Hood Town, my apologies.' It wasn't often that Sunny remembered I was the king of anywhere and it always left him looking surprised.

'Hodd Town!'

The guards at the city gates let us pass without question. It wasn't often that I remembered Sunny was Greyson Landless, royal guard from Earl Hansa's court.

Albaseat not only left Hodd Town looking like a tumbledown village, it made Crath City look shabby in comparison. The Moors had ruled Albaseat for generations and left their mark everywhere, from the great stone halls that stabled grandfather's cavalry to the high towers from whose minarets you could look out over the source of his wealth, laid out in many shades of green. I did just that, paying a copper to climb the winding stair of the Fayed Tower, a public building at the heart of the great plaza before the new cathedral. Sunny stayed at ground level, watching his horse and Balky from the tower's shade.

Even a hundred yards above the plaza's baking flagstones it felt oven hot. The breeze through the minaret was worth a copper on its own. Without the slow green waters of the Jucca the fields would be desert. The green gave over to parched browns as the land rose and I could see the first rolling steps of the Iberico Hills away to the north. Whatever taint they carried seemed to stain the air itself, turning it a dirty yellow where the horizon started to reclaim the hills.

I leaned out, hands on the windowsill, to spot Sunny below. The city marched off in all directions, broad and ordered streets lined with tall, whitewashed houses. To the west grander mansions, to the east the low homes and tight alleys of the poor. My grandfather's people living in the peace of his reign, his nobles plotting, merchants trading, blacksmith, tanner, and slaughterman hard at work, whores aback, maids aknee, washerwomen hauling loads to the river-side meadows where horsemen trained their steeds, the pulse of life, an old and complex dance of many partners. Quick, quick, slow.

To leave all this behind and dare old poisons, to risk an end like those I had given the people of Gelleth, made no sense. And still I would do it. Not for the hollowness inside me, nor the weight of the copper box that held what had been taken, not for the promise of old magics and the power they offered, but just to know, just to do more than skitter about on the surface of this world. I wanted more than I could see from a tower, however high, or even from the eyes the Builders set among the stars.

Perhaps I just wanted to know what it was that I wanted. Maybe that is all that growing up means.

Slow steps brought me from the tower, lost in thought. I waved Sunny to me and bid him lead me to the Lord House.

'They won't want the likes of—' He glanced back at me, taking in the fine cloak, the silver-chased breastplate. 'Oh.' And remembering that I was a king, albeit of a realm he hardly knew of, he led on.

We passed the cathedral, the finest I'd seen, a stone

confection reaching for blue skies. The saints watched me from their niches and galleries. I felt their disapproval, as if they turned to stare once we passed. The crowds thronged there, before the cathedral steps, perhaps drawn by the cool promise of the great hall within. Sunny and I elbowed our way through, pushing aside the occasional priest and monk as we went.

I came sweating to the doors of the Lord House. I would have stripped to the waist and let Balky carry my gear but perhaps that might have created a poor impression. The guards admitted us, a boy taking our animals, and we sat on velvet-cushioned chairs whilst a flunky in foolish amounts of lace and silk went to announce our arrival to the provost.

The man returned several minutes later with a polite cough to indicate that I might put down the large ornamental vase I had been studying and follow him. When my hands are idle they find mischief of one sort or other. I let the vase slip, caught it an inch from the floor and set it down. Polite coughs leave me wanting to choke out a cough of a different sort. I left Sunny to return the ornament to its niche and bade the servant lead on.

A short corridor took us to the doors of the reception chamber. Like the foyer, every inch of it stood tiled in geometric patterns, blue and white and black, fiendishly complex. Qalasaki would have enjoyed it: even a mathmagician would be hard-pressed to tease out all the secrets it held. High windows caught what breeze was to be had and gave a relief from the heat of the day.

The flunky knocked three times with a little rod he seemed to carry for that sole purpose. A pause and we entered.

The room beyond took my breath, complex in detail but a sparse and simple beauty on the grand scale, an architecture of numbers, very different from the gothic halls of my lands or the dull boxes the Builders left us. The provost sat at the far end in a high-backed ebony chair. Apart from two guards at the door and a scribe at a small desk beside the provost's seat, the long chamber lay empty and my footsteps echoed as I approached.

She looked up from her scroll while I closed the last few yards, a hunched old woman with black and glittering eyes, reminding me of a crow gone to grey and tatters.

'Honourous Jorg Ancrath, King of the Renar Highlands. Grandson to Earl Hansa.' She introduced me to herself.

I gave her the small fraction of a bow her rank commanded and answered in the local custom. 'You have the right of it, madam.'

'We're honoured to welcome you to Albaset, King Jorg,' she said through thin, dry lips and the scribe scratched the words across his parchment.

'It's a fine city. If I could carry it I'd take it with me.'

Again the scratching of the quill - my words falling so quickly into posterity.

'What are your plans, King Jorg? I hope we can tempt you to stay? Two days would be sufficient to prepare an official banquet in your honour. Many of the region's merchants would fight for the opportunity to bend your ear, and our nobility would compete to host you at their mansions, even though I hear you are already promised to Miana of Wennith. And of course Cardinal Hencom will require you at mass.'

I took pleasure in not waiting for the scribe to catch up, but resisted the temptation to pepper my reply with rare and difficult words or random noises for him to puzzle over.

'Perhaps on my return, Provost. I plan first to visit the Iberico Hills. I have an interest in the promised lands: my father's kingdom has several regions where the fire from the thousand suns still burns.'

I heard the quill falter at that. The old woman, though, did not flinch.

'The fire that burns the promised lands is unseen and gives no heat, King Jorg, but it sears flesh just the same. Better to learn of such places in the library.'

She made no talk of postponing my trip until after her nobles and merchants had taken their bites of me. If I were bound for the Iberico Hills such efforts would be wasted - money thrown into the grave as the local saying had it.

'Libraries are a good place to start journeys, Provost. In fact I have come to you hoping that Albaset might have in one of its libraries a better map of the Iberico than the one copied from my grandfather's scrolls. I would count it a great favour if such a map were provided to me ...'

I wondered how I looked to her, how young in my armour and confidence. From a distance the gaps between things are reduced. From the far end of her tunnel of years I wondered how different I looked from a child, from a toddler daring a high fall with not the slightest understanding of consequence.

'I would advise beginning and ending this journey among the scrolls, King Jorg.' She shifted in her chair, plagued no doubt by the aching of joints. 'But when age speaks to youth it goes unheard. When do you plan to leave?'

'With the dawn, Provost.'

'I will set my scribe to searching for a map and have whatever he finds waiting for you at the North Gate by first light.'

'My thanks.' I inclined my head. 'I hope to have some new tales to tell at your banquet when I return.'

She dismissed me with an impatient wave. She didn't expect to see me again.

## 6

### *Five years earlier*

Sunny and I made our way to the North Gate of Albaset in the grey light that steals over the world before dawn. The streets thronged. In summer the Horse Coast bakes and only the earliest hours of the day offer respite. By noon the locals would retreat behind white walls, beneath the terracotta tiles, and sleep until the sun slipped from its zenith.

In the lanes leading to the gate and the wide plaza that lay before it, business had already started. Tavern doors stood open while men bore kegs in upon their shoulders, or lowered barrels into the cellars by the street-traps. Grey-faced women emptied slops from buckets into the gutters. We passed a smithy open to the road so that passersby could see the hammering and quenching and be tempted to purchase what took such sweat and force to craft. A lad hunched at the forge, poking life back into fires banked overnight.

'Oh, to be still abed.' Sunny yanked his packhorse away from some tempting refuse.

A cry turned us back toward the blacksmith's. We had gone only a dozen steps beyond it. The smith's boy lay in the street now. He pushed himself up from the flagstones, face grazed, shaking his head, unsteady. The smith paced out from his workshop and kicked the boy hard enough to lift him off the ground. The air left his lungs with a whuff. Under the dirt the boy's hair looked fair, almost golden, rare this far south.

'My money's on the big fellow,' I said. My brother Will had such hair.

'He's a big one, all right.' Sunny nodded. The smith wore just a leather apron from shoulder to knee and leggings held up with rope. The muscle in his arms gleamed. Swinging a four-pound hammer from dawn till dusk will put a lot of meat on a man.

The child lay on his back, one arm half-raised, too winded to groan, a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth. I thought he might be eight, maybe nine.

'Do I have to kick every lesson into you?' The smith didn't

yell but he had the voice of a man who speaks over the anvil. He drove his foot into the boy's head, the force rolling him once. Blood on the smith's boot now, and staining the boy's hair.

'Ah, hell.' Sunny shook his head.

We watched as the smith stepped in closer.

'I should stop this,' Sunny said, reluctance in every line of him. Something in the smith's face put me in mind of Rike. Not a man to get in the way of.

'Boys get kicked every day,' I said. 'Children die every day.' Some have their heads broken against milestones.

The smith loomed above the boy, who lay curled now as if hunched against the pain. The man drew back for another kick, then paused, reaching a decision. He lifted his boot to stamp the life out of the lad. I guessed he thought him past use, best to finish him off.

'They don't die every day with one of Earl Hansa's guards watching. The Earl wouldn't want this.' But still Sunny didn't move. Instead he shouted. 'You, smith, stop!'

The man paused, his heel a few inches above the side of the boy's head.

'I've picked up strays before and they both died,' I said past a bitter taste. I saw blood in golden curls and felt the thorns' tight hold. I learned this lesson young, a sharp lesson taught in blood and rain. The path to the empire gates lay at my back. A man diverted from that path by strays, burdened by others' needs, would never sit upon the all-throne. Orrin of Arrow would save the children, but they would not save him.

'He's a street cur,' the smith said. 'Too stupid to learn. I've fed him for a month. Kept him under my roof. He's mine to end.' He brought his heel down hard, his weight upon it.

A loud retort of leather on stone. The boy rolled clear but lacked the strength to get up. The smith roared a curse - it drowned my own - the burn that stretched across my face from chin to brow as if a red-hot hand had branded me, now burned again with the same pain that it first gave. I've been told that conscience speaks in a small voice at the back of the mind, clear to some, to others muffled and easy to ignore. I never heard that it burned across a man's face in red agony. Still, pain or no pain, I don't like to be led or to be pushed. Perhaps I selected Balky as a kindred spirit for I took direction as poorly, even from my own conscience on the rare occasions it made a bid for control.

Sunny passed me, aimed for the smith. He hadn't even drawn his sword.

'I'll buy him from you!' I shouted. Sunny could come in handy and I guessed the smith would break his arms off before the idiot thought to reach for his blade.

That made the smith stop in his tracks, Sunny too, with a sigh

of relief, and it quieted the pain. The smith eyed the silver on my breastplate, the cut of my cloak, and thought perhaps that his satisfaction might be worth less than the contents of my coin pouch.

'What's your offer?'

'A contest of your choosing. You win and I pay you this for the boy.' I held a gold ducet before my face between index and middle finger. 'Lose and you get nothing for him.' I magicked the coin away.

He had a good frown at that. The boy managed another roll and fetched up against the wall of the harness shop opposite.

'Perhaps you think you can hold a hot iron longer than I can?' I suggested.

The frown deepened into crevasses topped by the black band of his brows. 'Strength,' he said. 'Who can hold the anvil overhead the longest.'

I glanced at the anvil a few yards back into the smithy. Perhaps two men of regular height might weigh as much. 'Rules?' I asked.

'Rules? No rules!' He laughed. He flexed an arm and muscle mounded on muscle. The Great Ronaldo would be impressed if Taproot's circus ever made it to Albaseat. 'Strength! That's the rule.'

'Show me how it's done, then.' I walked into the smithy. The glow of the forge fire and of two smoking lamps gave enough light to avoid the workbenches and various buckets. The place had a pleasing smell of char and iron and sweat. It reminded me of Norwood, of Mabberton, of a dozen other battles.

The smith followed. I set a hand to his chest as he passed me. 'Your name?'

'Jonas.'

He walked around the anvil. I glanced at the ceiling where tools hung from the beams. He would have just enough room. I would have plenty as he stood a hand taller than me.

Sunny stepped up behind me.

'The boy's still alive, I take it? I'm not doing this for a corpse.'

'He's alive. Might be hurt bad.'

Jonas crouched beside the anvil. He closed one big hand around the horn and set the heel of his other hand beneath the lip of the anvil's face.

'You've done this before.' I gave him my grin.

'Yes.' He showed his teeth. 'I can taste your gold already, boy.'

He tensed, building for the explosion that would drive the ironwork upward. That's when I hit him, with a hammer from the nearest bench. I struck the side of his head just by the eye. The noise wasn't dissimilar from his boot hitting the child. The

hammer came away bloody and Jonas pitched forward over his anvil.

'What?' Sunny asked, as if somehow he hadn't seen it in the half-light.

I shrugged. 'No rules. You heard him.'

We left them both lying in their blood. Whatever fire ate at my face I didn't need another stray, and even if the boy could walk, taking him to the Iberico would be more cruel than another month in Jonas's care. At least the boy was sitting up and looking about, which was more than could be said for his master.

A corner and another street brought us to the plaza. We pushed a path through bakers' boys with trays of loaves overhead, between laden farm carts ready to be offloaded onto the stalls already set to either side of the gate towers. The place heaved, late arriving traders made haste to erect their tables and awnings, and the townsfolk came mob-handed to buy, coins clicking in their hip pouches, eyes darting, hunting bargains in the predawn grey.

'We'll be lucky to find the provost's man in all this.' Sunny snatched at a passing bread roll and missed.

'Have some faith, man,' I said. 'How hard is it to spot a king?' I looped Balky's reins over his pack-saddle and ran both hands through my hair, throwing the length of it wide across my shoulders and back.

We reached the gates, the smoothness of the wall stretching above us to the paling sky. Hooves clattered across the flagstones as we led our animals beneath and traversed a dark tunnel through ten yards of wall.

'I'm to ride with you.' A voice from the black shadows to the side of the exit.

'There you go, Sunny, we are known.' I turned and gave him my grin. The glow from the east caught the lines of his face.

The stranger broke from the shadows, a black clot moving to join us. A woman.

She drew close, her horse a tall black stallion, a dark cloak wrapping her as if she expected to be cold.

'Did you bring a map for us?' I held out my hand.

'I *am* the map,' she said. I could make out only the curve of her smile.

'And how did you know us?' I asked, returning my hand to the reins.

She said nothing, only touched her fingers to her cheek. My scars burned for a moment, another echo of Gog's fire no doubt for I had surely forgotten how to blush long before.

Sunny held his tongue, but I could feel the smugness radiating off him behind me.

'I'm Honourous Jorg Ancrath, king of somewhere you've never



heard of. The grinning idiot behind me is Greyson Landless, bastard son of some venerable line that holds a few dusty acres along the Horse Coast best used for growing rocks. You can call me Jorg and him Sunny. And we're walking.'

'Lesha. One sixteenth of the Provost's horde of grandchildren.'

'Her granddaughter? I'm surprised. I had the impression that the Provost wasn't expecting to see us return.'

It seemed that Lesha wasn't going to answer for she rode a hundred yards in silence at our side as we led our animals away from the city.

'I'm sure my grandmother's assessment of the expedition is accurate and remains unchanged.'

I still could see nothing of her within the fold of her cloak but something in the way she held herself made me sure she was kind to the eye, maybe beautiful.

'So why would she send you, Lady Lesha?' Sunny asked. He broke the silence I'd left for her to fill. Often the lack of a question will prompt an answer, sometimes an answer to a question you might not have thought to ask.

'She didn't send me - I decided to come. In any case, she won't miss me too much. She has plenty of grandchildren and I'm far from being her favourite.'

That left a long silence that none of chose to break. Lesha dismounted and led her horse beside us.

The dawn broke, a gentle fading of greys until the eastern sky grew bright with promise. At last the first brilliant corner of the sun poked above horizon, throwing long shadows our way. I glanced at Lesha then, and lost any sting from when she had touched her cheek to mark my scarring. Each part of her face had been burned as badly as the wound I bore. Her skin held a melted quality, as if it had run like molten rock then frozen once more. The burns surprised me, but less than the fact that she had survived them. She met my gaze. Her eyes were very blue.

'You're still sure you want to go to the Iberico?' She pushed back her hood. The fire had left no hair, her scalp piebald in whites, unhealthy pinks, and beige, holes where her ears lay.

'Damned if I am,' Sunny gasped.

I reached out and took her reins so we both stopped in the road. Balky stood shoulder to shoulder with her horse, Sunny a few yards ahead, looking back.

'And why are you so keen to return, lady?' I asked. 'Why not twice shy, for you've surely been bitten?'

'Perhaps I've nothing to lose now,' she said, her lips lumpy lines of gristle. She didn't look away from me.

I closed my eyes for a second and a point of red light blinked against the back of my eyelids. Fexler's tiny red dot, drawing me across all these miles.

'And what desire drew you there in the first place? Did you think to find wealth in the ruins, or to come back to Albaseat a great and famed explorer?' I shook my head. 'I don't think so. Those are bad bets - not for a daughter of the provost's family. I think the secrets called you there. You wanted answers. To know what the Builders hid there, yes?'

She glanced away then, and spat, like a man. 'I found no answers.'

'But that doesn't mean the place holds none.' I leaned in toward her. She flinched away, not expecting intimacy. My hand caught her around the back of that bald head, the skin rippled and unpleasant beneath my fingers. 'It doesn't mean that asking our questions is not the truest thing that creatures such as you and I can do.' I drew her very close though she strained against it. She stood tall for a woman. 'We can't be trapped by fear. Lives lived within such walls are just slower deaths.' I spoke in a whisper now, bowing my head until a bare inch stood between our faces. I half-expected her to smell of char, but she had no scent, not perfume, not sweat. 'Let's go there and spit in the eye of any who says the old knowledge is forbidden to us, neh?' I kissed her cheek then, because I feared to do it and though commonsense may occasionally bind me, I'll be fucked if fear will.

Lesha snatched herself away. 'You're just a child. You don't know what you're talking about.' But she didn't sound displeased.

We rode until noon and took shelter from the sun in the shade of a stand of olive trees. The farmer's wife proved enterprising enough to delay her own siesta and toil up the slopes to offer us wine, cheeses, and hard brown herb-bread. The old woman crossed herself briefly when she saw Lesha but had the grace not to stare. We set to the meal, and sent her back with an empty basket and a handful of coppers, enough for twice the amount of food were it served in a fine tavern.

'Tell me about the Moors,' I said to nobody in particular. The piece of cheese I licked from my finger was soft and crumbly both at once. It smelled like something that shouldn't ever be eaten, but had a pleasingly complex and pungent taste.

'Which ones?' Lesha said. She looked asleep, stretched on the dusty soil, head pillowed on her bundled cloak at the base of the tree shading her.

She had a point. I'd seen at least a dozen Moors in Albaseat, wrapped in white robes, most of them all but hidden inside the hood of a burnoose, some trading, some just bound upon their business.

'Tell me about the Caliph of Liba.' It seemed a good place to start.

'Ibn Fayed,' Sunny muttered. 'The thorn in your grandfather's arse.'

'Has he many like Qalasaki working for him?' I asked.

'Mathmagicians?' Sunny asked. 'No.'

'There aren't many like that,' Lesha said. 'And they don't work for masters in any case. They follow a pure path. There isn't much that men like that want.'

'Not gold?' I asked.

Lesha raised her ruined head to watch me then sat up against the tree. 'Only rarities hold interest for their kind. Wonders such as we might find in the Iberico, but just as likely old scrolls from the Builder times, ways of calculating, old lore, the sort of cleverness that never seemed to get written down on anything that lasts, or at least that we can read.'

'And Ibn Fayed sails against the Horse Coast to raid, or to settle, or is it punishment for not following the Moors' prophet?' I had my grandfather and uncle's views on this but it's good to look at such things from other angles.

'His people want to return,' Lesha said.

This was new. The provost's granddaughter took her wisdom from the whole book, not just the current page.

'Return?' I had seen a Moorish hand behind much that stood in Albaset though no one seemed eager to admit it.

'Caliphs have ruled here as many years as kings have ruled. Before the Builders and after. The scribes today call them raiders, burners, heathens, but there's Moorish cleverness mixed into everything we take pride in.'

'Not just a pretty face, then,' I said. She read, this one, for her opinions weren't ones that could be formed on what others might think it safe to teach. The church held the Horse Coast Kingdoms and the West Ports close - any closer and they'd choke them. Priests kept a low opinion of heathens, and this far south disagreeing with a man of the cloth often proved to be a dangerous pastime. In every town a church scribe busied himself rewriting history - but they couldn't rewrite what lay written in stone all about them.

Lesha took no offence at my jibe, or at least I think not for her scar tissue couldn't mirror the emotions below.

We lay quiet for a time then. Almost no sound but for the distant clang of a goat bell. Why the old nanny wasn't lying in the shade I couldn't say. The heat wrapped us like a blanket, taking away any inclination to move.

'You were slow to save that boy, Jorg,' Sunny said. I thought him asleep for the past quarter hour, but clearly he'd been replaying the morning behind his eyes.

'I didn't save him. I saved you. You're of some use.'

'You would have let him die?' Sunny sounded troubled by it.

'I would,' I said. 'He was nothing to me.' Golden curls and

blood, the image played over the back of my eyelids. I opened my eyes and sat up. They broke William's head on a milestone, swung him by the feet and beat him on the stone. It happened. The world rolled on regardless. And I learned that nothing mattered.

'I couldn't stand and let it happen while I watched,' Sunny said. 'You can't kick a child to death in front of Earl Hansa's guard.'

'You stepped in for yourself, or for my grandfather?' I asked.

'It was my duty.'

I took an olive left at the bottom of the food basket. Firm flesh broke beneath my teeth. The warm and complicated flavour spread as I chewed.

'Would you have stepped in if it hadn't been your duty?' I asked.

Sunny paused. 'If he hadn't been so damn big, yes.'

'Because you couldn't watch it happen?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Don't live by half measures, Greyson.' I pushed the dusty linen of my sleeve back until the scars from the hook briar showed - pale sigils against tanned skin. 'I heard a priest once speak of the business of salvation. He urged us not to let the fact that we couldn't save everyone from their sins stop us trying to save the people in front of us. That's priests for you. Ready to give up in a moment. Falling over themselves to admit their frailty as if it were a virtue.' I spat out the olive stone. 'Either children are worth saving just because they're children, or they're not worth saving. Don't let your actions be dictated by the accident that puts one in front of your eyes and hides the next. If they're worth saving, save them all, find them, protect them, make it your life's work. If not, take a different street so you won't even see the one you might have seen, turn your head aside, put a hand to your eyes. Problem solved.'

'You'd save them all, would you?' Lesha spoke on the other side of me, voice soft.

'I know a man who is trying to,' I said. 'And if I hadn't learned better, then yes, I'd save them all. No half measures. Some things can't be cut in half. You can't half-love someone. You can't half-betray, or half-lie.'

Silence after that. Even the goat slept.

The shade kept us until the shadows started to lengthen and the white blaze of the sun softened into something that could be endured.

We moved on in the afternoon. Night found our party camped in a dry valley ten miles further north, with a roof of stars and the chirp and whirr of insects to serenade us. The olive groves and cork trees lay far behind. Nothing grew in these valleys except unforgiving thorns, mesquite bushes and creosote, making a

rich perfume of the night air but offering nothing to burn. We ate hard bread, apples, some oranges from Albaset market, and washed it down with a jug of wine, so dark a red as to be near black.

I lay in the night watching the stars wheel, listening to the nicker of the horses, Balky's occasional snort and stamp, Sunny snoring. From time to time Lesha whimpered in her sleep, a soft thing but full of hurt. And rising around it all, the relentless orchestra of night-crawlers, the sound swelling in waves as if an ocean rose about us as the sun fell. I held the copper box in one hand, the other touched the ground, grit beneath my fingertips. Tomorrow we would walk again. It seemed right to walk, and not just to save taking a good horse into poisoned lands. Some places a man needs to have his own two legs take him. Some journeys need a different perspective. The miles mean more if you have travelled them one step at a time and felt the ground change beneath your feet.

At last I closed my eyes and let the multitude of stars be replaced by a single red one. A single star brought the wise men to a cradle in Bethlehem. I wondered if a wise man would follow Fexler's star.

## Chella's Story

Six Years Ago

Defeated in the Cantanlona Swamps

The smell of soil, of earth that crumbles red in the hand, just so, and lets you know you're home. The sun that lit a life from baby to headstrong young man arcs between crimson sunrise and crimson sunset. In the dark, lions roar.

'This is not your place, woman.'

She wants it to be her place. The strength of his longing drew her here, with him, riding the wake of his departure.

'Go home.' His voice is deep with command. Everything he says sounds like wisdom.

'I can tell why he liked you,' she says. She has no home.

'You like him too, but you're too broken to know what to do with that.'

'Don't dare to pity me, Kashta.' Anger she'd thought burned out flares once more. The red soil, white sun, low huts, all seem further away.

'My name is not yours to conjure with, Chella. Go back.'

'Don't order me, Nuban. I could make you my slave again. My toy.' His world is a bright patch now at the corner of her vision, detail lost in jewelled beauty.

'I'm not there any more, woman. I'm here. In the drumming circle, in the hut shadow, in the footprint of the lion.' Each word fainter and deeper.

Chella lifted her face from the stinking mud and spat foul water. Her arms vanished into the mire at the elbows, thick slime dripped from her. She spat again, teeth scraping the mud from her tongue. 'Jorg

Ancrath!’

The web of necromancy that she had spun through the marsh month after month until it pervaded every sucking pool and mire, reaching fathoms deep to even the oldest of the bog-dead, now lay tattered, its strength bleeding away, corrupted once more by the lives of frogs and worms and wading birds. Chella found herself sinking and summoned enough of what strength remained to flounder onto more solid ground, a low mound rising from the mud.

The sky held the memory of blue, faded, as if left too long in the sun. She lay on her back, aware of a thousand prickles beneath her, of being too cold on her sides, too hot on her face. A groan escaped. Pain. When a necromancer has spent too much power, when death has burned out of them, only pain remains to fill the hole. After all, that’s what life is. Pain.

‘Damn him.’ Chella lay panting, more alive than she had been in decades, barely treading the margins of the deadlands. Her teeth ground over each other, muscles iron, the hurt washing across her in waves. ‘Damn him.’

A crow watched her, glossy black, perched on the stone that marked the mound’s highpoint.

The crow spoke, a harsh cawing that took on meaning from one second to the next. ‘It’s not the pain of returning that keeps the necromancer away from life. It’s not that which keeps them so far away – as far as they can go without losing their grip on it. It’s the memories.’

The words came from the crow’s beak but they had been her brother’s, years ago, when he first taught her, first tempted her with what it meant to be death-sworn. In moments of regret she blamed him, as if he had talked her into corruption, as if mere words had parted her from all that was right. Jorg Ancrath had put an end to all her brother’s talking, though. Beheading him beneath Mount Honas, eating his heart, stealing away some part of his strength.

‘Fly away, crow.’ She hissed it past clenched teeth. But memories had started to leak behind her eyes, like pus from a wound, welling up where fingers press.

The crow watched her. Beneath its thin and clutching claws the stone lay lichen spattered, patched in dull orange, faded green, as if

diseased. The bird held Chella's slitted gaze, its eyes bright, black, and glittering. 'No necromancer truly knows what waits for them as they walk the grey path into the deadlands.' It cawed then, harsh and brief as the speech of crows should be, before returning to her brother's voice and to his lessons. 'Each of them has their reasons, often horrific reasons that would turn the stomachs of their fellow men, but whatever their motivation, however strange and cold their minds, they don't know what it is that they have begun. If it could be explained to them in advance, shown on one foul canvas, none of them, not even the worst of them, would take the first step.'

He hadn't lied. He had spoken the whole truth. But words are only words and they seldom turn a person from their path unless they want to be turned.

'I followed you, Cellan. I took your path.' She remembered his face, her brother's face, from a year when they had been young together, children. A happy year. 'No!' The pain had been better than this. She tried not to think, to make a stone of her mind, to allow nothing in.

'It's just life, Chella.' The bird sounded amused. 'Let it in.'

Behind screwed-shut eyes images fought for their moment, to hold her regard if just for an instant before the tide of remembering swept them aside. She saw the crow there, dipping its scarlet head into an open corpse.

'Life is sweet.' Again the caw. 'Taste it.'

She snatched for the crow, lunging, one pain-clawed hand reaching. Only to find it gone. No flap of wings, no scolding voice from high above, just one broken and bedraggled feather, as if that was all that there had ever been.

The sun passed overhead, witness to Chella's long agony, and at last, in the dark beneath a host of stars, she sat. Her head throbbed with memory. Not a complete mapping of the life she had stepped away from, but enough meat on the skeleton to match with where she stood upon the threshold of death and life. She hugged herself, feeling at once how her ribs stood out, how sunken her belly, how withered her chest. The coldest fact, though – the harshest judgment, came from the sum of all her remembering. No tragedy had driven her along the path she chose. She hadn't run from any particular horror, no offence too vile to live with, no terror nipping at her heels. Nothing but



common greed: greed for power, greed for things, and curiosity, of the everyday cat-killing kind. Such were the needs that had set her walking among the dead, mining depravity, rejecting all humanity. Nothing poetic, dark, or worthy, just the mean little wants of an ordinary little life.

Chella drew a deep breath. She resented having to. Jorg Ancrath had done this to her. She felt her heart thump in her chest. Barely more than a child and he had beaten her twice. Left her lying here more alive than dead. Made her feel!

She picked a leech from her leg, then another, fat with her blood. Her skin itched where mosquitoes had taken their fill. It had been years since she held any interest for such creatures, years since they could even touch her without snuffing out the tiny flickers of life in their soft and fragile bodies.

The marsh stank. It hit her for the first time, though she had spent months in its embrace. It stank, and tasted worse than it smelled. Chella pulled herself up, weak in her legs, trembling. The cool of night on her mud-caked nakedness accounted for some of her shivering, hunger and fatigue for a little more, but most of it was fear. Not of the darkness or the swamp or of the long journey through harsh lands. The Dead King scared her. The thought of his cold regard, of his questions, of standing before him in whatever dead thing he chose to wear, her wrapped in the tatters of her power and speaking of failure.

How had it even come to this? Necromancers had been the masters of death, not its servants. But when the Dead King first rose unbidden amongst the darkest of their workings the necromancers knew fear once more, though they thought it abandoned and forgotten in their path. And not just Chella's small cabal beneath Mount Honas. She knew that now, though for a year and more she had thought the Dead King a demon woken by her delving into places not meant for men, a creature focused on her alone, then on her brother and the few around them. But the Dead King spoke to all who looked past life. Any who reached through and drew back what could be found beyond the veil to refill the remains of those who had passed. All who reached for such power would find themselves, sooner or later, holding the Dead King's hand. And he would not ever let them go.

And why had he sent her against this boy? And how had she failed?

'Damn you, Jorg Ancrath.' And Chella fell back to her knees and vomited up a dark and sour mess.

## 8

In the six kingdoms I took from the prince of Arrow there are many cities larger, cleaner, finer, and in every way superior to Hodd Town. There were cities in my domain that I had yet to see, cities where the people called me king and my statue stood in markets and plazas, that I had not been within ten miles of, and even these were finer than Hodd Town. And yet Hodd Town felt more mine. I had held it longer, taken it in person, painted the streets red when Jarco Renar raised it in rebellion. It was not a place where they remembered Orrin of Arrow. None in Hodd Town spoke of his goodness and vision or voiced the common belief that he would be named a saint before his memory grew cold.

All of Hodd Town turned out to greet our arrival. No one lingers at home when the Gilden Guard ride through their city gates. Highlanders lined the streets cheering, and waving whatever flags they had. Of the Hoddites who would whisper in hoarse voices the next day, heads pounding with the echoes of celebration, not one in ten would be able to give a good account of why they cheered, but in a place like the Highlands it's hard not to get excited over any touch of the exotic or foreign. At least as long as it's just passing through and doesn't look at your sister.

I rode at the head of the column and led it to the gates of Lord Holland's mansion, the grandest building in the city, or at least the grandest complete building. One day the cathedral would outshine it.

Lord Holland came to throw his gates open in person, a beefy man sweating in his finery, his wife wobbling along behind, a fan of silver and pearls to hide her jowls.

'King Jorg! You honour my house.' Lord Holland bowed. His face said his hair should be grey with age so I half expected the glossy black wig to fall as he bent to me, but it stayed in place. Perhaps he kept his own hair and used lampblack on it.

'I do honour you,' I agreed. 'I've decided to stay the night while I wait on

word from the Haunt.

I swung out of my saddle, armour clanking, and waved him to lead on. ‘Captain Harran.’ I turned, holding a hand up to stop his mouth. ‘We’re staying here until dawn tomorrow. There’s no discussion to be had. We will have to make the time up on the road.’

He looked grim at that but we knew each other well enough that after a few moments holding his eyes to mine he turned away and called for the guard to set a perimeter around Holland’s mansion.

The Hollands’ house-guard moved to block Gorgoth’s path as he followed Makin and myself to the front doors. I had to commend their bravery. I’ve seen Gorgoth reach out both hands and crush two men’s skulls without effort. Lord Holland paused on the steps ahead of me, sensing trouble. He turned with a questioning look.

‘I’m taking Gorgoth through the Gilden Gate in Vyene, so I think he ranks high enough for your front door, Holland.’ I nodded him on.

The guards stepped back with evident relief and we went inside.

Lord Holland’s guest chambers proved to be more than well appointed – even luxurious might be too small a word. Thick rugs covered the floor, woven silk shipped from the Indus and worked with all manner of pagan gods. No wall remained without art, either tapestry or oil and brush, and elaborate plasterwork, gilded to a high shine, decorated the ceilings. Holland had offered me his own rooms but I didn’t want to live amid his old man’s stink. Besides, if they were richer than his guest rooms I’d be hard pressed to resist stealing stuff.

‘Decadence begins when the budget to beautify a man’s home exceeds the coin spent to ensure its defence.’ I turned back to Makin. Gorgoth closed the doors behind him and stood at Makin’s side.

Makin smoothed back his hair and grinned. ‘It’s pretty. No doubting that.’

Gorgoth let his gaze wander. ‘There’s a whole world reaching into this room.’

He had it right. Holland had assembled pieces from all corners of empire and beyond. The works of brilliant men. Years of effort concentrated within four walls to ease the eye of a rich lord’s guests.

Gorgoth lifted an elegant chair in one blunt hand, his fingers curled around intricate scrollwork. ‘The beauty to be found beneath mountains is more ... robust.’ He set the chair down again. I imagined the legs splintering if he

tried to sit upon it. ‘Why are we here?’

Makin nodded. ‘You said bad beds, grinning officials, and fleas. But here we are even so. The beds look fine. Perhaps a little soft and ...’ he glanced at Gorgoth, ‘weak, and there may be fleas, though a better class of flea no doubt, and yes, the officials grinned.’

I pursed my lips and threw myself back onto the grand bed. I sunk into eiderdown, the coverings almost closing above me as if I had fallen into deep water.

‘There’s something I need to sleep on,’ I said.

It took an effort to lift my head to sight Gorgoth. ‘You two amuse yourselves. I’ll send if I need you. Makin, be charming. Gorgoth, don’t eat any servants.’

Gorgoth rumbled at that. They turned to leave.

‘Gorgoth!’ He paused before the door, a door so tall that even he would not have to duck beneath it. ‘Don’t let them give you any shit. You can eat them if they try. You’re coming to Congression as King Under the Mountain. The Hundred may not know it yet but they will.’

He tilted his head at that, and they both left.

I had my own reasons for bringing the leucrota to Congression, but good as those reasons were it had been the chance to represent his new people, his trolls, that had persuaded Gorgoth, and lord knows he needed persuading, for I couldn’t order him. And that in itself made another good reason. I had few men around me that would speak honestly and tell me if they thought me wrong. I had only one man who I couldn’t order, who at the very last would twist my head off rather than obey against his instinct. Everyone needs somebody like that around sometimes.

I sat in Lord Holland’s delicate chair, at a desk of burr walnut so polished it seemed to glow, and played with the chess set I had filched from the guards’ pavilion. I killed a few hours staring at the squares, moving the pieces in their allotted fashion. Enjoying the weight of them in my hand, the glide of them across marble. I have read that the Builders made toys that could play chess. Toys, as small as the silver bishop in my hand, that could defeat any player, taking no time to select moves that undid even the best minds amongst their makers. The bishop made a satisfying click when tapped to the board. I beat out a little rhythm, wondering if any point remained in playing a game that toys could own. If we couldn’t find a better game then perhaps the mechanical minds the Builders left behind would always win.

Holland took me at my word and allowed no visitors, no requests, no invitations. I sat alone in the luxury of his guest rooms and remembered. There was a time when a bad memory was taken from me. I carried it in a copper box until at the last I had to know. Any closed box, any secret, will gnaw at you, day on day, year on year, until it reaches the bone. It will whisper the old rhyme – open the box, and face the danger, or wonder – till it drives you mad, what would have happened if you had. There are other memories I would rather set away from me, beyond use and recollection, but the box taught me a lesson. Nothing can be cut away without loss. Even the worst of our memories is part of the foundation that keeps us in the world.

At last I stood, tipped over the kings, both the black side and the white side, and fell once more into the bed. This time I let it swallow me and sank into the white musk of her dreaming.

I stood in the Tall Castle before the doors to my father's throne room. I knew this scene. I knew all the scenes that Katherine played for me behind those doors. Galen dying, but with my indifference overwritten by all her yesterdays so that he fell like an axe through both our lives. Or Father's knife, driven into my chest at the height of my victory, as I reached to him, son to father, a sharp reminder of all his poison, aimed for the heart.

'I'm past games,' I said.

I set my fingers to the handles of the great doors.

'I had a brother who taught me a lesson that stuck. Brother Hendrick. A wild one, a stranger to fear.'

And no sooner was he mentioned than he stood at my side – like the worst of devils summoned by their name. He stood beside me before my father's doors, with a laugh and a stamp of his boot. Brother Hendrick, dark as a Moor, his long hair in black knots, reaching past his shoulders, lean muscled, rangy like a troll, the pink and ragged slash of a scar from his left eye to the corner of his mouth, stark against dirty skin.

'Brother Jorg.' He inclined his head.

'Show her how you died, Brother,' I said.

He gave a wild grin at that, did Brother Hendrick, and the Conaught spearman charged again from a sudden rolling smoke. The Conaught spear is an ugly weapon, barbed and barbed again as if it's never intended to come out, cutting blades along the length.

Hendrick caught the spear in his gut, just as I remembered it, right down to the bright sound of mail links snapping. His eyes went wide, that grin of his

wider, twisted now and scarlet. The Conaught man had him, stuck on that spear, out of reach of Hendrick's sword even if he had the strength to swing.

'Now I'm doubting that Brother Hendrick could get himself off that spear,' I said, over the ghosts of screams and the memory of swords on swords. 'But he could have fought it, and maybe just maybe he'd have thrown himself clear. He would have left more yards of his guts on those barbs than remained in his body though. He could have tried to fight it, but sometimes the only option is to raise the stakes, to throw yourself the other way, to force your opponent further down the path they've chosen, further than they might want to go.'

Brother Hendrick dropped his sword and shook the shield from his arm. With both hands he seized the spear high along its haft, past the blades, and hauled himself along it. The point sprang black and dripping from his back, a yard of wood and cutting edges passed into his stomach, tearing a terrible wound, and in two driving steps he reached his foe.

'Watch,' I said.

And Brother Hendrick slammed his forehead into the spearman's face. Two red hands gripped behind a Conaught neck and pulled him closer still. Hendrick fell, locked to his man, his teeth deep in exposed throat. The smoke rolled over them both.

'That spearman should have let go that day,' I said. '*You* should let go now, Katherine.'

I gripped the handles to the throne room doors and pulled, not on the metal but on the dark tide of my dreaming, on the fever dreams of long ago when I sweated in the corruption of my thorn wounds. Frost spread from my fingers, across the bronze, over the wood, and from every joint and seam in the doors pus began to ooze. The sweet stench of it drew me to the night I woke in sweat and pain to find Friar Glen's man, Inch, with his hands upon me. As a child of nine I didn't understand much, but the way he snatched back from me, the look on that mild face, the beading sweat as if a fever held him also, all helped me to know his mind. He turned without words and started for the door, hurried but not running. He should have run.

My hands, white upon the icy bronze of the handles, felt not the cold metal but the weight and heat of the poker that I had snatched from before the fire. I should have been too weak to stand but I had slipped from the table where they bled and purged me, let the sheet fall from me, and ran naked to the roaring fire. I caught Inch at the door and when he turned I thrust the poker

up between his ribs. He squealed like pigs do when the butcher is killing them. I had only one word for him. A name. 'Justice.'

I spread the fire not to be warm, though the fever set my teeth chattering and my hands shaking too much to be of use. I set the fire to be clean again. To burn up every trace and touch of Inch and his wrong. To devour all memory of my weakness and failure.

'I meant to stay there,' I said, my voice a whisper. She would hear me even so. 'I don't remember leaving. I don't remember how close the flames came.'

They found me in the forest. I had wanted to reach the Girl-who-waits-for-Spring, to lie on the ground where I buried my dog and to wait with her, but they caught me before I got there.

I raised my head. 'But that's not where I'm bound tonight, Katherine.'

There are truths you know but will not speak. Even to yourself in the darkness where we are all of us alone. There are memories you see and yet don't see. Things set apart, made abstract and robbed of meaning. Some doors when they are opened may not be shut again. I knew that, even at nine I knew it. And here, a door that I had closed long ago, like the lid on a coffin, the contents no longer fit for inspection. Fear trembled in my hands and I tightened my grip against it. No part of me wanted this, but I would chase Katherine from my dreams and own my nights once more – and honesty remained my sharpest weapon.

I pulled on the handles to those doors of frost and corruption, I hauled on them and it felt as if I dragged a spear into my guts, inch by bloody inch. And with a squeal of protest the doors opened, not onto a throne room, not to my father's court, but to a dull autumn day on a rutted path that wound away up the valley to where the monastery sat.

'Damned if I will!'

Brother Liar was damned long ago but we none of us mentioned that. Instead we stood in the mud of the road and in the chill of a damp westerly breeze and watched the monastery.

'You'll go up there and ask them to see to your wound,' Fat Burlow said again.

Burlow could swing a sword better than most and lay a cold eye on a man. He wasn't jolly with all that lard, but he didn't have the authority that Brother Price used to wield.

'Damned if—'



Brother Rike slapped Liar around the back of the head and he pitched forward into the mud. Grumlow, Roddat, Sim and the others crowded at Rike's elbows.

'He wouldn't see much,' I said.

They turned to look at me, leaving Liar to get to all fours, the road dripping from him. I may have killed Price with three stones but that didn't stop me being a skinny ten-year-old child and the brothers weren't about to take direction from me. That I lived at all came down in equal measures to a quick hand with the knife and to the Nuban's protection. It would be another two years, after Sir Makin had found me, with both him and the Nuban to watch my back, before I would openly make the brothers' decisions for them.

'What's that, runt?' Rike hadn't forgiven me for Price's death. I think he felt I'd stolen it from him.

'He wouldn't see much,' I said. 'They'd take him to the infirmary. It's a separate building usually. And they'd watch him because he looks as though he'd be stealing the bandages while they wrapped him.'

'What do you know?' Gemt aimed a kick to miss me. He didn't have the balls to risk connecting.

'I know they don't keep their gold in the infirmary,' I said.

'We should send the Nuban in,' Brother Row said. He spat toward the monastery, lofting the thick wad of his phlegm a remarkable distance. 'Let him work his heathen ways on those pious—'

'Send me,' I said.

The Nuban had shown no enthusiasm for the venture from the moment Fat Burlow first dreamed it up. I think Burlow only suggested hitting St Sebastian's to shut Rike's moaning. That and to give the brothers something to better to unite behind than his own wavering command.

'What're you a-goin'ta do? Ask them to take pity on you?' Gemt snorted a laugh through his nose. Maical echoed him back down the line, with no idea what the joke was.

'Yes,' I said.

'Well ... it does have an orphanage.' Burlow rubbed his stubble, folding himself a few more chins.

We made camp a couple of miles back along the road in a copse of twisted elm and alder, thick with the stink of fox. Burlow had decided in his wisdom that I would approach the monastery a little after dawn when they should be

finished with matins prayers.

The brothers lit campfires among the trees and Gains took his cauldron from the head-cart to set over the biggest blaze. The night turned mild with cloud unrolling as the gloom thickened. The aroma of rabbit stew started to spread. We were twenty strong or thereabouts. Burlow moved about convincing men to their duties, Sim and Gemt to watch the road, old Elban to sit where the horses were corralled and listen out for wolves.

Brother Grillo began to pick at that five-string harp of his – well *his* since he took it from a man who could really play it – and somewhere in the dark a high voice ran through the Queen’s Sorrow. Brother Jobe it was who sang that evening. He’d only sing when it got too dark to see much, as if in the blind night he could be another lad in another place and call out the songs they’d taught that boy.

‘You don’t think we should rob St Sebastian’s?’ I asked the darkness.

It spoke back with the depth of the Nuban’s voice. ‘They’re your holy men. Why do you want to steal from them?’

I opened my mouth, then shut it. I had thought I just wanted to build my reputation with my road-brothers and to share out a little of the anger gnawing inside me. More than that though ... *they were* my holy men, these monks in the fortress of their monastery, echoing psalms in its stone halls, carrying golden crosses from chapel to church. They spoke to God and maybe he spoke back, but the wrongs done to me hadn’t even rippled the deep pool of their serenity. I wanted to knock on their door. My mouth might ask for sanctuary, I might play the orphaned child, but truly I would be asking ‘why’? Whatever lay broken inside me had started to wind too tight to be ignored. I would shake the world until its teeth rattled if that was required to have it spit out an answer. *Why?*

Brother Jobe ended his song.

‘It’s something to do, a place to go,’ I said.

‘I have a place to go,’ the Nuban said.

‘Where?’ If I hadn’t asked he wouldn’t have told. You couldn’t leave a gap long enough that it would force the Nuban to fill it.

‘Home,’ he said. ‘Where it’s warm. When I have enough coin I will go to the Horse Coast, to Kordoba, and take a ship across the narrows. From the port of Kutta I can walk home. It’s a long way, months, but across lands I know, peoples I know. Here though, in this empire of yours, a man like me can’t travel far, not alone, so I wait until fate leads us all south together.’

‘Why did you come here if you hate it so much?’ His rejection stung though it hadn’t been aimed my way.

‘I was brought here. In chains.’ He lay back unseen. I could almost hear the chains as he moved. He didn’t speak again.

Morning stole through the woods pushing a mist ahead of it. I had to leave my knives and short sword with the Nuban. And no breaking my fast. A rumbling stomach would speak on my behalf at the monks’ gate.

‘Get the lie of the land, Jorg,’ Burlow told me as if it had been his idea from the start.

Brother Rike and Brother Hendrick watched me with no comment other than the scrape of their whetstones along iron blades.

‘Find out where the men-at-arms bed,’ Red Kent said. We knew the monks had mercenary guards, Conaught men, maybe soldiers from Reams sent by Lord Ajah, but maintained and kept in coin by the abbot.

‘Watch yourself up there, Jorth,’ Elban lisped. The old man worried too much. You’d have thought as a man’s years ran out he’d worry less – but no.

And so I started along the road and let the fog swallow the brothers behind me.

An hour brought me mist-damp and muddy-footed to the bend in the road where we first studied the monastery. I walked another few hundred yards before the fog admitted a dark hint of the building, and in ten strides more it slipped from suggestion to fact, a sprawl of buildings to either side of the River Brent. The waters’ complaints reached me as they tumbled through the millwheel before escaping to the farmlands further down the valley to the east. Wood smoke tickled my nostrils, the faintest scent of frying, and my stomach rumbled obligingly.

I passed the bakehouse, brewhouse, and buttery, grim stone blockhouses identified by the aromas of bread, malt, and ale. All seemed deserted, the matins prayers requiring even the lay brothers from their labours in the fields, at the fishponds, or at the piggery. The path to the church threaded the cemetery, headstones all askew as if at sea. Two great trees stood amidst the graves, shouldering the most weathered stones aside. Two corpse-fed yews, echoes of an older faith, standing proud where men played out their lives in service to the white Christ. I stopped to pick a pale red berry from the closer tree. Firm and dusty-skinned. I rolled it between finger and thumb, an echo perhaps of the lost flesh those roots drank, sunk in the ichors of the rotting

faithful.

Strains of plainsong reached across the cemetery, the monks coming to the close of matins. I decided to wait.

Burlow had plans to head north with St Sebastian's treasures. To make the coast, where on a clear day a man could look out across the Quiet Sea and spot the sails of a half dozen nations. The port of Nemla might pay tax to Reams but it paid no attention to Lord Ajah's laws. Pirate lords held power there and a man might sell anything in such a place, from holy relics to human flesh. More often than not the buyer would be a man of the Isles, a Brettan from the drowned lands, sailors all. They said that if all the men of Brettan left ship at once the Isles would not have space for them to stand.

The Nuban once rumbled me a song from the Brettan Isles. Hearts of oak it said they had, but the Nuban told it that if their hearts were of the oak then it was from the yew that their blood had been brewed, a darker and more ancient tree. And from the yew come their longbows, with which the men of Brettan have slain more men in the long years than were felled with bullet or bomb in the short years of the Builders.

I waited by the church doors when the songs ran out, but despite the scraping of pews and the mutter of voices, no one emerged. All fell silent and at last I set hand to the doors and pushed inside into the quiet hall beyond.

One monk remained at prayer, kneeling before the pews, facing the altar. The others must have left through another exit leading into the monastery complex. The light from windows of stained glass fell around the man in many colours, a patch of green across his head making something strange of his baldness. It occurred to me as I waited for him to finish bothering the almighty that I didn't know *how* to ask for sanctuary. Acting had never featured in my skill set, and even as the words I would need sprung to mind I could hear how false they would ring, falling bitter from a cynical tongue. Some tell it that 'sorry' is the hardest word, but for me it has always been 'help'.

In the end I decided to go with my strengths. I didn't wait for the monk to quit his silent moaning and I didn't ask for help.

'I've come to be a monk,' I said, with the silent proviso that hell would freeze and heaven burn before I let them give me the haircut.

The man stood without haste and turned to face me, the window colours sliding across the grey of his habit. His tonsure left a garland of black curls around a polished scalp.

‘Do you love God, boy?’

‘I couldn’t love him any more.’

‘And do you repent of your sins?’

‘What man doesn’t?’

He had warm eyes and a soft face this one. ‘And are you humble, boy?’

‘I could be no more humble,’ I said.

‘You’ve a clever way with words, boy.’ He smiled. The lines spreading from the corners of his eyes declared him given to smiles. ‘Perhaps too clever. Too much cleverness can be a torment to a man, setting his wits against his faith.’ He steeped his fingers. ‘In any event, you are too young to become a novice. Go home, boy, before your parents notice you’re gone.’

‘I have no mother,’ I said. ‘And no father.’

His smile eased. ‘Well now, that’s a different matter. We have orphans here, saved from the corruptions of the road and educated in the ways of our Lord. But most come to us as infants, and it isn’t an easy life, our boys work hard, both in the field and at their studies, and there are rules. Lots of rules.’

‘I came to be a monk, not an orphan, a brother, not a son.’ I didn’t want to be a monk but just being told ‘no’ lit the corner of a fire in me. I knew myself broken, to burn over every refusal, to feel my blood rise at the slightest provocation, but knowing and fixing are different things.

‘A good number of our novices are drawn from boys maintained here.’ If he sensed my anger he showed no sign of it. ‘I myself was left on the church steps as a baby, many years ago.’

‘I could start that way.’ I shrugged as if letting myself be talked into it.

He nodded and watched me with those kind eyes. I wondered if his prayers were still echoing behind them. Did God speak back to him or did the Old Gods whisper from the yew, or perhaps the gods of the Nuban called out to him across the straits from the crowded heavens above Afrique?

‘I’m Abbot Castel,’ he said.

‘Jorg.’

‘If you follow me we shall at least see that you get a meal.’ He smiled again, the sort of smile that said he liked me. ‘And if perhaps you choose to stay we might see whether you really could love God a little more and be somewhat more humble.’

I spent that first day digging up potatoes with the twelve orphans currently under St Sebastian’s care. The boys ranged from five years to fourteen, as

mixed a bunch as you could want, some serious, some wild, but all excited to have a new boy amongst them to break the monotony of mud and potatoes, potatoes and more mud.

‘Did your family leave you here?’ Orscar asked the questions and the rest of them listened. A short boy, lean, ragged black hair as if cut in haste, and mud on both cheeks. I guessed him to be eight.

‘I walked,’ I said.

‘My grandpa brought me here,’ Orscar said, resting on his digging fork. ‘Mam died and my father never came back from the war. I don’t remember them much.’

Another taller boy snorted at the tale of Orscar’s father, but said nothing.

‘I came to be a monk,’ I said. I drove the fork deep and turned up half a dozen potatoes, the biggest of them skewered on the tines.

‘Idiot.’ The largest of the boys shouldered me aside and lifted the end my fork. ‘Scratch them and they won’t keep past a week. You gotta feel the way into the ground, dig around them.’ He pulled the wounded vegetable free.

I imagined how it would be to lunge forward and impale him, the fork’s middle tine nailing his Adam’s apple and the other two bracketing his neck. I wondered that the danger didn’t even occur to him as he scowled at me over the weapon, pointed right at him. He wouldn’t keep past a week.

‘Who’d be a monk?’ A boy my age came across, dragging a full sack. He looked pale beneath the grime, his grin fixed, as if he knew exactly what I’d been thinking.

‘It has to be better than this?’ I lowered the fork.

‘I’d go mad,’ he said. ‘Praying, praying, more praying. And reading the bible every single day. And all the copying. All that quill work, copying other people’s words, never writing their own. You want to spend fifty years doing that?’ He hushed as one of the lay brothers stomped over from the hedgerow.

‘More work, less talk!’

And we set to digging.

It turns out there’s a certain satisfaction in digging. Levering your dinner from the ground, lifting the soil and pulling fine hard potatoes from it, thinking of them roasted, mashed, fried in oil, it’s all good. Especially if it wasn’t you who had to tend and weed the field for the previous six months. Labour like that empties the mind and lets new thoughts wander in from unsuspected corners. And in the moments of rest, when we orphans faced each other, mud-cheeked, leaning on our forks, there’s a camaraderie that

builds without you knowing it. By the end of the day I think the big lad, David, could have called me an idiot a second time and survived.

We trudged back to the monastery as evening shadows tracked across the rutted fields. They fed us in the fraterhouse with the ordained brothers at one long trestle, the lay brothers at another, and the orphans crowded around a low square table. We ate faggots of potato mash fried in pork fat with autumn greens. I hadn't tasted anything better in for ever. And the boys talked. Arthur told how his grandpa used to make shoes before his sight got dim. Orscar showed us the iron cross his da gave him when he went away. A heavy thing with a circle of red enamel at the crossing point. For the blood of Christ, Orscar said. And David told how he might sign up to be a soldier for Lord Ajah, like Bilk and Peter who we saw patrolling along the Brent. They all spoke, often at once, laughing, cramming in food past their words, speaking of foolishness, games they played, dreams they had, 'might-have-been's and might-be's'. The easy talk that children share, that Will and I had shared. Strange to think of these boys bound about by so many rules and seeming so free, and my road-brothers, unbound by law or conscience, yet so guarded and bitter in their conversation, each word edged and weighted, as if they were every one of them trapped and seeking escape each moment of their lives.

The orphans slept in their own dormitory, a solid stone-built building, slate-roofed, clean within though bare as a monk's cell. I lay among them, comfortable on my straw mattress. Sleep found us all quick enough. Honest labour will do that for you. But I woke in the darkest hour and listened to the night, to the skittering of mice amongst our straw, to the snores and the mumbling of sleep-tied tongues, to the hunting owls and the chuckle of water through the mill. I thought of my road-brothers, caught in dark dreams as their bodies lay scattered between the trees. They would wake soon, blood-hungry, and turn this way.

A monk came for us before dawn so we would be washed and ready for matins prayer.

'No work!' Orscar whispered beside me as he dressed.

'No?'

'It's Sunday, idiot.' David used a long pole to heave the shutters open. It made little difference.

'Sunday's for praying.' This from Alfred, the peacemaker in the potato field.

‘And studies,’ said Arthur, a tall and serious boy of around my age.

It turned out Sunday held time for studies additional to those the monks arranged for us. First though, I sat through lessons on lettering, instruction on the lives of saints, and a session of choir practice – I croaked like a crow. An elderly monk arrived for the day’s last lesson, hunched around a black cane, eyes bright but pale beneath the grey fringe of his hair. He had a sour look to him but the boys seemed to like him.

‘Ah. New boy. What’s your name, young man?’ He spoke quick and high with just a creak of age.

‘Jorg,’ I said.

‘Jorg, eh?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Sir.’

‘I’m Brother Winter. No sir about it. And I’m here to teach theology.’ He paused and frowned. ‘Jorg, eh?’

‘Yes, Brother.’

‘I never did hear of a St Jorg. Now ain’t that a curious thing? St Alfred, St Orscar, St David, St Arthur, St Winter ... ain’t you got a saint’s day, boy?’

‘My mother had it that St George’s day would serve. Jorg being a flavour of George.’

‘The Brettan saint?’ He made to spit and caught himself. ‘He fell out of heaven when the sea swallowed those lands.’

Brother Winter let my name and its ill omens lie after that and taught us theology as promised. He proved entertaining and praised my quick wits, so we parted friends.

In the two hours between vespers and compline we ran free of prayers and lessons. The slightest hint had Orscar begging to show me the monastery – grounds and buildings all. He raced me around as fast as the evening dark allowed, eager to please, as if I were his big brother and my approval weighed more than all the gold in chapel. We crept up the woodpile by the old almonry where peasants came for alms in hard years, and from our vantage spied on Ajah’s soldiers who barracked there when not on duty.

‘The abbot says we don’t need soldiers everywhere.’ Orscar clambered back down, wiping his nose on his sleeve. ‘But David says he heard St Goodwin’s – down by Farfield – was raided six months back and burned flat. He heard it from novice Jonas at the smithy.’

‘If a raid comes, don’t trust in soldiers,’ I told him. ‘Run for the river and



follow it upstream. Don't stop for anything.'

I slipped away from Orscar in the dark and made my way to the road, where the monastery lane joined the wider way. Even ditching the boy with a turn of speed in the shadows felt like a betrayal. He'd started to dote on me like Maical with that idiot grin of his following Gemt. Like Justice used to pace after William and me, hour after hour, just happy to be pack with us, overjoyed if we petted him, ecstatic if Will wrapped him in his little arms and buried his face in that fur. The hound would stand there as if he were tolerating the hug, as if it wasn't what he'd followed us half a day for, but his tail couldn't lie.

Elban stood waiting a little way down the road, a ghost in the moonlight. 'What's the word, Jorth?'

They'd sent Elban because he didn't look like trouble, but I'd back him against two of Ajah's troopers any day. Well, not in a fair fight, but you don't see many of those.

'The word is precious little gold and more guardsmen than Brother Burlow is going to want to take on, well armed, with strong points to defend. The place is built to hold.'

'They ain't gonna like that news, Jorth.' 'Newth' he said, struggling on the 's'. He sounded worried, though he scowled to hide it.

'Tell Burlow you're just the messenger,' I suggested. 'And keep out of Rike's reach.'

'Ain't you coming with me then?' Elban frowned. His tongue slid across the pale flesh of his gums.

'There's a piece or two worth stealing. If I can swipe them, I'll come running. Otherwise I'll join you here tomorrow, same time, and we'll all go.'

I left him muttering 'they won't like it, they won't like it'.

I'd counted twelve guards, none of them much younger than Elban, and the crucifix the abbot wore to vespers on its own was worth the effort to take them down. In truth, despite the cruel lessons taught me by my own father and by the thorns, I had found the whisper of a different way in the fields and halls and sanctums of St Sebastian, and whilst I listened with a sceptical ear, still I wanted to hear that whisper a little longer.

My father taught me not to love or to compromise, the thorns taught me that even family bonds are fatal weaknesses, a man must walk alone, bide his time and strike when the strength is in his hands. Sometimes, though, it seemed all that bound me to those lessons were the scars they had left on me.

As I trudged back I reasoned that what I wanted from the road, from my road-brothers, wasn't gold and the slaughter of monks. I had come from wealth – I knew how the innocent died. What I sought was the power that lies in hands untied by social strings, not restrained by moral code, chivalric charter, the rules of war. I wanted to earn the edge that the Nuban showed in my father's dungeons, to be forged in battle. And I would find those things in the hard times. I would steer my brothers into the crucible where the Hundred wet their swords, and see what would unfold.

I told myself all that, but unsaid, beneath those words, I knew that perhaps I just wanted a door back to gentler days when my mother had loved me. I was after all a child of ten, weak, stupid, and unformed. I had been taught the right lessons but all teachers know a pupil will backslide if hard lessons are not reinforced by repetition.

The scent of white musk reached me, reached into wherever it is the dreamer stands to watch their nightmare unfold. She stood with me, unseen and untouchable, but close, almost skin to skin as I pulled these old memories through her. And I knew she felt the threat, counted its approach in heartbeats, whilst knowing neither its nature nor the direction of its attack.

I had returned to find the monastery guards setting torches in iron brackets before the chapterhouse. More monks than I had suspected to be housed at St Sebastian's were already gathered in the shadows by the wall. Evidently not all showed up for meals.

'Where'd you go?' Orscar rushed me from the dark. If I'd had a knife he'd have got himself stuck on it.

'The bishop's coming!' His news proved too important to wait on my answer.

'What bishop? Where?' It didn't seem a very likely story.

'Bishop Murillo! His servant just arrived ahead of the procession to warn us. He's on the north road. We'll see their lights coming up over Jedmire Hill soon enough.' Orscar kept hopping from one foot to the other, as if he needed to piss. Probably did.

'Brother Miles said the Vatican sent the Pope's own carriage to collect him.' Arthur stood behind us now. 'Murillo's on his way to Roma.'

'They'll make him a cardinal! For sure!' Orscar sounded far more excited about church politics than any eight-year-old should be.

'Where are all the others?' I asked. Apart from Orscar and Arthur none of the orphans had come for the show.

Orscar blinked. 'They must've seen him before. He ministers at St Chelle. He's visited before. Brother Winter said so.'

I didn't let it bother me. I'd seen bishops before. Well two. Bishop Simon who ministered at Our Lady in Crath City, and Bishop Ferr who replaced Simon when the angels dragged him off one cold night. Even so I'd wait and have a look-see at this third one. He might have treasures in his carriage that would keep my road-brothers happy. If the other boys had found something better to occupy them, good luck.

'He's the grandson of the Duke of Belpan, you know?' Arthur said.

'The bishop?'

He nodded. I shrugged. Abbots in an order bound to simple living and hard labour might work their way up from an orphan's box abandoned on the doorstep. Bishops in their velvets and palatial residences tended to have been placed there for safe-keeping by powerful relatives, having been plucked from the outer branches of some illustrious family.

It took a while. The torches had started to gutter and the compline bell threatened when at last we saw the procession, armed riders at the front, priests walking, the papal carriage creaking along behind two plough-horses, more clerics trudging behind and finally two more mailed riders with the holy cross in red atop white tabards.

The carriage jolted along the road, halting with its door between the double line of torches that formed a corridor to the chapterhouse's grand entrance. The driver of the carriage, a goblin of a man with grey and bushy brows, sat motionless, his pair with their heads down, snorting occasionally like oxen. The grandest of the three priests preceding the carriage came to open the door and to lend Bishop Murillo his arm, although the man seemed unlikely to need it. He squeezed from the gloomy confines, his bulk strained against the purple of his cassock. Once out he reached back in and took the mitre offered from the shadows. I hadn't thought there room for a second passenger. Murillo jammed the hat onto his head, the sweat on his tight black curls immediately soaking into the red band around its base. He stood straight, hands in the small of his back, thrusting that belly. I half expected an enormous belch from his fleshy mouth, but instead he growled and stamped toward the monastery. The head priest and two men-at-arms followed close behind. Although fat, the bishop had a restless energy about him. He reminded me of a boar hunting a scent. A little of Burlow too. His eyes found Orscar, then me, as he reached the door. He smiled at us, a convulsion of the

lips, and muttered something to the closer guard before vanishing within.

The bishop's mass kept us from our beds, a droning affair of Latin prayers in the crowded church hall. We orphans stood scattered amongst the monks and saw little but the backs of tonsured heads. Holy or not, monks are an unwashed lot. The old brother ahead of me made frequent releases of evil smells that the rope around his habit could not restrain. He had two fat ticks behind his ear – the image stays with me, two bloated purple pearls.

At last, communion, and the long queue to be dismissed. At the head of the line I saw Abbot Castel take offered cup and drink from its gilt bowl.

'The blood of Christ,' the serving priest intoned under the bishop's watchful eye.

Wine. At least it wasn't to be a dry wafer.

We shuffled forward slower than a candle burns its length. In the queue I noted again that most of the orphans were missing, only Orscar stood before me, and somewhere back along the line, Arthur.

I saw the abbot, waiting in the shadows of the wall, as we approached the altar. He had the look of an unwilling conscript gathering himself to draw steel and to fling himself into battle. The bishop in his finery shot Castel a vicious glance. Soft and fat he might be, but another life could have put the bishop amongst my road-brothers, red in tooth and claw. Another life would just have made Castel a different kind of victim to men such as Rike and Row and Liar.

Three more monks until our turn. Two more. One. Orscar stepped up, thirsty for communion wine. The orphans normally got the body not the blood. And, quicker than I had thought he could, the abbot strode forward, swept the boy up, and bore him from the church. Orscar, made mute by surprise and by the speed of his abduction, didn't manage even a yelp before the door to the chapterhouse swung shut behind them. Every other person in the great hall of the church held still, watching the door until the echoes of its closing died away. Murillo, already red in the face, shaded to purple. Another heartbeat of silence and then the bishop looked my way, furious for reasons I couldn't fathom. He stamped the heel of his crook to the floor. The priest, silver thread tracing the scarf that draped the black velvet of his gown, fixed cold eyes upon me and held out the communion cup, almost empty now. I drank, and the wine was bitter.

More monks, more filing past, more drinking, as we stood and waited. The

wine still burned my tongue, as if they had fermented gall rather than grapes. A lethargy rose through me, from the cold stone of the floor, through leg and belly until my thoughts swam in it and the drone of liturgy lost its meaning. And finally, with the witching hour behind us, the bishop spoke those words all children long for in any mass.

*'Ite, missa est.'* You are dismissed.

I staggered on the way to the door, catching at a monk's arm for support. He shook me off, a stony look on his face, as if I were diseased. The church stretched and squashed, the walls and pillars dancing like reflections on a pond.

'What?' I tasted the bitterness again and my tongue ran out of words. My hands sought the knife that should have been on my belt. My hands knew the danger.

'Jorg?' I heard Arthur's voice, saw him bundled away by the monk with the ticks and foul stinks.

Somehow I came to the doors that led outside, and leaned on them. Cold night air would help. They gave, opening by degrees, and I slipped through. Strong arms wrapped me. One of Murillo's men-at-arms. A black hood, taking away the world, throttling hands. I threw my head back and heard a nose break. And fell into a confusion without up or down, without sight, straining against bonds, and drowning, choking, retching in the dark.

Memory gives me only pieces of the time spent in the bishop's chambers, but those pieces are clear and razor-edged. I had never fought Katherine when she pulled me into nightmare. Now I fought her as she tried to leave. I fought her as I drew each part of those broken memories through the channel she had opened – like Brother Hendrick and his Conaught spear, I didn't care if they tore me, so long as she felt some fraction of it too.

The smell of Murillo, perfume and sweat. The corrupt softness of his bulk. The strength that twisted my limbs until they creaked, until the pain reached me through the fog of whatever drug the wine had hidden, and tore thin screams past the gag. I made Katherine watch and share, made her share the pollution, the crude stink of his lust, the delight he took in his power, the horror of being helpless. I let her hear his grunting. I made her understand how dirt can get inside you, too deep to be scrubbed out, too deep to be bled out, perhaps too deep even to be burned out. I showed her how that stain can spread, back across the years turning all a child's memories to rot and filth,

out across a future, taking all colour and direction.

I kept her with me, lying soaked in blood and filth and pain, bound, blindfold, sick with the drug and yet clinging to it for fear of the clarity a clear head would bring.

I won't say rage kept me alive. Those poisoned hours offered no escape, nothing so tempting as dying, but perhaps if I could have slid away into death, if it had been an option, then my anger might have been the thing to keep me back. As the drug faded from me and focus returned, a need for revenge started to build, quickly eclipsing all minor desires such as escape, the easing of pain, or the need to breathe.

Chains can hold a man. A well-fastened manacle will require the breaking of bones before the prisoner can win free. Ropes in general cannot be broken, but with determination they can often be slipped. Lubrication is the key. Sweat will normally start the process, but before long the skin will give and blood will help those rough fibres slide over raw flesh.

The bishop didn't wake. I made no noise while I freed my hands, tied behind my back. I eased from the bed, slithering across stained silk sheets. On the floor I took the fruit knife from the bedside table and by the glow of the dying fire sawed at the bonds around my ankles. I walked naked from the room. As if there could be more shame. I took the knife and the poker from the fire with me.

In the small hours of night the monastery corridors lay empty. I walked them blind, trailing the point of the knife along the walls from time to time to count my way. I heard plainsong as I walked, though there were none awake to sing it. Even so, I heard plainsong, pure in its promise, as if all things holy and good were pressed into notes, and spilled from the mouths of angels. I hear it even now when I remember those orphan boys, the digging in that field, mud and potatoes, lessons and games. I hear it as if it were reaching faint through a closed door. And the song drew a tear from me, oh my brothers, not the hurt, or shame, not betrayal, or that last lost chance of redemption – just the beauty of that song. One tear on a hot slow roll down my cheek.

I left by the door to the stables, unlatching it and turning the heavy iron ring. Both the soldiers on the other side turned, blinking away boredom. I felled them with two blows of the poker, first to the left temple of the right guard, then the right temple of the left. Whack, whack. They didn't deserve to be called soldiers, defeated by a naked child. One lay silent, the other, Bilk I

think, writhed and groaned. Him I skewered through the throat. That shut his noise. I left the poker in him.

The stables smelled of every other stables. In the darkness, amongst the horses, I could have been anywhere. I moved without sound, listening to the clop of hooves, the restless snort and shudder of disturbed mounts, the scurry of rats. I took as much rope as I could carry and a sharper knife used for working leather. The coils itched my shoulder and back as I returned through the blind corridors.

I left the rope outside the bishop's door and went back for a bale of straw and the soldiers' lamp. The big horses that pulled the Pope's carriage were housed in the stall closest to the stable doors. The larger of the two stepped out when I opened the stall, head down, looking more asleep than awake. I set a tether around his thick neck and left him standing there. He looked as though he would stand forever, or at least until someone gave him reason to move again.

I guessed Murillo's men-at-arms would be billeted with Lord Ajah's soldiers in the almonry for the night. At some point the monks would be on the move for the night prayer. I didn't know when that might happen, nor truly care: I would just kill anyone in my way. The night still had a dream-like quality, perhaps the tail end of whatever poison Murillo had had the priest slip into the wine.

The swinging lamp chased thin shadows across the walls, copies of my limbs. I wedged handfuls of straw beneath the roof eaves where I could reach by climbing on barrel or sill. I wedged more between the split wood, stacked for winter against the chapterhouse wall. There's not much to burn in a stone-built monastery, but the roof is always the best bet. And of course the guest quarters where the bishop slept offered more combustibles, with several tapestries, wooden furniture, shuttered windows. I went into the priests' rooms, two priests in the chamber to the left of the bishop's and three opposite. I cut their throats as they slept, a hand to the mouth while I tugged the sharpness of the leather-knife through skin, flesh, cartilage and tendon, through vein, artery, and wind-pipe. Men sliced like that make strange noises, like wet bellows pumping, and thrash before they die, but in the tangle of their bed linens it isn't loud. I set straw and bedding ready to fire in the priests' rooms too.

The high priest, the man who poisoned the cup, ready for Orscar, and drunk by me, I cut. I knew him to be dead but I cut his face and watched the

flesh spring open beneath my blade. I sliced away his lips and let the ichor from his eyes, and I prayed, not to God but to whatever devil got to keep his soul, that he would carry the wounds with him into hell.

By the time I returned to Murillo's chambers I was clothed once more, in the scarlet of priests' blood. For a time I watched his bulk within the bed, a black lump in the embers' glow, and listened to the wheeze in and the snored breath out. He posed a puzzle. A strong man who might wake easily. I didn't want to have to kill him. That would be too kind.

In the end I lifted the covers with a gentle hand to expose his feet. I eased the rope beneath his ankles so a yard lay to one side and the rest to the other. A hangman's noose is a simple knot, and I used the loop to draw his ankles together before making the knot tight against them. Then I left with the rope coil, playing it out as I went.

On my route back to the stables I set flame to the various piles of straw and bedding prepared earlier. At the stables I cut the rope and tied the end around the plough-horse's neck. Before I led him away my eye lit upon a fallen hemp bag that lay on the floor with long dark roofing nails spilling from it. I stooped to pick it up.

Brother Gains, who Burlow set to watching the monastery, tells it that I came through the cemetery leading the biggest horse in the world and that all behind me the sky was lit with crimson and orange as fire leapt among the roofs of St Sebastian. He said I came naked and blood-wrapped and that he thought that it was me screaming, until I drew closer and he saw the grim seal of my mouth. Brother Gains, never a man given to religion, crossed himself and stepped aside without a word when I passed him. He watched the taut rope and shrank back further as the screams grew more loud and more piercing. And out of the darkness, lit by the flames of St Sebastian, Bishop Murillo came dragging, leaving his own trail of blood and skin on the grit and gravel of the cemetery path, white bone jutting from beneath the rope that bound his broken ankles.

I let Katherine share that night. I let her watch the brothers take to horse and ride whooping up the road toward the distant orange glow. She saw how I bound Murillo and how such terror ran in him that he forgot the agony of his shattered ankles. And I taught her how long it can take to hammer thirteen nails through a man's skull, tap, tap, tap. How night shades into day and brothers gather once again, draped in loot and relics, black with char. The



brothers formed my audience, some fascinated, like Rike with his new iron cross around his neck, set with a circle of red enamel at the crossing point – red for the blood of Christ. Some watched in horror, some with reserve, but they all watched, even the Nuban with nothing written on his face but the deep lines of sorrow.

‘We’re meat and dirt,’ I told them. ‘Nobody is clean and nothing can wash away our stain, not the blood of the innocent, not the blood of the lamb.’

And the brothers watched as a child learned what revenge can do, and what it can’t. Together Katherine and I watched that child learn how a simple iron nail can break a man’s mind apart, causing him to laugh, or cry, to lose some basic skill, some memory, or some restraint that made him human or gave a measure of dignity. I let Katherine see how something so simple as hammering home a nail can make such profound changes, to the bishop whose head is pierced, and to the boy who wields the hammer. And then I let her go. And she ran.

My dreams would be my own again. I was past games.

## 9

I woke to the sound of Makin's voice.

'Get up, Jorg.'

In the Haunt I have a page schooled in the art of discreet coughs and a gradual elevation in volume until his royal highness deigns to stir. In Lord Holland's house it seemed 'get up' was the best on offer. I struggled to a sitting position, still in the clothes I wore the night before and more tired than when I fell into the bed.

'And a very good morning to you, Lord Makin.' My tone made it clear I meant none of it.

'Miana's here,' he said.

'Right.' I rolled off the bed onto my feet, still woozy with sleep. 'Let's go.'

'Not shaving?' He offered me my cloak from the chair.

'It's the new style,' I said, and went out into the corridor beyond, past the guards stationed outside the door. 'Left or right?'

'Left. She's in the blue room.'

And yes, Lord Holland had a whole room, the size of a church hall, given over to displaying the colour blue. Miana stood, pale, pretty, her hands across the stretch of her belly, Marten beside her, leaning on a staff for support, his face black with bruising. At the rear of the room, ten men from my guard, cloaks clasped with the Ancrath boar in silver, stood tight around a black coffer, Sir Riccard with them.

I crossed the room and put my arms around Miana. I needed to touch her with my own hands after being locked into the dream with hands I didn't own that tried to kill her. She put her head against my chest and said nothing. She smelled good. Of nothing specific – just good. Makin followed in behind and closed the door.

'I saw the assassin,' I said. 'A white man, sent from the Vatican, or made to look as though he was. I saw you kill him. You and Marten both.' I nodded to him. He knew what it meant to me.

Miana looked up, eyes wide with surprise starting to narrow with confusion, suspicion even. ‘How?’

‘I think he used dream-magics to make the castle sleep, even the trolls below. When you use those methods and spend your power so carelessly, you leave yourself open to others with such skills. Perhaps something of Sageous rubbed off on me when I killed him.’ I shrugged. ‘In any case, you know I have bad dreams. It might be easier to fall into such enchantments from a nightmare than from honest sleeping.’ I didn’t mention Katherine. It didn’t seem politic to remind her that another woman filled my nights.

‘We found these on him.’ Marten held out a scroll, three gold coins, and a signet ring.

The ring held an intaglio in a silver mount, carnelian worked with an intricate device, the papal seal with one bar. It gave the bearer an authority little short of a cardinal’s. I dropped it back into Marten’s palm and took the scroll.

‘A warrant for your death, Miana.’

‘Mine!’ Outrage rather than fear.

‘It’s very pretty.’ The scribe had illuminated it to a high order and not scrimped on the gold leaf. It must have taken a week’s work at least. ‘It’s possible they’re forgeries, but I doubt it. The trouble the forger would earn for themselves would outweigh any gain. And besides, the Pope does have good reason.’

Miana stepped back, her eyes blazing. ‘Good reason! What offence have I ever given the church?’ She clutched herself all the tighter.

‘It’s to punish me, my dear.’ I spread my hands to offer up my guilt. ‘The Vatican must have finally tied me to the sack of St Sebastian’s, and more importantly to them, tied me to the maiming of Bishop Murillo Ap Belpan.’

‘But you’re lord of Belpan now. That line is gone.’ Anger muddled her logic.

‘It’s probably the “bishop” part that has them upset,’ I said.

‘The warrant should be for you, then!’ Miana said.

‘The church frowns on killing kings. It goes against their views on divine right. They’d rather slap my wrist and show me to be penitent. If that fails then perhaps I might die of an ague over the winter, but nothing so obvious as a warranted assassin.’

‘What will we do?’ Marten asked. He held his voice calm but I think if I’d told him to take ten thousand men and lay siege to Roma, he would have left

to do it without further question.

‘I think we should open the box,’ I said. ‘I hope somebody thought to bring the key.’

Miana fished the heavy piece of iron from her skirts and put it in my hand, still warm from her flesh. I waved the guards aside and fitted key to lock.

‘Some kind of weapon?’ Makin asked. He stood beside Miana now, an arm around her.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Some kind of weapon.’

I threw back the lid. Gold coins, stacked and tightly bound in columns, reached nearly to the lid, a sea of them, enough to buy Holland’s mansion ten times over.

‘That,’ said Makin, letting his hand fall from Miana’s shoulder as he stepped closer, ‘is a lot of gold.’

‘Two years of taxes gathered from seven nations,’ I said.

‘You’re going to hire your own assassins?’ Marten asked.

‘You could hire an army with that. A large one.’ Makin stooped so low the reflected light made his face golden.

‘No.’ I flipped the lid shut and Makin flinched.

‘You’re going to build the cathedral,’ Miana said.

‘Praise the Lord for clever women. That boy you’re cooking for me in there is going to be scary clever.’

‘Build a cathedral?’ Makin blinked. Marten held his peace. Marten trusted my judgement. Too much sometimes.

‘An act of contrition,’ Miana said. ‘Jorg is going to buy the most expensive pardon in history.’

‘And of course the Pope is bound by tradition and duty to attend the consecration of any new cathedral.’ I turned one of the assassin’s gold pieces over in my fingers. The word ‘contrition’ nibbled at the edge of my pride.

‘Jorg!’ Miana narrowed her eyes at me, knowing my mind. She had known it from the start and sought to turn me with talk of diplomacy.

The Pope stared at me from the Vatican gold. Blood gold for my child and wife. Pious CXII. When they showed you fat on money then you must truly be enormous. I held the coin up for inspection. ‘Don’t worry, my dear. I’ll play nice. When she comes to see the new cathedral I’ve built for her I will thank her for coming. Only a madman would threaten the Pope. Even if she is a bitch.’

‘And what’s to stop another assassin coming while you’re gone?’ Miana

asked.

‘Nothing.’

It’s never a good idea to tease a woman near her time, and seldom a good idea to tease Miana in any case, unless you want back worse than you gave. She came at me, fists raised.

‘You’re coming with me.’ I spoke quickly, backing around Makin.

‘You said wives couldn’t come!’ Miana mastered the art of the wickedly murderous look at an early age.

‘You’re my advisor now,’ I shouted, backing to the door since none of my guard saw fit to defend me.

That mollified her enough to halt her advance and lower her hands. ‘I can’t ride like this,’ she said.

‘You can go in one of the wagons.’ Each guard troop had a wagon for equipment.

‘Well that’ll jolt the baby out of me quick enough!’ She sounded cross but seemed to find the idea to her liking. ‘So I’m to sit all alone in a rickety wagon and be hauled halfway across empire?’

‘You’ll have Marten for company. He’s in no state to ride,’ I said.

‘Marten? So anyone can come along now?’

‘Advisor!’ I raised my hands again. ‘Makin, tell Keppen and Grumlow they can go back to the Haunt.’ I didn’t think missing Congression would bother Keppen in the least, and Grumlow had a woman somewhere in Hodd Town that he’d probably rather spend time with.

‘So that’s settled.’ I dusted my hands together and cast an eye over the room’s lurid blues. ‘Let’s go and make Bishop Gomst a happy man.’

We left Holland’s mansion in a troop. Gorgoth carried the coffer and it pleased me to see that even his arms strained with the weight of all that gold. Lord Holland, his wife, and retainers flocked about us from the front steps to the gates of their compound. Makin made all the replies and niceties, the dregs of my dreaming still soured the day. At the gates Marten pointed out one of the guard wagons to Miana, an uncomfortably functional vehicle. She made an immediate turn, Sir Riccard jumping to avoid the swing of her belly.

‘Lord Holland!’ She stopped the man in mid-flow. ‘I wish to purchase your personal carriage.’

I left Miana to secure the deal, guarded by Marten, Riccard and eight of the ten men who accompanied her from the Haunt. Rike, Grumlow, Keppen, and

Kent fell in with us as I led the way to the part-built cathedral of Hodd Town. Gomst had mentioned plans to name it the Sacred Heart after a cathedral of legend that once stood in Crath City. For my part I felt St George's to be a fine name.

I settled the brothers within the walls of the great hall, dwarfed by the immense pillars that had stood ready to carry the roof for a decade and more. Lesser clerics, choirboys, and the more devoted and well-wrapped of Hodd Town's citizens, watched them with undisguised curiosity. Gorgoth put down his burden, set a bare foot to the lid, and stared back causing several choirboys to make a run for it.

A duty-priest led me to the grand vestibule where Gomst kept his office, due mainly to the fact the chamber had a completed roof. He rose from behind his desk to greet me. From the look of him he slept no better than I did. Gomst never wore his years well and now they hung from him like invisible chains.

'They tell me you do good work here, Father Gomst.'

He bowed his head and said nothing. In the six years since we found each other again on the lichway before the ghosts came, the grey had risen from his beard and chased the black from his hair.

'I've brought you enough gold to have the cathedral completed. I want as many men as can fit around the walls to be working here at every hour of every day.'

Gomst lifted his head frowning and made to speak.

'On Sundays they can rest,' I said.

'You think faith and churches will save us from the Dead King?' Gomst asked.

'Don't you, Bishop?' I thought it would be nice if one of us did.

He drew in a deep breath and set his eyes on me, bright and dark. 'It's easier to have faith when you are one of the flock. The closer I get to the top of this long ladder we call the church of Roma ... the closer to the Holy See where God speaks ... the less I hear him, the further away I feel.'

'It's good that you have some doubt in you, Gomsty. Men who are certain of everything – well perhaps they're not men at all.'

Gomst stepped closer, from shadow into lamplight, and it seemed that I saw him for the first time, set against the memory of another bishop, one more certain of his path and his entitlements. I wondered how long Murillo's shadow had hidden Gomst from my sight. He was at worst guilty of loyalty to

bad kings, of a mind narrowed by a life at court, and of pomposity. Not the most capital of crimes, and old crimes at that.

‘You remember the ghosts on the lichway, Father Gomst?’

He nodded.

‘You told me to run, to leave you there alone. And when they came, you prayed. Faith was your shield. We faced them together, you and I, with all my brothers fled.’

Gomst offered a grim smile. ‘I was in a cage if you recall, or I would have run with them.’

‘We’ll never know, will we?’ I gave him the brilliance of my own smile, creasing the stiff burn-scars on my cheek. ‘And all men are cowards. I may not have run that day but I’ve always been a coward, never braver than my imagination.’

From my belt I pulled out the order he would sign to acknowledge the church’s acceptance of my chest of gold. Gomst looked at it.

‘I would have run, but for that cage.’ He shivered.

I clapped a hand to his shoulder. ‘And here I am building you a new cage, Father Gomst, for just forty thousand ducets.’

We sat then, Father Gomst and I, and drank small beer, for the water in Hodd Town is barely safe for washing.

‘So here I am, Gomsty, with a box full of shiny metal making a cathedral happen. Making the Pope herself trail out of Roma to my doorstep.’

The bishop inclined his head then wiped a touch of foam from his moustache. ‘Times change, Jorg. Men change.’

‘And how did I get my box of gold? By setting my will behind a sharp edge and applying an unhealthy amount of determination.’ I sipped from my flagon. ‘When you move the big pieces on the board, the world seems more like a game than ever. That illusion, that those at the top know what they’re doing – the feeling some folk hold, that the world is safe and solid and well-ordered – well, that illusion wears thin when it’s us who stand at the top doing the ordering. I don’t doubt that for every step you take toward Roma God sounds three steps further away.’

Gomst’s hands trembled on his cup, his big and ugly knuckles paling. ‘You should watch over those dear to you more closely, Jorg. King Jorg. Triple your guards.’

‘Yes?’ His meaning escaped me. Sweat glistened on his brow.

‘I – I hear rumours, among the bishops, from visiting monks, wandering

priests ...’

‘Tell me.’

‘The Pope knows. Not from me. Your confession remains between us. But she knows. They say she will send someone.’ He set his cup down, rattling it on the desk. ‘Guard those you love.’

I wondered at Gomst, surprised by him after all these years. He’d known me longer than any man I still kept counsel with. After my father burned my dog he called Gomst to instruct me. Perhaps he thought some religion would temper the lesson. Or maybe that hammer, the one I nearly killed him with when he set the fire, had made him think I needed an education in divine right. He may have reasoned that if I thought God stood behind him I would be slower to raise my hand against him the next time. Whatever the reason, he dropped my spiritual welfare into Father Gomst’s lap in my seventh year. Or at least he ordered a priest to the Tall Castle for that purpose. It may have been Mother who chose the particular cleric to fill the role.

Strange to say, but Gomst had watched me grow for longer than did my mother, longer than Makin, or the Nuban, or Coddin. He had seen more of my years pass than any of them, Father included.

‘The Pope’s man has already called, Father Gomst. Two nights ago. He won’t be leaving again. Miana will be coming with us to Congression. In fact, if you play your cards right you can ride with her in Lord Holland’s carriage as soon as she’s taken it off him.’

‘I ...’

‘You need to be at the west gate two hours from now. You’ve got that long to set your priests loose on this project. I will want to see serious progress by the time we get back. Let them know where the gold is coming from. Tell them if I come back from Congression and I’m still not emperor, I’m not going to be in the mood for excuses.’



## 10

Fifty horses churn up a lot of mud. With the season heading into autumn and seven times that number of cavalry we made a river of the stuff. The wagons, set close to the rear of the column, slid through it, their wheels little more than sled-runners often as not. It turned out to be more comfortable than jolting over ruts. In fact if you must travel by carriage I recommend having an army at horse smearing the road out ahead of you.

‘Well this is nice,’ I said.

Actually for a carriage it was about as nice as it gets. Lord Holland had paid to have almost as much attention lavished on the interior as he did at home. The exterior had been finely worked too, but a thick layer of mud obscured all that.

Gomst sniffed and rummaged for his snot-rag. The bishop had acquired a cold for the journey. As a priest he used to wipe his nose on the black sleeve of his vestment. Bishops have different standards it seems. ‘I’m surprised you didn’t decide to sail, King Jorg,’ he said.

‘I considered it.’ The voyage of nearly three thousand miles by sea cut the overland distance from five hundred easy miles to a hundred over mountains. As much as I liked my new flagship I couldn’t talk myself into such a plan.

Osser Gant sat beside the bishop, sharing his cold. Two old men sniffing and spitting together. Miana, Marten and I sat opposite, facing the direction of travel. I’d squashed in for a look-see and set my muddy feet on the carpet.

‘You need a nursemaid and a midwife,’ I said. ‘A bishop, a chamberlain, and a general aren’t going to be much help when your time comes.’

‘I have three nursemaids and two good midwives,’ Miana fixed me with that stare of hers. ‘Jenny and Sarah are back at the Haunt. I wasn’t expecting to be bundled off to Hodd Town then hauled off to Congression!’

‘We’ll just have to collect some replacements on the way,’ I told her.

‘Some waifs and strays? Farmgirls skilled in the delivery of cows and sheep?’

Women aren't expected to be reasonable when getting ready to squeeze out a child. I still had my own doubts about the whole process. It seemed as though it would be a tight fit and I was glad I didn't have to do it. 'Peasants have babies too, Miana. Lots of them. But no, not a farmgirl. We're going to be travelling through Teutonia. They're at least half-civilized, so I'm told. We'll stop by one of the local lords and prevail on him to volunteer some women of suitable quality and experience.'

I peered through the window grille, eager to be back out there. I'd spent a whole minute in the carriage and had had enough of it. Swapping the carriage bench and all its fine cushions for Brath's saddle seemed a fair exchange given that I also got to swap Gomst and Osser for a view, and their sniffing and snotting for a fresh breeze. Outside, the Gelleth lowlands slid past, green and pleasant, fields in the main with occasional strips of woodland splashed in autumn colours. No sign here of the havoc I'd wrecked in the north at Castle Red.

Our route took us across Gelleth under empire pax and would lead on through Attar to bridge the Rhyme at the city of Honth. From there Captain Harran planned to guide us along the River Danoob through half a dozen Teuton kingdoms until we reached Vyene. A trip estimated at a touch over three weeks. We could make better time and easier travelling on a barge once we reached the Danoob, but with over three hundred horses and their riders aboard most barges have a tendency to sink, and without them aboard, any barge carrying me through Teutonia would be guaranteed to sink. My father held a lot of alliances with the Teuton kingdoms, Scorrion in particular, and Teutonia had never liked the idea of the coast kingdoms uniting to the west of them.

'Jorg?' Miana at my side.

'Sorry?'

She sighed and folded tiny hands across her belly.

'Yes.' I guessed an answer. It seemed to satisfy her. She nodded and turned to speak to Marten.

It wouldn't be long before he wanted out of there too. A few days for his bruises to fade, maybe a while longer, for he wasn't young, and he would want to be riding. Something niggled at me, guilt perhaps, for being so ready to abandon Miana. It seemed probable that I should want to spend time with her, but I just didn't. I liked her well enough, but not well enough to spend three weeks in a carriage with. I wondered if any man would want to spend

three weeks sat next to his wife. Would I feel any different if I'd chosen her? If she had chosen me? If it were Katherine beside me?

'And what are you thinking about, Jorg?' she asked. She fixed me with dark eyes. Not black but hinting green, leaves in moonlight. I'd never taken note of their colour before. Strange what strikes you and when.

'I'm thinking I should take my muddy boots out of this fine carriage and check to see that Harran isn't leading us astray.'

She didn't say so but I could see her disappointment at the corners of her mouth. I stepped out feeling less than a king. Life can be complicated enough even when nobody is trying to kill you.

I rode alongside the carriage for a while in a black mood. A fine rain fell, unseasonably warm and light enough for the wind to blow into my face whatever angle I held my head. Makin rode up with his usual grin, spitting out the rain and wiping it from his cheeks.

'Lovely weather.'

'People who talk about the weather would be better served by admitting they've nothing to say but like the sound of their own voice.'

Makin's grin broadened. 'And don't the trees look beautiful this time of year?' I suspected he'd taken a pinch of clove-spice, the stink of it seemed to be on him a lot these days.

'Do you know why the leaves change colour, Makin?' They did look spectacular. The forest had grown around us as we travelled and the canopy burned with colour, from deepest red to flame orange, an autumn fire spreading in defiance of the rain.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Why do they change?'

'Before a tree sheds a leaf it pumps it full of all the poisons it can't rid itself of otherwise. That red there – that's a man's skin blotching with burst veins after an assassin spikes his last meal with roto-weed. The poison spreading through him before he dies.'

'I never knew death could be so pretty,' he said, indefatigable.

We rode in silence for a while and I wondered if men were the world's leaves. If as we aged the world filled us with its poisons so as old men, filled to the brim with the bitterest gall, we could fall into hell and take it all with us. Perhaps without death the world would choke on its own evils. The northmen, Sindri's people, have it that a tree, Yggdrasil, stands at the centre, with everything – even worlds – hanging from it. And with Sindri came

images of his milk-haired sister, Elin, tall and pale-eyed. Come to me in winter, she had said. I remarked to myself on her eyes in the moment I met her. Miana's after three years. A tree might stand at the centre of an old man's world. Whenever I turned my own face to the centre though, I saw a woman. Most young men do.

Three days later Lord Redmal's soldiers opened the road-gates to let us cross the border into Attar. Redmal's grandfather had built a fort across the road fifty years ago to let the folk of Gelleth know they weren't welcome. Merl Gellethar had flattened it in a dispute a decade before I reduced him to poisoned dust. Attar soldiers now infested the fort's ruins and watched the Gilden Guard with undisguised awe as they streamed past.

On the map Attar is a sizeable land, but the Engine of Wrong still turns and turns at Nathal as it has for ten centuries, and the north of Attar is a wasteland. I'm told it's not a poison or disease that keeps men away from Nathal and the lands around it, just a feeling, just the certainty that nothing there is right.

It took a day to cross the Attar hill country, where they keep the vineyards on the southern slopes and grow the grapes from which the Blood of Attar is fermented, a wine found at many royal tables. On the margins of the wine lands, as the hills smoothed themselves out for tobacco fields and small farmsteads, Red Kent came riding back from the column's vanguard with news.

'Another guard column ahead, sire,' he said, as humble and loyal as you please. I think Kent loved being a knight more than anything and, burned as he was, with that scary rasping voice, he made a good king's fist to send into trouble and to end it.

'Not the last we'll see, I suspect. Who is it?'

He paused and then I knew. Who else would it be. I owned every other land east of us until the sea.

'It's from Ancrath, a hundred guard.'

The votes of Ancrath and Gelleth, both resting in my father's hand.

I thought again of falling leaves and wondered if it wasn't time for another old man, full to the brim with poison, to make that final drop.



## Chella's Story

Five years of marching back and forth. Five years scurrying to do the Dead King's bidding. Always on the edge of things, as far from his court as one could be and still remain in the empire. Chella spent five years wading through mud and shit simply to rise enough in the Dead King's esteem for him to call her to court and seek an accounting for her failure. And she had come eagerly, racing across the broken empire just to face his judgment, just to stand before the inhumanity of the lichkin and have the Dead King watch her from the flesh into which he had settled deepest. Five wasted years – each one Jorg Ancrath's fault.

'There's a reason I'm having to hurt you.'

Chella walked around the stone pillar, a slow circle, hiding her irritation. The young man followed her with his eyes until the pillar took her from sight. She heard the clank of chains as he craned his head to look for her return. He had blue eyes, like many of these Brettan men, and he watched her as much as he watched the iron needle between her finger and thumb.

'Where's Sula?' He asked his question again. In the few patches without mud his hair showed blond, a golden hue. He met her gaze through locks matted with dirt and blood. Mire-ghouls had taken him and a woman near the Reed Sea during the Dead King's advance. Sigils on his uniform had marked him as wind-sworn and led him to this inspection.

'Kai.' Chella kept her voice tender, moving in quick and close, driving the needle two inches into the muscle of his inner thigh. 'Kai Summerson.' Her lips close enough to his ear for the blond hair to tickle. 'You have to let go of these attachments.'

He ground his teeth together, tension bunching around his jaw. After a moment he looked up again. 'Where—'

Chella pulled the needle free. 'Pain helps remind you of what is

important. The first important fact is that I don't have much time to waste on you and if you don't cooperate quickly I will just give you back to the ghouls and let them eat you piece by piece. The second important fact is that you're alive and that pain is not the only thing you can feel. I'm offering you a rare chance. Power, pleasure, a future.'

'Where is S—'

Chella slapped him across the face, hard enough to hurt her hand. 'Here.' She didn't need to speak. She just pulled the thread that bound her to each of her returned. Sula stepped from the shadow into Kai's line of sight. The ghouls hadn't left her pretty. Flesh and skin hung in a wet flap revealing her cheekbone, jaw, broken teeth, and the dark stump of her tongue. The dead girl watched Kai without curiosity. He sucked in a breath, gasping a deeper hurt than the needle had yet put in him. Perhaps she'd been his sweetheart. Surely more than a passing fancy.

'Sula?' Tears misted his eyes.

'Oh, grow up.' Boredom and anxiety nipped at Chella's heels and neither would help her turn him. 'She's dead. You're not. You can accept her death and find yourself a new direction, or you can join her. The world is changing. Are you going to change with it, Kai?'

Chella flicked her fingers at Sula and the corpse collapsed, ungainly, air belching as her stomach folded.

'Is she still "your girl", Kai? Does true love survive where flesh corrupts? What was she to you? A pretty face, a quick panting release? There's no romance in death, Kai, and death's the flip side of our coin.' She ran her fingers up into that blond hair of his. 'We're just meat on bones, waiting to rot. Find your pleasure where you will, by all means, but don't dress it up in sweetness and promises. There's nothing left to pin your loyalty on any more, Kai. Give it up.'

She took his wrist below the manacle and drove the needle through his palm, past clenched fingers. He cried out then, half a curse, half a scream, starting to break. Soon it would be all scream.

'W-what do you want?' He gasped his words past clenched teeth.

'Me? I want what you should want,' Chella said. 'I want what the Dead King wants me to want. The Dead King doesn't need your loyalty, he just requires that you do what he tells you to do. And when he has nothing for us to do, our time is our own.'

Chella pulled the needle free and licked the blood off it. She slid her other hand down across Kai's ribs and the hard muscle of his stomach, sweat slick.

'What do you want me for?' he asked.

Not stupid this one. And a survivor – at his core a survivor ready to do whatever is needed. Lead him slowly though, step by step.

Chella ran her hand lower. Even survivors balk if shown too much of the path at once. There's a road to hell that is paved with good intentions but it's a long route. The quicker path is paved with the kind of ignorance that clever men who just don't want to know are best at.

'You have talents that are rare, Kai.'

'The Dead King wants to recruit sky-sworn now?'

'Sky-sworn, rock-sworn, flame-sworn, sea-sworn.' Chella pricked his ribs with each word. 'They are all sworn, and men who can swear once can swear again. We're the same, you and I, we reach through into other places. What do you think the necromancers are, Kai? Monsters? Dead things?'

'You're dead. Everyone knows necromancers rise from the grave.'

Chella leaned in close, close enough that he could bite her neck if he chose, her lips at his ear once more. 'Death-sworn.'

In five years the Dead King had risen from being simply a new complication in the art of necromancy to a force that would change the world. He no longer bartered with necromancers, no longer manipulated, steered or simply terrified them into carrying out his will. He owned them. He no longer watched from the Dry Lands, peering into life through dead eyes where they fell, speaking with corpse lips, he inhabited the living world in stolen bodies, walking where he pleased. An army had grown about him. The lichkin had sprung from some untapped well of horror, lieutenants for the hordes of his dead.

While Chella had languished, the Dead King had risen beyond measure. His summons to court could mark a grisly end to the dark little tale of her existence, or a new beginning. She would present herself with Kai as her offering. Fresh meat. Even in the Dead King's forces necromancers were not common. Bearing gifts she would answer his call and answer for her failings with the Ancrath boy – who had also risen beyond measure and expectation.



## 12

### *Five years earlier*

Carrod Springs stinks. Not a human stink of waste and rot but a chemical offence against the senses, the bad-egg stench of sulphur, combined with sharper aromas fit for turning eyes red and stripping the lining from your nose.

'You see now why the trail detours so far to approach from the west with the prevailing wind,' Lesha said.

'Why would anyone live here?' Sunny asked.

A fair question. True enough, water had become a rarity as we trekked north into the wasteland, but the stuff that bubbled up in Carrod Springs could surely not be potable. It had risen hot and steaming from the earth's bowels. And smelled like it.

The settlement, seven shacks and two storage barns, clustered on a rise to the west, a spot where the breeze would offer a clean lungful. If there ever was any breeze. The buildings looked frost-rimed but drawing closer you could see it for what it was: salt, caked to the wood, bearding the eaves. We passed the first barn, doors wide, mounds of salt on display, like grain heaped from the harvest, some piles white, some grey, at the back rusty orange, and to the left-side smaller heaps of a deep but faint blue.

Balky had to be encouraged with a stick. None of the animals wanted to be here. They licked their muzzles, spat, and licked again. I could taste it on my lips too, like the salt spray off the ocean but sharper and more penetrating. My hands felt dry as if the skin on them had died and gone to parchment.

We tied the horses and Lesha led us to one of the smallest shacks - I had taken it to be a privy. A handful of residents watched us from their doorways, all of them veiled, salt crusted on the cloth where they drew breath. One had a huge goitre that wrapped his neck in throttling folds of mottled flesh. At the shack, Lesha knocked and entered. Sunny and I stood by the doorway peering into the gloom. It seemed unlikely we would all fit inside.

'Lesha.' A figure, seated in the far corner, nodding to her.

'Toltech.' She crouched before him.

Toltech watched her with bright eyes over the top of his veil. He worked the mortar and pestle in his hands all the while, grinding away.

'You're going back in?' He didn't sound surprised.

'Three of us, with three beasts. We'll need pills for a week.'

'A week is a long time in the Iberico.' Toltech glanced to me then to Sunny. 'An hour can be a long time there.'

'If it takes us an hour, we'll be there an hour,' Lesha said.

Toltech put down his pestle and reached across to a low shelf. He picked up a bowl filled with small wraps of greased paper, tightly bound. Scars ran along his hand. The same molten scars that covered Lesha.

'Take one at sunrise, one at sunset. Swallow them in the paper if you can. The salt steals any moisture in the air and dissolves in it, so these will not last long anywhere damp. Take a hundred. Five silver.'

The right salts helped keep out the sickness caused by the echoes of the Builders' fire. Nobody knew why. The required salts could be separated from the waters of Carrod Springs with sufficient expertise. Five pieces of silver seemed a small price to pay. I counted out the coins, one stamped with my grandfather's head, and passed them in to Lesha.

Toltech started to count salt pills into a cotton bag. 'If you find anything in the hills, even if it's just broken pieces, bring it to me. I might give you your silver back.'

'What have you had from the Iberico before, Master Toltech?' I asked. 'I'm something of a collector myself.' I leaned a little way in through the entrance. Beneath the salts' astringency the smell of sickness caught at me.

'Small things.' He pointed at two short bottles of green glass on the shelf where the bowl had rested. Beside them a tray covered with pieces of fractured plasteek in many colours and shapes. From behind him he took a great cog of silvery metal, stained with age. It looked like an enormous cousin to one of the minute pieces from inside the watch in my baggage. 'Nothing of great consequence. The best I sell on.'

'And do you know about the Builders, Master Toltech? Do you learn their secrets as you sift through their leavings?' I asked.

'I know only what all of us here know about the Builders. What our fathers knew.'

'And that is?' Some men like to be prompted.

'That they are not gone, and that you cannot trust them.'

We camped that night on the very edge of the Iberico range where a poisoned stream named the Cuyahoga ran out across the badlands. I swallowed my salt pill, the bitterness escaping despite its

wrap of paper. Toltech had had no more to say about the Builders so as we settled down after sunset I quizzed Leshia.

'What does your friend mean when he says the Builders are not gone?'

I felt rather than saw her shrug. We lay close, despite the weight of heat upon us. 'Some say the Builders are spirits now, all around us, written into the elements.'

'Not just echoes in machines?' I thought of Fexler flickering into life as I came down the cellar steps.

Leshia lifted to face me, frowning, deep enough that her scars buckled into furrows. 'Machines? Things of wheels and pulleys? I don't understand.'

'Spirits you say?' I decided to keep the engines beneath my grandfather's castle to myself. 'Good spirits or evil ones?'

Again the shrug. 'Just spirits. In the air, in rocks, running through rivers and streams, even staring at you out of the fire.'

'I heard that the Builders took hold of what is real, and before they scorched the world, they changed it,' I said.

'Changed what?' I'd forgotten Sunny was even there.

'Everything. Me, you, the world, what *real* is. They made the world listen a little more to what's in men's heads. They made thoughts and fears matter, made them able to change what's around us.'

'They didn't make it listen to me.'

I smiled at Sunny's grumbling.

'Earl Hansa had a rock-sworn mage work for him,' Sunny added. 'A young fellow. Must have been ten, fifteen years ago. Arron. That was it. He could work stone with his hands as if it was butter. One time he set a finger to my sword and it got so heavy I couldn't hold it. I couldn't pry it off the floor until the next day.'

'What happened to him?' He sounded like a useful man to know, this Arron.

'Sunk.'

'Ah.'

'Not at sea though. Ortens says he saw it, and Ortens isn't one for lying. He just sunk into the floor one morning. Right out in the centre courtyard. And nobody saw him again. There's just a grey stain where he went into the rock.'

'Well there's a thing,' I said.

And we all fell silent.

I lay for a time, on my blanket on the dust, listening to the silence. Something was wrong. I groped for it, reaching like you do in the night when your knife isn't where it should be. For the longest time I couldn't discover what it was that irked me.

'There's no noise.' I sat up.

'What?' Leshia, sleep edging her voice.

'Those things, those damned cicadas that screech all night.'

Where are they?'

'Not here,' she said. 'We're too close. Nothing lives in the Iberico. Not rats, not bugs, not lichen on rocks. If you want to go back - now is the time.'

## 13

### *Five years earlier*

The silence made it hard to sleep. The quiet seemed to have infected us all, even the horses held their peace, barely a snort or scrape of hoof hour after hour. In place of the night's muttering my ears invented their own script for the darkness. I heard whispers from the copper box, a taunting voice just beyond hearing, and behind even that, the sound of my own screaming. Perhaps the death of all those cicadas saved me, burned away by the ghost of the Builders' fire, or maybe built as I am of suspicion and mistrust I would have heard the attackers coming wherever we slept. Somewhere a stone grated beneath the sole of a shoe.

My kick found Lesha first. A stretched hand found some part of Sunny and I pinched it. Had they been road-brothers they would have, depending on their nature, sprung up blade in hand, or frozen where they lay, alert but waiting, until they understood the need. Brother Grumlow would have knifed the hand that shook him, Brother Kent would have feigned sleep, listening. Lesha and Sunny had slept too long in safe beds and started to rise in confusion, grumbling questions.

The predawn hint gave me the enemy as clumps of blackness, low to the dark ground, moving.

'Run!'

I threw my knife into the nearest threat, praying it wasn't a rock, then rolled past Lesha and took off at a sprint. The shriek that went up from the new owner of my dagger did more to convince the others of the danger than did my sudden exit.

Running in the dark is foolish but I'd seen the surroundings before the sun set. No bushes to tangle the feet and most of the rocks not big enough to be a problem. I heard the others behind me, Sunny's boots pounding, Lesha barefoot. Never let an enemy choose the ground. The only consolation in running blind into the night was that whoever meant us harm was now having to do the same.

Memory told me a shallow valley lay ahead, dividing the first

swelling foothills of the Iberico. I glanced behind, knowing that if the enemy were too close I would have heard the others go down already. The pursuers had unhooded several lanterns and their lights swung as they ran. Sunny had kept up a good pace and I had a scant twenty yards on him. Already Lesha was lost in the gloom, too stiff in the armour of her scars to run very fast.

I stopped and collared Sunny as he ran past. He nearly gutted me. 'Get down.' I hauled him to the ground. The Cuyahoga was out there, chuckling along its stony bed and Lesha had advised against wetting your feet in those waters - if you wanted to carry on walking.

'What? Why?' At least he had the sense to hiss his questions.

'The guide!' I kept low, crouched and hoping I looked like a rock. Lesha's feet made an odd noise hitting the dusty ground as she ran. She sounded close, the whoops of pursuit almost as near. She loomed into view and shot past us. I left Sunny to end the first man chasing her as I drove forward into the next two. Behind them the lights of at least four lanterns swung wildly in the hands of running men.

We took them by surprise. I swung left and right, crippled two men, and took off running again. I saw enough to know we had more than a dozen still chasing us, rough irregulars by the look of them. Road-brothers if you like, just not *my* brothers and not *my* roads.

I caught up with Lesha soon enough. They would too. Her only chance had been to get to her horse but there wasn't time.

'Where to?' I shouted.

'Don't know.' She panted it out. A useless but reasonable answer.

We let the valley guide us between the hills. Even as we ran the light grew, or rather the greys paled revealing hints at the world. Sunny waited for us where the valley divided, sword in hand, breathing hard. The cries of pursuit rang out behind. Hollers and wolf-howls, as if it were a game to them. It sounded like a lot more than a dozen on our trail.

It occurred to me that we were being herded. I had a couple of seconds to consider the realization before the ground gave way under Sunny. He vanished into a dark hole and I avoided following him by the narrowest of margins. Lesha hit me from behind as I teetered, arms wheeling, on the crumbling edge of the pit, and we went in together.

'Shit.'

We landed next to Sunny, our fall broken by a pile of sticks and dry grass. Looking up earned me an eyeful of loose earth sifting down and a glimpse of the paling sky, lighter still now viewed from the depths of a pit. To escape would require a climb of twelve maybe fifteen feet. We'd fallen into some kind of natural sinkhole covered to make a trap.

'Who are they?' I asked.

'Bandits.' Lesha's voice came soft with terror. 'Perros Viciosos, Bad Dogs in the old tongue. I didn't think they came this close to the Iberico.'

'Let them know who you are, Jorg. They'll ransom us.' Sunny tried to climb but slipped back in a shower of dry earth.

'You don't believe it half the time, Sunny. You think I'll convince this lot they've caught a king?'

The whooping drew closer, louder. Laughter now. 'We've got them!'

'Viciosos? That means "bad"?' It didn't sound quite right.

'Vicious,' Lesha said, stuttering out her words. 'For what they do to captives.'

The pit smelled of char.

'Give me a knife,' I said.

'Left mine in a Bad Dog.' Sunny patted his side.

'It's all on Garros,' Lesha said. She'd left her weapons on her horse. Who sleeps like that?

I drew my sword and made a slow arc to check the space. We had room to swing a cat if its tail wasn't too long. The laughter and mutter of voices increased above. The Bad Dogs were gathering.

I caught Lesha's shoulder and felt the unheard sobs shudder through her. No swift death waited for any of us. 'Stand there.' I pushed her into clear space, stumbling over the broken branches. She turned to me, just the glimmer of her eyes to mark her in the dark.

Light from above. A torch and a man to hold it. He could have passed for Rike's smaller uglier brother. 'See what running got you?'

I swung and severed Lesha's neck in a single clean cut, letting the sword bury its blade in the wall. Before she could fall I had her head in both hands, scarred and heavy, no realization in those eyes yet, and threw it as hard as I could. It struck the bandit square in the face, not on the forehead as I would have liked, but on the nose, mouth, and chin. He staggered one step backward, two steps forward, and fell with a wordless curse. He landed on Lesha's body. I caught the torch.

'What the hell?' Sunny stared in horror and amazement. Mostly amazement.

'Look at the walls,' I said. They were black. I stabbed the torch in where the sandy soil would hold it.

The bandit proved as heavy as he looked. I hauled him off Lesha and wrenched my sword clear to hold at his throat. 'Get up, Bad Dog.' The sharp edge helped him find his feet. 'Sunny, get her blood spread around.'

'What?'

I kicked the brush around my ankles and set my left hand to the pit wall. 'This wasn't put here to break our fall.' My

fingers came away sooty. 'They burn people here.'

More noise from above, an angry debate.

'You better lower a rope if you want this idiot alive,' I shouted.

A shrill laugh, more heated words exchanged.

'Ah, who am I kidding?' I sliced his throat on the blade of my sword and wrestled him around so the spray of his blood wouldn't be wasted. 'Who looks over the edge? It's not as if he knew we didn't have a knife to throw.'

Five torches arced in together before the idiot's neck had stopped pulsing. With the brush damped down and our wits about us we managed to get the torches secured and stamp out any burning patches. The smoke covered the stench of blood and soiled corpses. When we were done Sunny met my gaze.

'You killed her so you had something to throw?'

'That would have been enough of a reason - you saw how she moved, she wouldn't help in a fight. But no.'

'For the blood?'

'So I didn't have to watch them take as long as they could to kill her. If you knew how these sorts of men work, you'd be asking for me to take your head too.'

'But I get a choice?'

'You might be useful yet,' I said.

Our prison looked to be a fissure running for fifteen yards or so, three yards across at its widest where we fell into it.

I searched the idiot and found not one but two daggers, one for brawling, one balanced for throwing. I let Sunny have the bigger of the two.

'What now?' he asked. I could feel his fear but he kept it controlled. Holding a sword always leaves you with a little slice of hope.

'Now we wait for them to figure out how to kill us.' Anger kept my fear at bay. I wanted to take as many of them with me as could be managed. Dying in a dusty hole in the middle of nowhere hadn't figured in my plans and knowing that I was going to do just that left a sour taste in my mouth. How the hell did we manage to run into a hole with all this space around us in any case?

'You in the pit!' A shout from outside. No heads peeping over this time.

I kept silent. Two more torches arced in, trailing sparks and smoke across the pale sky. It seemed pointless given that five hadn't done the job. The sharp jab in my shoulder came as I was bending down for the closest brand.

'What?' I heard Sunny's exclamation. If the word 'what' had been taken away from him he wouldn't have had much to say that day.

I could have told him it felt like some kind of venom, but



he'd probably worked that out by then. A numbness had spread over my shoulder before I managed to stand, turn, and throw my knife at the dark face behind the blowpipe on the far edge of the pit. I missed. Another dart hit me in the chest, a little black thing half a finger in length.

'Fuck.'

The third dart set me slumped over my sword, without the strength to look up. It might be said it's never too hot for armour, but I'd have run slower than Lesha if I'd kept it on.

Men dropped into the pit and they hauled us out of there like meat, ropes round our chests, limbs trailing without sensation. It's not so hard to keep fear at arms' length with a sword. When you're helpless and in the grip of men for whom your pain is the only decent entertainment for miles around, you'd be mad not to be terrified.

Two men had hold of my arms, and the creature that darted me followed along where my heels dragged trails in the dust. My legs were red to well above the knee, dust caking onto the wet blood. The creature looked like a girl, eleven maybe, almost skeletal, burned dark by the sun. She grinned and waved her blowpipe at me.

'Ghoul darts. From the Cantanlona.' She had a high clear voice.

'Hard come by,' said one of the men on my arms. 'You'd better be worth it.'

They dragged us three hundred yards or so to a campground. Our horses and Balky were already there, tied to a rail. The horses tugged at their ropes, nervous, thirsty maybe. Balky just looked bored. The encampment seemed semi-permanent, with a few lean-to shacks in even worse condition than those in Carrod Springs, a cart, some water barrels, a chicken or two and in the middle, four thick posts set into the ground. It said a lot about the Perros Viciosos that they had put more construction material and effort into their infrastructure for torture than into their own living arrangements.

I counted about thirty men, as various in their origins and appearance as my own road-brothers, but with a predominance of dark-haired men, Spanards from the interior, an older and more pure bloodline than found in the coast regions, most of them lean and with a dangerous look to them. By my reckoning we'd left five of them dead. None of those in sight bore fresh wounds.

Two men strung Sunny up to one pole then came back for me. The rest watched, or ate, or squabbled over our possessions, or all three. Several men had reached for the box at my hip, but always their hands had fallen away, their interest gone. None of them offered so much as a kick or a punch, as if wanting to keep us in as good health as possible until the fun started.

'That's Jorg Ancrath,' Sunny told them. 'King of the Renner Highlands, grandson of Earl Hansa.'

The Bad Dogs didn't bother to reply, just tightened our ropes and set about their business. Waiting is part of the exercise. Letting the tension rise, like bakers' dough in the tin. Sunny kept talking, kept telling them who I was, who he was, what would happen if we weren't let go. The girl came over to watch us. She held out a hand filled with a large beetle scrabbling to get away.

'Mutant,' she said. 'Count the legs.'

It had eight. 'Ugly thing,' I told her.

She pulled off two of its legs. The bug was big enough for me to hear the crack as the limbs came free. 'All better.' She put it down and it took off across the dust.

'You killed Sancha,' she said.

'The big ugly idiot?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I didn't like him.'

The men set a fire in the blackened space before the poles. A small one, for wood is rare in the Iberico.

'He's the King of the Renner Highlands,' Sunny shouted at them. 'He has armies!'

'Renar,' I said. The numbness started to fade from my limbs, my strength making a slower return.

A woman came out of one of the shacks, a crone with sparse grey hair and a long nose. She unrolled a hide across the ground, displaying an assortment of knives, hooks, drills, and clamps. Sunny set to struggling. 'You can't do this, you bastards.'

Only they could.

I knew it wouldn't be long before he was begging me to get him out of this, then cursing me for getting him into it. At least I didn't have Lesha doing the same on the other side of me. I knew what would happen because I'd seen it before. I also knew that the quiet ones, the ones biding their time like me, would scream just as loud and beg just as uselessly in the end. I watched the men as they gathered, catching what names I could, Rael, tall and thin with a scar across his throat, Billan, pot-bellied, a salt-and-pepper beard, pig eyes. I muttered the names to myself. I would hunt them down in hell.

*Five years earlier*

While the old woman worked to expose Sunny's ribs, the girl brought me her latest find. She held the scorpion's claws together in one tight fist and kept the stinger stretched out with the other hand. Eight legs writhed in a fury of motion. The thing had to be a good twelve inches from claw tip to sting. I could see the strain of holding it in the small knots of muscle along her arm bones.

'What?'

'It's not right!' She had to shout to be heard amid Sunny's screaming.

'Mutant?' It looked fine to me, just much bigger than I like my scorpions.

The old woman tossed down another strip of skin and two scrawny chickens chased after it. The men, crowded before the posts, cheered. Most of them sat cross-legged with some kind of liquor to hand in waxed leather tubes from which they sipped. All of them seemed content to let the crone ply her trade. Some chatted between themselves, but most showed an interest and would applaud the deft knife-work at the completion of each stage. I noted that one man had found Lesha's head and held it in his lap, angled toward the posts. There were few among the Bad Dogs who matched the intensity with which she watched us.

'Not mutant. Wrong.' She strained to crack the creature's back but couldn't. The legs kept up the frenzy of writhing. 'Can't you hear it?'

I could barely hear *her* over Sunny's screaming, let alone her new pet. In truth I think he screamed to take his mind off what was being done, the real hurting had yet to start. Torture is more than pain and the Perros Viciosos knew it. Certainly the old woman knew it. She hadn't really begun on him yet, but the mutilation hurt worse than agony that leaves no mark. When the torturer does damage that obviously won't heal they underscore the irreversibility of it all. This won't get better. This won't go away. It lets the man know he is just meat and veins and

sinew. Flesh for the butcher.

The girl, Gretcha, held the scorpion to my face. I craned away, rewarded by a full view of Sunny's chest, the white of rib bones showing through the narrow slots cut to reveal them. Veins stood out in sharp relief across his neck, eyes screwed shut.

I heard it then, the strange whir, click, and tick behind the dry thrashing of legs. It set me in mind of the noise when I put the Builders' watch to my ear, the sound of cogs, of metal teeth meshing with impossible precision. I turned and stared at the thing and for one fragment of a second its black eyes blinked crimson.

Gretcha threw the scorpion down and started to chase it, beating at it with a heavy stick. One blow broke most of the legs along the left side. She vanished from the corner of my eye still chasing the crippled arachnid. I could turn my head no further. The red flash echoed behind my eyelids and for some reason I saw Fexler's red star once more, blinking over the Iberico.

It took the better part of an hour for the old woman to finish her work and in that time she used most of the tools from the wrap she had rolled out at the start. She made an artwork of Sunny's chest and arms, cutting, searing, tearing pieces away, unpeeling layers, pinning them back. He howled at her of course, and at me, demanding release, that I do something, begging me, and before long he swore terrible revenge, not on his tormentors but on Jorg Ancrath who had brought him to this fate.

Fear ran in me - how would it not? Terror ran through me in a hot rush, then as ice along veins, making my fingers and face prickle with pins and needles. But I tried to fool myself that I sat in the audience, watching with the casual cruelty of road-brothers at rest. And to some degree I succeeded for I have sat and watched, on too many occasions, from the times before I really understood such suffering to the times where I understood it and didn't care. The strong will hurt the weak, it's the natural order. But strapped there in the hot sun, waiting my turn to scream and break, I knew the horror of it and despaired.

At last the crone stepped back, red to the elbows, but with scarcely a drop on her clothes or face. She turned to her audience, mocked a curtsy, and went back to her shack with her tools in their roll beneath one arm.

Cheers from the crowd, some quite drunk now. Harsh rasping breaths from Sunny, his head hanging low, one eye wide and staring, the other tight shut. The tall man, Rael, stood and advanced to secure Sunny's head to the post with leather straps. Off by the shacks someone took a piss, another man scattered grain for the hens.

'Gretcha!' The round-bellied man, Billan, called out for the girl.

She came from behind the posts with the slash of a grin on her

skull face, dropping a handful of broken insect parts, legs and glossy black plates. Billan set a stool for the girl to stand on, close to Sunny's post.

Gretcha went to the fire without further prompting and took the iron that had been set there. I hadn't seen it placed. She grasped it by the cloth-wrapped end and held the dull orange end toward us. 'No!' Sunny understood the leather straps around his forehead. I couldn't blame his struggles. I would be struggling and telling them no when my turn came.

In the fire strange shapes danced. The sun made ghosts of the flame and I had to squint, but I saw them, shapes and colours that had no place there. Delirium setting in from the heat and terror. Perhaps madness would claim my mind before they even started on me.

'You're too loud.' Gretcha pushed the hot iron into Sunny's mouth. His clenched lips shrivelled away before the iron's glare. Teeth cracked at the iron's touch. I heard them. They became brittle and shattered as she pushed. Steam poured from his mouth, steam and awful screaming and the smell of roasting.

I looked away, blinded with tears as the little girl put his eyes out. I could say I wept for Sunny, or for the horror of a world where such things happen, but in truth I wept for myself, in fear. At the sharp end of things there is only room for ourselves.

The Bad Dogs whooped and cheered at the sport. Some called out names, presumably of the men who we had killed, but it meant nothing. We would have suffered the same tortures if they had captured us in our sleep without loss.

'Gretcha.' Billan again. 'Enough with that one. Mary will find something more in him later. Put the other's eye out. Just one. I don't like the way he's been looking at me.'

The girl pushed the end of the iron into the hot embers and stood watching it, her back to me. I pulled at my bonds. They knew how to tie a man, not just at the wrists but at the elbows and higher too. I pulled anyhow. Anger rose in me. It wouldn't stand before the iron, but for a moment at least it chased away some measure of the fear. Anger at my tormentors and anger at the foolishness of it, dying in some meaningless camp filled with empty people, people going nowhere, people for whom my agony would be a passing distraction.

When Gretcha turned back I met her gaze and ignored the hot draw of the iron.

'Keep a steady hand, girl.' I gave her a savage grin, hating her with a sudden intensity so fierce it hurt.

*Are you dangerous?* I had asked the Nuban when they held the irons over him. I'd given him his chance, loosed one hand, and he had seized it. *Are you dangerous?* Yes, he had said, and I told him to show me. I wanted that chance now. Let her say the words.

*Are you dangerous?*

Instead her smile fell away and her hand wavered, just a touch.

'Stop!' Rael called. 'His head isn't bound. You could kill him.'

He came across and secured me with more straps. I watched him, trying to commit each detail of his face to memory. He would be one of the last people I saw.

'Give me the iron.' He snapped the words out, taking it from Gretcha's hands. 'I'll do this one myself.' Returning my glare he said, 'You might be a lord of some sort. You had enough gold on you. And this.' He held up his wrist to show the watch from my uncle's treasury. 'But we both know that if you were ransomed you would do nothing but hunt us from the moment you were free and safe. I can see it in you.'

I couldn't lie to him. There would be no point. If I were free I would hunt them over any distance at any cost.

'Looks like you've done this before.' Rael nodded at my cheek. 'Maybe we should start where they left off, just to remind you how it felt.'

The red-hot tip of the iron approached the thick scar tissue reaching across the left side of my face. No waver in Rael's hand however fierce my stare. Gretcha stood beside him, her head reaching only a little past his waist.

The heat scorched my lips and dried the wetness from my eyes, but in the scar-tissue no pain, just a warmth, pleasant almost. The burn had killed all sensation in that flesh, I could scratch it with my nails and only feel the tugging in the untouched skin just below my eye. The iron rested a little below my cheekbone with the pressure of a poking finger. Puzzlement reshaped Rael's brow.

'He won't b--'

A sudden pulse of pleasure flushed through the scar tissue, almost orgasmic, and a flash of heat closed my eyes. The stink of my hair crisping filled my nostrils. Rael screamed and when I looked again the dance had him. That dance men do when unexpected agony seizes them, a stubbed toe or blow to that tricky bone in the elbow will start it off often as not. He held the wrist of his right hand in the grip of his left. And there, seared across the exposed palm, deep enough to reach the little bones that fill the hand, the line the iron had left on him. The iron itself lay in the dust, bright and shining, as white with heat as if it were at the bellows' mouth in a forge, the cloth burning around it.

I had to laugh. What were they going to do if I laughed at them? Hurt me? In the shock of it I had bitten my tongue and I laughed now with the taste of blood filling my mouth and the warmth of it running crimson over my lips.

'Idiot.' Billan got up and pushed Rael out of his way. He

caught my chin and jaw in a painful grip. 'What did you do, boy?'

'Boy?' It hurt to get the word out with his fingers digging into my jaw muscles. I didn't know what I'd done but I was glad of it. I suspected something in the fragments of Gog bedded in that scar had reacted to the touch of so much heat.

'Answer me.'

Even now Billan thought he had something to threaten me with. I spat blood into his face. He staggered away with a girlish shriek and that set me laughing all the more. Hysteria had me in its claws. Others among the Perros Viciosos got to their feet. One slab of muscle named Manwa, brother to Sancha who I killed in the pit, took Billan's arm and tried to settle him. A dirty rag set to the blood didn't seem able to wipe it off. Seconds later a better view showed that the skin itself had turned scarlet where the blood touched, and in his eyes the blood had scalded his cornea a milky white. It seemed the necromancy that lurked within me and would kill small things through just a touch of my fingers, really did run in my veins.

'Get Old Mary back!' Billan shouted it in his blindness. The effort to hold himself back, to deny the lust to choke the life out of me, made him tremble. 'I want him to scream for a month.'

'You won't live a month, Billan. When your brothers understand that your sight isn't coming back ... how long before they tie you to this post do you think?' I couldn't stop smiling. Hysteria and bravado would be cut from me quick enough when the crone brought her knives, I knew that, but hell, laugh while you can, no?

Manwa pulled out his sword, which turned out to be my sword. 'He has a sword of the old-steel and he works magic.' He turned the blade in his huge fist. He was a big man but his hands belonged to a giant. 'Maybe we should ransom him? The other one said Earl Hansa would pay for them.'

Rael spat, his face tight with suffering. A burned hand leaves a man no peace. 'He dies. He dies hard.'

Manwa shrugged and sat down, my sword across his knees.

Two men led Old Mary back to the posts. I saw them first from the corner of my eye and watched so close that I almost didn't notice the rope go slack around my ankles. Behind the complaints and curses of the Bad Dogs, behind the wet unnatural sobbing from Sunny, I heard a click and whir and a scrabbling like fingers clawing wood. Something fought a path up the post at my back, on the far side. Schnick. The rope around my knees fell away. Nobody noticed.

Mary unrolled her tool-wrap out across the dust again. She gave me a mean look as if I was really going to get it now for disturbing her rest. Again the absurdity of it twitched at the corners of my mouth. She drew the sharpest of her blades, a small cutting edge on a cylindrical metal shaft, the sort of thing Grecko doctors might use for slicing out a canker. Three steps

brought Mary to me, unsteady on her feet, sure of hand. She cut away the stained remnants of my shirt. The blade didn't pull as the cloth parted before it.

'That's a very ugly wart you have there, Old Mary,' I said.

She paused and looked at me. She had mean old woman eyes, very dark.

'Oh sorry. I mean the one down on your chin. Ugly thing. Couldn't you just slice it off? With that nice sharp knife of yours? Trim some of those wattles too? We don't want them calling you Ugly Old Mary now, do we?'

Something dry and unpleasant scrambled over my bound hands. I shivered as hard little legs moved over my wrists. It took all my remaining composure not to twitch the thing off me.

'Are you stupid?' Mary asked after the longest pause. She hadn't said a word to Sunny the whole time she worked on him.

'Did I hurt your feelings, Old Mary?' I smiled at her, my teeth crimson no doubt. 'You know that however much I shout and beg, those words can't go back in the box don't you? You are ugly and old. There's nothing we can do about it, Mary. I expect little Gretcha will be doing your work soon enough and you'll be her journeyman piece. I wonder what shapes she'll cut you into?'

The Bad Dogs watched me now, their arguments forgotten. Even Rael and Billan gave up on their hurts for a moment to give me their attention. Victims threaten or plead. Old Mary didn't know what to make of mockery.

Schnick. My wrists were free. Blood started to flow into them. It hurt worse than anything I'd suffered on the torture pole thus far.

Old Mary shook her head and brushed aside a lock of grey hair. She looked annoyed, less sure of herself. Here she was, ready to open me up piece by piece, and I'd made her self-conscious with throw-away commentary on her wartiness. I grinned wide enough to crack my face. I felt pretty sure they'd have to kill me once I got free. The prospect of attacking them rather than expiring on that pole just flooded me with joy. I couldn't stop smiling.

'Cracked, this one.' Mary set the point of her knife at the extreme right of my lowest rib.

I strained for the faint noise of my saviour crawling up the pole. If it cut the rope across my chest and upper arms everyone would notice it fall and I would still be secured by the head. They hadn't set a rope around our necks, presumably to stop us choking when straining to get away from the pain.

Mary made her cut. They say sharp knife, no tears. The cutting didn't hurt, but an acid wash of pain followed in the knife's wake. It took all my restraint to keep from kicking her away and betraying myself.

'Ouch,' I said. 'That hurts.'

Mary drew back to make a lower cut parallel to the first.



Behind me the creature slipped and fell.

'Oh crap!' I shouted it. Amazingly Old Mary startled back and several of the Bad Dogs flinched. Somehow the creature caught on my hands, a bite or a grip, I didn't know, but I did know it really hurt. 'OUCH! Fuck it!'

Mary blinked. I had one thin slice in me - she didn't understand.

'You're going to do the same thing again?' I demanded. The creature released its grip and climbed back over my hands to the pole. It felt like a giant crab, or spider. Jesu, I hate spiders. 'You're going to do the ribs all over again like you did on Sunny?' I flicked my eyes his way. 'You're supposed to be good at this, to make it interesting to watch! No wonder they've got Gretcha ready to replace you.'

'The ribs are boring,' somebody called out behind her.

'It's good when she breaks them out.' That was Rael.

'We've got one ready for that.'

'Something new!'

Slight vibrations as the creature reached the chest rope. Shit. I tensed ready to struggle like hell when it came free. More vibration and the thing moved on, up, the rope intact.

'Come on Ugly Mary, show us something new.' A dark-skinned youth near the back.

Mary didn't like that at all. She scowled at me, showing yellow stumps of teeth. Muttering, she turned and bent for a thin hook.

The creature moved behind my head. My hair pulled where strands were bound up in the leather. A claw slid under the strap that bound my forehead.

Mary faced me, straightening as much as her back allowed. She kept the hook low as she advanced, at groin level, smiling for once.

Schnick.

I pressed forward and the rope around my chest gave. The creature must have sawed through, leaving just a strand to hold it.

Conjurers will hold your attention where they want it and in doing so can leave you blind to what else is happening before your eyes. Mary's hook held the Bad Dogs' attention. The last rope on me dropped away and, like magic, nobody saw it fall.

The madness in me, some virulent mix of terror and relief, put me in mind to scratch my nose then return my hand behind me. Sanity prevailed. I overcame the temptation to waste the moment by sinking Mary's hook into one of her eyes. Instead I moved forward, very swift, and snatched my sword from Manwa's lap.

I strode into the midst of them.

To avoid grappling and capture it's best to keep to the edge, but they had bows and somewhere, more of those darts. By striking

to the middle I kept them disorganized, close. And as I moved through them I laid about me. Before the first of the Dogs gained their feet I had opened wounds on four men that would never close.

There's a freedom in being surrounded on all sides by enemies. In such circumstances, with a heavy blade that's sharp enough to make the wind bleed, you can swing in grand and vicious circles and your only care need be to ensure the weapon isn't locked into the corpse of your last victim. In many ways I had lived most of my life in exactly such a condition, swinging in all directions with no worry about who might die. Experience served me well on the edge of the Iberico Hills.

The Bad Dogs died, parted from heads, from limbs, without time for one man to fall before the point of my sword ploughed a red furrow through the next. Not before or since have I taken such unadulterated joy in slaughter. Some cleared their weapons, swords, knives, sharp little hatchets, cleaver-axes, but none lasted more than two exchanges with me: a swift parry and they went down on the riposte. I got cut, in three places. I didn't know about that until much later, until I found that some of the blood wouldn't clean away.

Once, with men advancing from many directions, I spun and found Manwa in front of me. Instinct wrapped my spare hand around his knife hand and twisted me to the side. Hatred drove my forehead into his nose. He was a tall man, powerful, but I had grown tall, and whether rage multiplied my strength or my muscle matched his I don't know, but his knife didn't find me. In fact I kept it for a dozen more bloody moments, cutting and thrusting, until I left it in Rael's neck.

It helped that many of them were drunk, some too intoxicated on blind-shine even to find their weapons, let alone swing them to good effect. It also helped that I hated them all with such purity, and that I had trained at swordplay for months, day in, day out, until my hands bled and the sword-song rang in my ears.

A fat man fell away from me, guts vomiting in blue coils from his opened belly. Another man, already running, I cut down from behind. Turning, I saw two more Dogs running toward the valley. One I brought down at fifty paces with a hatchet scooped from the ground. The other escaped. The silence was sudden and complete.

By the posts Mary stood with Gretcha at her side. The girl had one small hand knotted in the old woman's skirts, the other holding her blowpipe, levelled at me. I walked toward them. Pfft. Gretcha's dart hit my collarbone. I snatched the pipe from her and threw it behind me.

'We're very much alike, Gretcha, you and I.'

I squatted to be level with the girl. The dart came out with a pull and I let it fall into the dust. She watched me with dark eyes. I saw a lot of Mary in her. A granddaughter perhaps.

'I can help.' I smiled, sad for her, sad for everything. 'If someone had done this for me when I was a child it would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.'

Her mouth made an 'oh' of surprise as the sword passed through her, grating on thin bones. She slid off the blade as I stood.

'Ugly. Old. Mary,' I said.

She still held the hook. I caught her around her scrawny neck but she didn't try to stick me with it. Necromancy tingled in my fingertips, reacting to her age maybe. My fingers found the knobbles of her spine and I let death leak into her, enough to make her crumple to the floor.

Sunny still lived. His gasping made the only sound in that silence that settles over carnage. Some of the Bad Dogs would be wounded but alive. If they were though they managed to stay quiet about it and sensibly keep themselves from my attention.

Close up Sunny's injuries screamed at me. I sensed the hurt coursing through him in red rivers. Necromancy knows about such things. With a hand against his chest it seemed I knew him blood to bone, that I knew the branching of his veins, the shape of his spine, the beat and flutter of his heart. I had no healing though, only death. Thick mucus, flecked with char, oozed from his eye sockets. His tongue lay scorched and swollen in a broken mouth.

'I can't help you, Greyson Landless.'

The effort that raised his eyeless head to me tore through the necromantic threads between us and ripped a gasp from me. I cut his ropes and lowered him to the ground. I wouldn't see him die bound.

'Peace, brother.' The point of my sword rested above his heart. 'Peace.' And I made an end of him.

Greyson's suffering still trembled in my hands. I knelt beside Old Mary, crumpled in the dirt, watching me with bright eyes, dust on the trail of drool across her cheek. With one hand on her scrawny neck and one atop her head I let Sunny's pain free. It seems that a necromancer's fingers can do in moments with strokes and pinches what all her sharp instruments took hours to achieve. Her heart couldn't take it for long and death reached up for her. She died too easy.

Lesha's head lay in among the bodies. I retrieved it, killing one malingerer on the way. Most corpses echoed with some remnant of the person when I touched them. Row's flesh had reeked of him. But Lesha's head felt empty, not literally, not scooped out, but free of any trace of her, a shell. Somehow it pleased me, that she had gone beyond reach. Somewhere better I hoped.

I set her head beside Sunny, ready to bury. First though, I walked around the posts. The scorpion, missing three legs on one side, some armour broken away from its back, clung motionless to the rear of the post I had been bound to. The leather strap that

held my head still hung from its claw. The scorpion's head lifted a fraction as I approached it, and once more the dark beads of its eyes glowed crimson.

'Fexler?' I asked.

It twitched twice and fell from the post, landing on its back. One more convulsion and it wrapped tight with a loud crackling noise, its armoured plates seizing in permanent embrace.

'Damn.'



## Chella's Story

'Tell me again.'

He's chained and bleeding in a dungeon surrounded by walking dead, and up above there's all manner of worse things, mire-ghouls and rag-a-mauls the least of them ... and he keeps asking questions!

'You're an unusual man, Kai Summerson.' Chella paced around the pillar once more. She couldn't seem to keep her feet still. Too much life in them perhaps.

'This from a necromancer with my woman's corpse on the floor.'

Chella leaned in close, the iron needle in her hand, but she knew the balance had slipped away from her. Somewhere along the line this unusual young man had deduced that she needed his cooperation. Maybe it had just been too obvious that she would have killed him if her need hadn't been so great.

'What is it that you didn't understand?' She whispered it into his ear. He couldn't know how much she needed a success, anything to move her from the cold shadow of the Dead King's disdain.

'Sula's in heaven ... and also here?'

A sigh escaped her, sharpened by frustration. Even clever men could be fools. 'What will not pass into heaven may be returned to the body. How much is returned depends upon the person, and upon the call. It doesn't take much to get a fresh corpse on its feet. A little hunger, greed, some anger maybe. Sula had plenty of greed.'

'So not everyone can be returned. Some people pass on clean and whole?'

'A saint maybe. I've never met one.' Also children. But she didn't say it. Whatever the road to hell is paved with, the key is to take one step at a time.

'And having reminded me of heaven you expect me to damn myself to eternity in flames just to avoid a painful death?' Kai spat blood onto

the floor. He must have bitten his tongue. He didn't seem nearly as scared as he should be. Probably it felt like a dream to him, a nightmare, too much strangeness too quickly. If she had time Chella would leave him a day or two. Fear seeps into a man. In a cold dark place, alone with nothing but imagination for company, terror would gather him in. But she didn't have two days, or even one.

'Death is broken, Kai. Hell is rising. How long do you think heaven will keep you safe? The Dead King is putting an end to all of that. Eternity will be here, in this world, in this flesh. All you need to decide is whether to feed the fire or be the fuel.'

## 16

Perhaps the Engine of Wrong had found a new gear for nothing felt right after Kent brought news that my father's carriage preceded us. I rode to the front of our column, Makin and Rike falling in around me. At Captain Harran's side a few minutes later, cresting a low rise, I saw the dull gleam of the Ancrath column ahead. It takes more than a river of mud to keep the Gilden Guard from shining.

I pulled up to stare at the carriage bumping along amidst the horsemen. I last rode in it when I was nine. The old bastard had salvaged it.

'He scares me too,' Makin said.

'I'm not scared of my father.' I showed him my scowl but he only grinned.

'I don't know how he puts the fright in a man,' Makin said. 'I mean, I swing the better sword, and yes he's got a cold temper on him and harsh ways, but so have a lot of kings, and dukes, and earls, barons, lords – hell, any man you give command to is likely to put an edge on it just to keep hold. He's not even given to torture: his brother, his nephews, all well known for it, but Olidan he'll just have you hung and be done.'

Rike snorted at that. He'd seen my father's dungeons from the wrong side. Still, Makin had it right, there were plenty around who made Olidan Ancrath seem a reasonable man.

'I said I wasn't scared of him.' My heartbeat told the lie but only I could hear it.

Makin shrugged. 'Everyone is. He puts the fright in you. He's got the look. That's what does it. Cold eyes. Makes you shiver.'

I've been known for bold moves at times, for daring the challenge even when I've known I shouldn't. Under that grey sky though, with a cold wind blowing wet from the north, I felt no inclination to catch up to the carriage labouring ahead of us and demand an accounting for the past. My chest ached along the thin seam of that old scar and for once I found myself wanting to let something lie.



We rode without talking, the column moving around us, so many guardsmen in their fine armour, so sure in their purpose. The chill breeze nagged at me and all my yesterdays crowded at my shoulder, wanting their turn to rattle in my skull.

‘Cerys,’ I said.

Makin pushed back his helm and looked at me.

‘Killed when she had three years to her. Tell me.’ I had thought that if we ever spoke of Makin’s daughter it would be in maudlin drunkenness in the small hours before dawn, or perhaps as with Coddin it would take a mortal wound to turn our conversation to matters of consequence. That it might happen riding in the mud in the cold light of day surrounded by strangers had not occurred.

Still Makin watched me, jolting in the saddle, unaccustomed stiffness in that flexible face of his. For the longest moment I thought he wouldn’t speak.

‘My father had lands in Normardy, a small estate outside the town of Trent. I wasn’t the first son. I got married off to a rich man’s daughter. Her father and mine settled some acres on us and a house. The house came a couple of years after our official marriage. Something less than a mansion, more than a farmhouse. The sort of place you might have raided when you led the brothers on the road.’

‘It was outlaws?’ I asked.

‘No.’ His eyes glittered, bright with memory. ‘Some official dispute, but too petty to be called a war. Trent and Merca quarrelling over their boundaries. A hundred soldiers and men-at-arms on each side, no more. And they met in my wheatfield. We were both seventeen, Nessa and me, Cerys three. I had a few farmhands, two house servants, a maid, a wet-nurse.’

Even Rike had the sense to say nothing. Nothing but the clomp of hooves in mud, Gorgoth’s heavy footfalls, the creak of harness, dull chinks of metal on metal, the high sharp arguments of birds invisible against the sky.

‘I didn’t see them die. I might have been lying in the dirt by the main door clutching my chest. Nessa likely got cut down while I lay there looking at the clouds. I blacked out later. Cerys hid herself in the house and the fire probably reached her after I’d been dragged unconscious into a ditch. Children do that, they hide from the fire rather than run, and the smoke finds them.

‘Took me six months to recover. Stabbed through a lung. Later, I raided into Merca, with a band who survived that day. I found out that the lord’s boy

who led that raid had been sent to a cousin's in Attar to keep him safe. We met a year later. I tracked him to a little fort-town about twenty miles north of here.

'My route back took me through Ancrath, and I stayed there. In time I found service with your father. And that's all there is to it.'

Makin didn't have a grin on him, though I've seen him smile at death time and again. He kept his eyes on the horizon but I knew he saw further than that. Across years. 'That' is never all there is to it. Hurt spreads and grows and reaches out to break what's good. Time heals all wounds, but often it's only by the application of the grave, and while we live some hurts live with us, burning, making us twist and turn to escape them. And as we twist, we turn into other men.

'And how long does it take for a child that you cross nations to avenge, because you couldn't save her when saving her was an option, to become a child that you knife because you couldn't accept him when accepting him was an option?'

Makin gave half a grin then though he didn't look away from whatever past held him. 'Ah, Jorg, but you were never as sweet as Cerys, and I was never as cold as Olidan.'

Another day passed and we trailed the Ancrath column through Attar's heartlands. Everywhere peasants came on rag-bound feet to watch us pass, wreathed in the smoke from fields where red lines of fire ate the stubble. They abandoned the harvest's funeral rites, the laying and the stacking of crops, the pickling and the drying for winter, to watch the Gilden Guard and see the pennants of jet and gold flutter on high. Empire meant something to them. Something old and deep, a half-forgotten dream of better things.

In the late afternoon, sunshine broke through a fissure in the clouds and Miana emerged from Lord Holland's carriage to ride a sedate mile side-saddle as we plodded through a ford town with the unlikely name of Piddle. Marten took to saddle as well and when Miana retired he kept at my side.

'She's finding it difficult, sire,' he said, unprompted.

'More difficult than being at the Haunt waiting for guests from the Vatican?'

'It's hard work carrying a child in the last month.' Marten shrugged but I felt he cared more than that.

Sometimes it cuts to see other men more passionate than I about the things

that I should care for. I knew that if the Pope's assassin had killed Miana and our unborn child I would have grieved. But also I knew that some terrible part of me, down at the core, would have raised its face to the world with a red grin, welcoming the chance, the excuse, for the coming moments of purity in which my revenge would sail upon a tide of blood. And I knew that rage would have swept away everything else, including sorrow.

'It's a hard world, Marten.' He glanced across, confused for a moment as we'd ridden a quarter mile since he last spoke. 'It shouldn't be easy to bring someone into a hard world. It's too easy to make a new life, too easy to take an old one. It's only right that some part of the process present a little difficulty.'

He kept his gaze upon me, a right earned over and again in my service, and the weight of his judgment built upon me.

'Dammit.' I snorted my exasperation. 'I feel outnumbered in that carriage.'

Martin smiled. 'A married man is always outnumbered.'

I spat in the mud and pulled on Brath's reins with a curse. Five minutes later I sat in the carriage once more beside Miana.

'My father's carriage is just ahead of us,' I said.

'I know.'

It felt odd to be talking about him, especially with Gomst and Osser sat watching us. Gomst at least had the sense to pull out his bible, a book near big enough to hide the both of them, and engage the older man in discussion of some or other psalm.

'Coddin wants me to vote with my father at Congression. To make peace with him.' The words made my mouth dirty.

'And you would rather ... not?' A smile quirked at the corners of her lips but I didn't feel mocked.

A snatch of Gomst's conversation reached me. "'Father, where is the lamb that is to be sacrificed?" And Abraham replied, "My son, God will provide the lamb".'

'I have many reasons to want him dead. And almost as many reasons to want to be the one to do it.'

'But *do* you want to do it? The Jorg I know tends to do what he wants to do, and if reasons oppose him he changes them.'

'I—' I wanted to understand how it all worked, this business of living and of raising children. I wanted to do the job better than he had. 'Men will tell our son how it was between me and my father.'

Miana leaned closer, raven-dark hair falling around her pale face. ‘So what will they tell our child?’ She refused to call him ‘our son’ until he came out to prove himself.

‘Even the king can’t control men’s gossip,’ I said.

Miana watched me. She wore a circlet of woven gold but her hair did as it pleased, taking at least two maids and a handful of clips to constrain. At last my incomprehension drove her to explain. ‘How can a clever man be so stupid? How it was between you and Olidan isn’t finished. The story that will be told is not yet written.’

‘Oh.’

I let her shoo me out of the carriage.

Not until chance took a hand though did I finally find the stones to ride to my father’s carriage. A guard captain came with news and found me skulking mid-column, Gorgoth at my side. Gorgoth always proved good company if you didn’t want to talk.

‘The Ancrath carriage has broken an axle.’ He didn’t bother with my title. ‘Can room be found in yours? There’s some objection to using one of the baggage wagons.’

‘I’ll come and discuss the matter.’ I suppressed a sigh. Sometimes you can sense the current of the universe flowing and nothing can deny its will for too long.

All my men rode in my wake. Word had spread fast. Even Gorgoth came, perhaps curious to see where a son such as I had sprung from. We passed the Gilden Guard in their hundreds, all halted on the trail. Every head turned our way. And in a narrow stretch of road, unremarkable save for the stream on whose rocky bed my father’s carriage had broken its axle, I came once more to speak with the King of Ancrath.

I felt Coddin at least would be pleased. I may not have taken his advice but fate seemed to disagree with my decision, pushing the Ancraths one step further along the path of the old prophecy. Two Ancraths working together were required to break the power of the hidden hands and here were the last two Ancraths. Well, you can lead a horse to water, but I choose what I damn well drink and I hold a low opinion of prophecy. It would take more than hell freezing over to see me allied to my father’s cause.

They had dragged the carriage some twenty yards up the slope from the stream. I dismounted close by, my boots sinking six inches into churned mud.

A breeze tugged the bare twigs in the hedgerows, a taller tree overreached us, black-fingered against a pale sky. The hand on Brath's reins shook as if the wind pulled on it too. I bit off a curse at my weakness and faced the carriage door. A thousand years ago Big Jan had pulled me through that door, from one world into another.

I stood there, cold, my bladder too full, a tremble in my limbs, turned in heartbeats from the king of seven nations bound for Congression to a scared child once again.

The guard captain of the Ancrath column applied his mailed knuckles to the wood. 'Honourous Jorg Ancrath requests audience.'

I wanted to be anywhere else, but stepped closer. None of the guard but the captain had dismounted to prevent violence. Either they didn't know the stories men told of me, or they didn't care. Perhaps they saw their job as retribution for breaking pax rather than prevention of such breaches.

The door opened and from the dark interior emerged a slim and pale hand. A woman's hand. I stepped forward and took it. Sareth? Father had brought his wife?

'Nephew.'

And she stepped out onto the riding board, all whispering silks and stiff lace collars, her hand cool yet burning in my grip. The carriage behind her lay empty.

'Aunt Katherine,' I said, my words once again in short supply.

## 17

Six years had only made her the more beautiful. What Katherine Ap Scorrion hid in dreams stood before me on a cold day at the edge of winter.

‘Katherine.’ I still held her hand, raised between us. She took it back. ‘My father sent you to Congression? In his stead?’

‘Ancrath is at war. Olidan stays with his armies to ensure that the war is not lost.’

She wore black, a flowing gown of it, satin folds reaching to a broad hem of black suede from which the mud might be brushed when dry. Lace around her neck like ink tattoos, earrings of silver and jet. Still mourning her prince.

‘He sent you? With two voting seals and no advisors.’

‘Nossar of Elm was to come but he fell sick. I have the king’s trust.’ She watched me, hard eyes, her lips a tight line in a pale face. ‘Olidan has come to appreciate my talents.’ Half a challenge – more than half. As if she might favour father over son and replace her sister at his side.

‘I’ve come to appreciate your talents myself, lady.’ I sketched her a bow if only to gather my thoughts. ‘May I offer you a place in the Renar carriage? Father’s repairs to this one seem to have been poorly judged.’ I drew on Brath’s reins bringing him close enough that she could mount from the riding board.

Katherine left the carriage without further encouragement, stepping up to ride side-saddle to accommodate the length of her dress. For one moment satin lay taut across the jut of her hipbone. I wanted her for more than the shape of her body – but I wanted that too.

Kent dismounted quick enough so that I could take his horse and ride with Katherine back along the column. I rode close, wanting to speak but knowing how weak my words would sound.

‘I didn’t mean to kill Degran. I would have fought to save him. He was my —’

‘And yet you did kill him.’ She didn’t look my way.

I could have spoken of Sageous but the heathen had only put the rope in my hands, the fact he knew someone would get hanged hardly excused me. In the end I could only agree. I did kill my brother.

‘Orrin also deserved better from his brother,’ I said. ‘He would have made a good emperor.’

‘The world eats good men for breakfast.’ She shook her reins to coax Brath a little faster.

The words sounded familiar. I kicked Kent’s horse and caught her. She pulled up beside Lord Holland’s carriage. ‘I didn’t know your tastes were so grand, Jorg.’

‘My wife’s choice,’ I said.

I nodded to the guardsman by the carriage door and he knocked to announce Katherine. His knuckles barely made contact with the lacquered wood before the door sprung open and Miana leaned out, dark eyes on Katherine, lips pursed. She looked unaccountably pretty.

‘I’ve brought you a midwife, dear – my Aunt Katherine.’

It’s my sincere hope that Katherine’s look of shock was more spectacular than the one I wore when taking her hand five minutes earlier.

I entered the carriage first and sat between the young queen and the older princess. I didn’t trust in Gomst to be able to stop the bloodshed should things go badly.

‘Queen Miana of Renar,’ I said, ‘this is Princess Katherine Ap Scorrion, my father’s representative at Congression and widow to the Prince of Arrow. We met Arrow’s army two years back, you may recall.’ I waved a hand at the old men. ‘Osser Gant of Kennick, Lord Makin’s advisor, and of course you know Bishop Gomst.’

Miana settled her hands on her belly. ‘I’m sorry for your loss, Katherine. Jorg tells me he killed the man who murdered your husband.’

‘Egan, yes. Orrin’s younger brother. Though the best deed that day was in putting an end to the heathen, Sageous. He poisoned Egan’s mind. He wouldn’t have betrayed Orrin otherwise.’

I pressed back into the cushions. Two women, each given to speaking her mind and to trampling any social niceties that stood in their way, are wont to have short conversations that end interestingly. The fact that Katherine allowed for Sageous’s hand in Orrin’s fratricide seemed harsh when she gave me no room to hide in such excuses. In truth, though, I couldn’t hang my

guilt on him.

‘The firstborn are often the best that the tree will offer,’ Miana said. ‘The ancients offered the first fruit to the gods. It might be that the first child carries whatever goodness their parents have to give.’ She laced her fingers over the greatness of her womb.

A slight smile touched Katherine’s lips. ‘My sister is the firstborn. Anything gentle or kind went her way rather than mine.’

‘And my brother who will one day rule in Wennith is a good man. Any wickedness or cunning that my parents had came to me.’ Miana paused as the carriage lurched into motion, all the columns starting to move now. ‘And you have Orrin and Egan to support my theory.’

‘Of course that would make Jorg the Ancraths’ paragon.’ Katherine glanced at Gomst who had the grace to look away. ‘Tell us, Jorg, what was William like?’

That surprised me. I had been happy letting them spar across me. ‘He was seven. It was hard to tell,’ I said.

‘Tutor Lundist said William was the more clever of the two. The sun to Jorg’s moon.’ Gomst spoke up but kept his eyes down. ‘He told me the child had an iron will such that no nurse could sway him from his chosen path. Even Lundist with his eastern cunning couldn’t divert the lad. They brought him before me once, a boy of six determined that he was setting off on foot to find Atlantis. I talked about his duty, about God’s plan for each of us. He laughed at me and said he had a plan for God.’ Gomst looked up but he didn’t see us, his eyes fixed on the past. ‘Blond as if he came from the emperor’s own blood.’ He blinked. ‘And iron in him. I believe he could have done anything that boy – had he been allowed to grow. Anything. Good or ill.’

My own memories painted a softer picture but I couldn’t dispute Gomst. When William set his mind, when he decided how a thing should be, there was no arguing with him. Even when Father was called upon he would hold his nerve. And despite what I knew of my father’s ruthlessness, when it came to William, it never occurred to me that the matter was yet settled even when we heard Father’s footsteps in the corridor. Perhaps the reason my father hated me lay as simple as that. I had always been the weaker of the two. The wrong son died that night, the wrong son hung in the thorns.

Miana spoke into the uncomfortable silence. ‘So tell me, Katherine, how is my father-in-law? I have yet to meet him. I’d like to get to know him. I had hoped he might be at Congression so Jorg could introduce us.’



That painted a picture. What would Father make of my tiny child-wife who incinerated her own soldiers to tear a vast hole in the enemy?

‘King Olidan never changes,’ Katherine said. ‘I’ve spent years at his court and don’t know him so I doubt you’d learn much if he had come to Congression. I’m far from sure my sister knows him after six years in his bed. None of us know what his dreams for Ancrath are.’

I read that code clear enough. She hadn’t managed to work her night-magics on Father, and perhaps Sageous hadn’t either. Maybe Father’s was the only hand on the knife that stabbed me. All presuming Katherine wasn’t lying of course, but her words rang true, it didn’t seem she would consider me worth sullyng her lips with falsehoods for.

‘How goes his war, Princess?’ Osser Gant leant forward. He had quick ways about him for a greybeard, his eyes dark and cunning. I could see why Makin valued him.

‘The dead continue to press from the marshes, seldom great numbers in any one place, but enough to drain the land. Peasants are killed in their villages, their bodies dragged to the bogs, farmers die in their homesteads. The dead hide in the mud when Ancrath’s troops pursue, or they shelter in Ill-Shadow, in any place where the land is too poisoned for men. Gelleth has such places.’ She looked my way once more. ‘The attacks sap morale, leave food in short supply. Before I left there was talk of a lichkin walking the marsh.’

Gomst crossed himself at that.

‘And what do they say in Olidan’s court about the direction of these attacks?’ Osser asked. A question of considerable interest to all Kennick men for although they had lost the marshes to the dead many years before, very little of the predation was on the Kennick dry lands. Makin’s troops had little cause for worry as long as they kept their feet on firm ground.

‘They say the Dead King hates King Olidan,’ Katherine said.

‘And what do you say, Katherine?’ Miana leaned across me, lily-scented, our child kicking my legs through her belly.

‘I say the black ships will sail up the Sane estuary and disgorge their troops into the marshes when the Dead King is ready to strike. And that from there they will move through Ancrath, sheltering in the scars the Builders left us, Ill Shadow, Eastern Dark, Kane’s Wound, what your people call “promised lands”, Queen. He will move into Gelleth along the paths Jorg opened with his destruction of Mount Honas, and continue by such means, gathering

strength from many sources, until they reach Vyene where Congression's endless voting will cease to matter.'

'And is this what King Olidan has sent you to tell the Hundred?' Gomst asked. He held his crucifix so tight that the gold bent in his grip, a zealot's fire in his eye. Such passion made a stranger of the man after so many years of empty piety. 'It is what the holy say. God tells them this.'

A brittle laugh escaped Katherine. 'Olidan knows the black ships will sail his way. He says Ancrath will hold, that this new contagion will be stamped out, that Ancrath will save the empire. He asks only that his right to the throne be acknowledged and whilst he leads his armies to save the Hundred they set the crown upon his lap and restore the stewardship. Of course he asks in more tactful language, in many messages suited to many ears, calling in old debts and promises.' Her green eyes found me, our faces close, my leg pressed to hers and generating heat. 'Filial duties remembered,' she said.

'Why—'

Katherine cut me off. 'Your father says he knows the Dead King. Knows his secrets. Knows how to undo him.'



## Chella's Story

'What you've seen so far will not prepare you for this. Make a stone of your mind. Swear any oath that is asked of you.' Chella straightened the collar of Kai's robe and stood back to look at him again.

'I will.'

Ten years had settled on the young man overnight, tight lines around his mouth, lips narrowed. He wore the weariness around his eyes and in them. She hadn't broken him. You can't make necromancers from broken men. It's a contract that must be entered into of one's own will, and Kai had just enough of an instinct for self-preservation to will it. Beneath his charm and easy ways Chella imagined a hardness had always waited. She walked on and he followed her along the corridor.

'Don't look at any of them. Especially not the lichkin,' she said.

'Christ! Lichkin!' He stopped and when she turned he backed away, the colour running from his face. For a moment it seemed that his knees would buckle. 'I thought the king's court were necromancers ...'

'The lichkin should be the least of your concerns.' Chella couldn't blame him. You had to meet the Dead King to understand.

'But ...' Kai frowned. She saw his hand move beneath his robe. He would be holding the knife she gave him, taking comfort in a sharp edge. Men! 'But if they're dead, shouldn't we be the ones to give the orders?'

Fear and ambition, a good combination. Chella felt her lips twist, a sour smile. He had barely started to sense the deadlands, this one, made his first corpse twitch only hours before, and already he thought himself a necromancer and reached for the reins. 'If they were fallen then yes, a necromancer would have raised them and a necromancer would rule them.'

'They're not dead?' Again the frown.

‘Oh they’re dead. But they will never be ours to command. The lichkin are dead – but they never died. It’s given to us to call back what cannot enter heaven and restore it under our command to the flesh and bones it once owned. But in the deadlands, where we call the fallen from, there are things that are dead and that have never lived. The lichkin are such creatures and they are the Dead King’s soldiers. And in the darkest reaches of the deadlands, amongst such creatures, the Dead King came from nowhere and crowned himself in fewer than ten years.’

She walked on and after a moment’s hesitation Kai followed. Where else had he to go?

They passed several doors on the left, and shuttered windows on the right. A storm-wind rattled the heavy boards but the rain had yet to fall. Two guards waited at the corner, dead men in rusted armour, a faint aroma of decay about them overwritten by the eye-watering chemicals used to cure their flesh.

‘These are strong ones. I can feel it.’ Kai paused, lifting his hand toward the pair as if pressing against something in the air.

‘Not much of these passed on,’ Chella said. ‘Bad men. Bad lives. It left a lot to be called back into the body. Cunning, some measure of intelligence, some useful memories. Most of the guards here are like this. And when you find a corpse you can refill almost to the brim, well you don’t want it to rot away on you now, do you?’ The dead men watched her with shrivelled eyes, their dark thoughts unknowable.

More corridors, more guards, more doors. The Dead King took the castle only months before from the last Brettan lord of any consequence, Artur Elgin, whose ships had sailed from the port below for twenty years and more, terrorizing the continental coasts north and south. Artur Elgin’s days of terror weren’t over. Indeed they had very much begun, though now he served the Dead King, or rather what had been called back from the deadlands did, and Chella suspected that was pretty much all of the man.

Chella sensed the Dead King always, from a thousand miles she felt him as something crawling beneath her skin. In the castle where he laid his plans no place was free of the taste of him, bitter on the tongue.

At last they came to the doors to Artur’s court, slabs of old oak with

black iron hinges scrolling out across them. The bog-stink wrinkled her nose. Mire-ghouls watched them from the shadows to either side, some with black darts clutched in stained hands. Before the doors two giants, each more than eight foot tall, freaks from the promised lands, their dena scorched by the Builders' fire so that they grew wrong. Big but wrong. And now dead. Meat-puppets held by the necromancers' will.

The giants stepped aside and Chella moved toward the doors. The presence of the Dead King overwhelmed that of his court, reaching through stone and wood to swamp her senses. In the fullness of Chella's necromantic power, when she stepped as far from life as a person can and still return, she knew the Death King's presence as a dark-light, a black sun whose radiance froze and corrupted but somehow still drew her on. Now though, dressed only in the tatters of her former strength, with her blood pumping once again, Chella felt her master as a threat, as something sculpted from every memory of hurt or harm or pain, screaming hatred in a register just beyond hearing.

She set her hands to the doors and found them trembling.

The stink of lichkin hits flesh like ink hits blotting paper: it sinks bone-deep, overriding irrelevances such as the nose. Men are busy dying from the moment they're born but it's a crawl from the cradle to the grave. Being near a lichkin makes it a race.

The Dead King's court lay in darkness but as Chella pushed the doors open a cold glow began to spread within the chamber. Ghosts, tight-wrapped around their masters, began to unfurl, like an outer skin, flayed from the lichkin by the presence of life. The spirits burned with the light of their own misery, pale apparitions, delicate tissues of memory, membranes of misused lives. The lichkin themselves were blind spots on her living eyes, as if patches of her retina had died, folding the room's image over itself in those places. In times when the necromancy ran deep in her and her blood lay still, Chella had seen the lichkin, bone-white, bone-thin, the wedge of their eyeless heads filled with small sharp teeth, each hand dividing into three root-like fingers.

'Kai!' She felt his retreat. The sound of his name made him stop. He

knew better than to run.

The Dead King sat on Lord Artur Elgin's driftwood throne. He wore Artur Elgin's robes. They fitted him well. Blue-leather shoulders, a laced front fixed with silver clasps each set with sea-stone, the leather giving over to thick velvet of a deeper midnight blue. He wore Artur Elgin's body too, and it fitted him less well, hunched and awkward, and when he lifted his head to Chella the smile that he made with the dead man's mouth was an awful thing.

## *Five years earlier*

Two knives broke in the effort to uncoil the scorpion. When I locked its tail in place with Old Mary's clamps and levered it apart using a sword, the corpse opened in a series of jerking releases, accompanied by crunches like glass breaking under a heel.

'You're something made,' I told it. 'A clever piece of clockwork.'

I could see no cogs or wheels though, no matter how close I squinted. Just black crystal, traces of clear sparkling jelly and multitudes of wires, most of them so thin as to be on the edge of invisible.

'Something broken.' I put it into Lesha's saddle-pack to take with me.

It took hours to dig two graves. My wounds stung and smarted. Later they ached and throbbed. I used an axe to break up the ground and a shield to scoop the soil away. The earth tasted sour, worse than the salts from Carrod Springs.

I buried Greyson first. I found a visored helm, scoured it out with sand, and put it on him to cover his face. 'You be sure to grumble, wherever you find yourself, Sunny.' Two shield-loads of dust and grit stole the detail from him. Just another corpse. Four more and he made little more than an undulation in the earth. Ten more and I smoothed the ground over.

I set Lesha's head against her neck. I felt it the right thing to do since I had separated them in the first place. The pieces didn't seem to fit.

'All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Lesha together again.'

I sat beside the grave without looking at her, watching the sun drop toward the west. 'These men, they weren't any different to me and mine.' My cuts stung and throbbed. I thought of how much hurt I'd escaped and the complaints went away. 'Being at the sharp end of the stick changes your view on the business of



poking, sure enough - you'd have to be pretty stupid not to see that one coming though.' I stopped talking. It wasn't so much that there wasn't anyone to hear. When you've got death in you and you're surrounded by corpses, well you're always going to have some kind of an audience. It was more that what gripped me was too fluid, too uncertain to be captured and spoken. Words are blunt instruments, better suited to murder than to making sense of the world. I filled the grave. It was time.

The sun clung to the horizon with crimson fingers. I straightened and paused mid-step. Red eyes watched me, the sky reflected in the gaze of the fallen. Too many heads lay turned my way for chance to have set their course. Coldness pulsed from the old wound in my chest, necromancy, a numbness like the ghouls' darts brought, or a detachment maybe, as if some unseen hand were closing around me, walling away the world's vitality. Close by, Rael lay, a knife in his throat, skewering the old scar where some past attempt had failed. I took my step and his eyes followed the motion.

'Dead King.' The words bubbled up, the blood so dark it ran purple over his teeth.

'Hmmm.' I picked up the sturdiest of the discarded axes. The Perros Viciosos had favoured axes. The heft of it held a certain comfort. A quick shake rid me of wearies and I set to my task. It's hard work taking the limbs off a man. The legs especially take a lot of hacking, and flesh is much tougher stuff than you might imagine. As soon as you lose the edge on an axe it tends to bounce off a leather-clad thigh if your stroke is anything but perfect. With luck you'll break the bone in any case, but to hew the whole limb off? Think cutting down trees: always far harder than you think it should be. By the end my breath came in gasps and sweat dripped from my nose. I settled for taking off hands and feet from the last ten men before collapsing in a cross-legged slump before Rael once more.

'Life was much easier when death held on to what it was given,' I said.

I couldn't tell if Rael still watched me but the Dead King's presence lingered in the stink of old blood.

'I'm thinking if you could stand these lads up again you would have done it by now, but better safe than sorry, neh?'

Still nothing. The Dead King seemed to have Chella under his thumb, so that made his interest in me ... unsettling.

I leaned in over Rael's corpse and rapped on his forehead. 'Hello?' Gathering my own traces of necromancy and reaching in didn't seem like the best idea, rather like using your fingers to take a bone from a hungry dog.

Nothing. Perhaps the king had a lot of dead eyes to peer out of - too many people to scare for more than a quick name check with each. I shrugged. At the bottom of it the Perros Viciosos

weren't any more frightening dead than alive. It didn't mean I wanted to spend my night sleeping among them though. They surely smelled worse dead.

I led Lesha's horse away from the camp and settled a hundred yards off over a low ridge. Despite myself I slept poorly, haunted by Sunny's screams and prodded awake by each small noise in the darkness.

\* \* \*

Dawn found me back at the Bad Dogs' camp. I blessed the Iberico's poisons for the lack of flies and rats. What beauty there is to war is in the moment. After a day any battlefield is little more than carrion and scavengers. In the Iberico at least the carrion doesn't swarm with flies. In fact, apart from my own indulgence with the axe, the dead looked untouched with only the occasional large and hardy cockroach digging in for breakfast.

I collected my bits and pieces. Balky favoured me with a reproachful stare as I loaded him. I tethered the mule to Lesha's stallion, and led them both off into the promised land.

Without Lesha's guidance I had nothing to stop me walking into the invisible fires that had scoured her so badly. We walk a knife-edge each day though, and most don't know it - at least in the promised lands, in the Iberico, in Kane's Scar and Ill-Shadow back in Ancrath, in such places there's no pretence, no lie of safety, no deception that like the ancients' song, 'love is all you need'. At a single false step you can and will burn. As always.

At times I let Lesha's horse precede me, but horses like to be led and prodding him along made for slow going.

The first time I saw it I wasn't sure what my eyes were telling me. On a slope to our right a shoulder of weathered Builder-stone broke through the shale. Above and around it the air shimmered in a heat haze. The burned side of my face throbbed with it, and in the moment I closed that eye with wincing - the haze vanished. Looking once more, and only with the eye so nearly blinded when Gog burned me, I saw the shimmer again, like the ghosts of flame that had danced on Jane beneath Mount Honas.

'Get along.' I pulled Balky up on his tether. He let out a hee-haw loud enough to crack rocks. The notion to push him through that shimmer came and went. Other considerations aside, I'd have to carry my own kit. If one of those mouse-sized roaches had been handy I would have tossed that through. A stray thought occurred. I dug out the view-ring from my pack and held it up to watch the phenomenon through. In an instant, shades of red wrapped the world, painted in thick crimson around the shoulder of old stone, fading to less violent hues further down the slope.

Along our path at the bottom of the dry valley the ring showed occasional regions of dull orange hanging mist-like.

'Damn but that's handy. What else can you show me?'

And like the genie from Aladdin's lamp, Fexler Brews stood before me on the road, no larger than life and no smaller. I took a step back, the kind of step that seeks no permission and springs from the days when men's fear was written into the marrow of our race. The kind I always regret. I held the ring aside and Fexler vanished along with the shades of red and orange. Brought back and he returned with the ring.

'What am I doing here, Brews?' I felt silly talking to something seen only through a small loop of steel, even out in the wilds with none but horse and mule to watch me.

Fexler spread his hands. He wore the same whites he had back at Castle Morrow, not a speck of dust on them.

'Why the mystery? Just tell me plain and—'

He turned and walked away down the valley.

'Hell.' And I followed, hauling Balky after.

### *Five years earlier*

Fexler Brews' ghost led me through the Iberico Hills. We walked from well before noon until well after, long enough for me to grow weary and for the cuts on my back, just above my hip, to start with that nagging ache and heat that speaks of infection.

The hills held every colour from bone-white through the greys to ochre. Baked mud, crumbling earth, exposed rock. And from time to time some rusting hulk, eroding in that stubborn way that Builder works have about them, refusing the elements century after century. Most of them blocks of metal with no hint of function, looking like steel, pocked and pitted, some large as houses, some askew as if pushed aside by giants, all stained with corrosion in trickled green and powder-white. We passed one that buzzed, a high whine that hurt my teeth, and Fexler vanished until it lay well behind me. In another place a leaning metal column, half-buried, or maybe nine-tenths buried, sang in a voice of staggering beauty and a language unknown to me. I stood with the sun's heat beating against me and the hairs on end across my neck, just bathing in it.

I saw Fexler only through the viewing ring and perhaps the ring just drew him for me, over-riding the scenery like a painting on glass. Either way he guided me through the dry washes and dusty gullies of the promised land, without speaking, pausing only when I paused.

We passed one machine where the metal sheeting had torn away to reveal spinning cylinders, wheels turning in wheels, all moving in silence, gleaming. It reminded me of the interior of the watch in my pack. Fexler wouldn't speak of it.

The shadows had grown long when our path following a gully came to dead end hemmed in by crumbling walls of earth and sand. Fexler came to a halt, watching me.

'Why have we stopped?' I asked. Not that I wasn't happy to have stopped - there just seemed no reason for it.

Fexler vanished.

Banging the view ring against the hilt of my sword didn't

restore him. I made a slow turn, completing the circle with my arms spread. Lesha's stallion watched with mild interest. Balky just looked vacant.

I stepped toward Fexler's last position and stubbed my toe. A day early an expert had tortured me, albeit very briefly. Stubbing my toe proved more intense and more shocking. I reached shoulder-deep into my well of obscenities and released a string of quite spectacular examples. It deserved a better audience. In time, after all the hopping and cursing, I hobbled over to discover what had lamed me.

With some kneeling, scraping, and brushing, I uncovered a lid of Builder-stone, circular and about a yard across. Rusty stains indicated that the thing had once been secured in place by more than its weight. The spare sword I'd strapped to Lesha's horse proved useful for levering the lid up the few inches necessarily to shunt it by degrees to one side. It took half a skin of water to replace what the effort had sweated out of me. The sun in those hills is without mercy.

Beneath the lid a shaft led down, unlit, smooth as far as I could tell, and without any odour rising from it. I took a small rock and dropped it into the darkness. It's not something I could resist doing even if I had no reason for it. The pause before the distant clatter told me that I didn't want to follow the rock.

'You could have told me to bring some damn rope!' I had some despite Fexler's lack of warning, but I doubted it would be enough.

In a shaft as narrow as the one before me you can brace your back against the wall and your feet on the opposite side, and edge down. However, if the shaft widens, or enters a room, or is smoother than you'd hoped ... getting back up might prove difficult. I had come into the Iberico prepared to dare invisible fires. Somehow though, getting stuck in a hole and dying of thirst seemed too pathetic an end to be risked.

I dug the tinderbox from my kit and took off the bandage I'd wrapped around the wound on my upper arm. I had to peel it away, and where the linen stuck it stank, sickly sweet. The dry ends took the flame well enough and burned as it fluttered after the rock I'd dropped in. The sides looked to be parallel all the way down. I guessed it to be some forty-foot deep. I thought a tunnel led off from the bottom but it was hard to tell from my position.

I squeezed the uncovered wound, trying to force the pus out of it. 'Christ-on-a-bike!' One of Makin's oaths, that. I don't know what a bike is but it sounds painful. The edges of my flesh looked an unhealthy pink, rimmed in black crusts. I couldn't imagine the two halves ever knitting together again.

The Bad Dogs had plenty of rope at their camp and I'd taken a fair bit of it with me. Never go questing without a bit of rope, at least that's how the stories have it. My three pieces knotted

together reached about two thirds of the way down the hole. I tied a larger knot in one end and secured it under the stone lid rather than trust to my equine companions for anchorage. On my belt I tied the lantern I'd taken from the camp and a spare flask of oil. I squeezed flint, steel, and tinder into a pocket. Better not to carry a light for the descent or a fall might find me with broken legs *and* on fire.

A tired achiness made each action clumsy. I swallowed another bitter pill of Carrod Springs' salts and took the rope in both hands. One more glance at the dusty hills, at the worn blue of the sky, and I started down.

Out of the sun I felt cold enough to shiver, though that may have owed more to fever than to the drop in temperature. I climbed down hand over hand, clutching at the rope with my knees. When my knees discovered they had nothing left to clutch, the top of the shaft, part occluded by the lid, offered a bright crescent of sky. A shudder took me, along with the sudden conviction that someone would slide the lid back and seal away the light.

Groaning with the effort, I lifted both feet to brace against the side of the shaft and pushed until my shoulders and upper back wedged against the opposite side. I had no great conviction that the pressure would keep me from falling if I let go the rope, but even less conviction that I could manage the climb back.

I let go.

Inch by strained inch I slid down the shaft. My legs shook with the effort and I felt sure I must be leaving a trail of skin and blood on the Builder stone: my shirt couldn't have lasted long against the friction.

Sufficient daylight reached down to let me know when the shaft ran out of wall, and soon enough I found that whilst the soles of my boots still gripped the stonework, my heels had nothing to rest on. When a decision is inevitable you may as well take it as quick as possible so that you still have something left to deal with whatever consequences may arise. I dropped, doing my best to swing my feet below me. The effort proved a partial success and ended with bruised heels, banged-up knees, elbows slammed to the ground, and finally the side of my head fetching up against the floor. An inch or so of dust covering the stone floor served to lessen the impact, saving me from a cracked skull and leaving me conscious, choking, and with a river of blood flowing from my nose. I levered myself up so I could sit cradling my knees, and set my back to the nearest wall.

'Ow.' The complaint came out nasally.

Pain led my fingers to a piece of the lantern glass embedded in my thigh. I pulled it out and held the wound closed until the blood stopped pulsing around my fingertips. In time I found the lantern wick, set it into the oil flask, and with steel and flint

and more fumbling than necessary I set a flame to it. The tunnel led off to front and back, circular in cross-section and looking suspiciously like a sewer. The end of my rope dangled three yards above my outstretched hand and getting back into the shaft would require gymnastics I thought beyond me even without wounds or fever.

On the assumption that water had once flowed along the tunnel I made my best guess at which direction it might have taken and started to walk 'upstream'. When you're in a dark place, and your light is going to run out before too long, you get on with things. It's a wonder to me how few people apply that same logic to their lives.

Three times new tunnels joined mine and on each occasion I studied my choices through the Builders' view-ring, which shed some light on the matter, a red blinking light that demanded I turn right twice and then follow straight on. At two of the turns traces of rust hinted that metal grilles once blocked the way. A great sage once said there are few problems that won't go away if you ignore them long enough. Fortunately these obstacles had been pre-ignored for a thousand years.

Toward its end the pipe rose at a steep angle and brought me into a circular room, empty in the main but littered with fragments of plasteek. Brittle with age, they made a satisfying crunch underfoot. Some of the pieces could have been the arms of chairs, small wheels, others lay bonded to the remains of metal cabinets. A corridor led off and I followed it, shadows dancing all around. The place had no odour to it, as if even that staleness which haunts abandoned rooms had given up and left.

A long corridor led me past many doorways all open and dark, decorated with the fragments of the doors that had guarded them. In the ceiling flat strips of whitish glass punctuated the walk and at one point, as I passed below, two of them tried to flicker to life like the glow-bulbs in the Tall Castle.

I've wandered the ruins of forts where generations lived, seen the march of empty centuries across the old stone, wearing away the sharpness that defined lives. In those places, at every turn, those lost inhabitants are remembered. The scuffmark where a door closed decade after decade, steps sagging with wear, the deep-scored name where a child set his stamp upon a windowsill. You can read such ruins, however tumbled, almost see the soldiers at the walls, stable-boys leading horses out to exercise. But in the dry corridors of this Builders' den, untouched by rain or wind, undisturbed, I saw nothing but puzzles and sorrow. I might be the first man to walk here in a thousand years. A thousand more might pass before the next. In such a place silence and dust wait whilst men's lives slip past. Without the flicker of my flame to count the moments hours could race by, years escape, and I might crawl away ancient and unwise.

The corridor ended in a large hall with many doors, these seemingly of wood but untouched by age.

Silence.

In the times that I have reached after the dead to pull back what is needed to make them rise, it seemed I reached into such a place as this. When I drew Row back into his corpse it was into dry lands that I followed him despite his dying in the mud of the Cantanlona bogs. I thought for a moment of William, of my little brother falling into such a place after they broke him. When I lay as dead after Father's knife touched my heart I imagined an angel came for me and I refused her. I hoped that years before that day she had descended to the dry lands to make those same offers to William. And that he had not refused.

My head snapped up, jerking me from my half-doze.

'Enough of this!' Delirium had started to reel me in. I shook it off and focused. I moved on, snorting at the thought of William and the angel. Even at seven he could probably have given her a harder time of it than I did at fourteen.

At the far end of the hall an archway led into a smaller lower hall. It caught my eye since the Builders weren't given to arches. A dozen or more cubicles opened to either side of the lesser hall, like monks' cells, each of them layered in dust, scattered with plasteeek fragments and pieces of corroded metal. I picked up a sliver of metal. Lighter than expected, not iron, and not rusted but powdery with some white residue. Oxidation. The word floated up from Lundist's instructions on alchemy.

The seventh cell on the left held a wonder. A man waited there, without motion, his back to me. And from the side of his head a spray of scarlet blood, fragments of bone tumbling through the air ... all frozen in the moment. A picture, but not a picture. Something real and solid but standing outside time. Where each of the other cells had a ring of corrosion in the centre of the ceiling, this one had a collar of silver metal, bound in places with copper, and surrounding a white light. The man sat in his grey tunic directly below the light. Somehow, no illumination escaped into the hall - and yet I saw the light. He sat on a chair that looked too thin to support him, odd in its slim and flowing form, without decoration or device. Beside him, part of a bed. Not a broken piece or a component but a section as if cut out like biscuits from dough, ending at some unseen perimeter that surrounded it and the man both. Beyond this small circle at the cell's centre, holding the man, the chair, and part of the bed, the remainder of the room lay in dusty ruin like all the rest.

I walked in to touch the man - or the image - perhaps it was an image, like Fexler's data ghost, just more convincingly drawn. Something the Builders considered art? Invisible glass stopped my fingers. I couldn't get close to the man. My hand slid across an



unseen surface, cool and slick to the fingertips.

The cell proved large enough for me to edge around the forbidden area, stepping through the dust at the margins of the room. The man's hand came into view, holding a complex piece of metalwork to his head, an iron tube projecting from it to touch his temple.

'I know this.' The oldest of my father's books held pictures of objects similar to this one. 'It's a gun.'

Another step and I saw the face, captured in the instant, imagining the pain but not yet feeling it despite the plume of blood and brain and bone behind him.

'Fexler!' I'd found the man himself. Not the memory.

The view-ring showed only the room, with Fexler lit red by the light, as if all the time that red dot pulsing amid the Iberico Hills had been this time-locked circle.

I made another circuit around the tableaux. 'You stopped time!' I thought about it, then shrugged. They say the Builders could fly. Who knows which is the more difficult, the stopping of time or taking to the skies? I thought of the watch buried in my baggage on Balky's back. A device of the ancients - perhaps if I stopped its hands turning I would stop time just as they had.

'You brought me here, Fexler.' I spoke to the man. 'What do you want? I can't fix you.'

Obviously I couldn't fix him. What had Fexler's ghost been thinking? The answer came easy enough. Jorg breaks things. Fexler didn't send me to fix this - he sent me to end it.

Of course breaking things that are sealed away behind unbreakable glass can prove difficult. As the point of my knife slid over the invisible barrier I started to doubt the glass existed at all. It seemed clear that something had to stand between a space where time flowed and a space where it did not. Zeno's paradoxes sprung to mind. The Greeks loved paradoxes. Maybe they used them as currency. In any case I made no headway.

I walked away, a slight tremble in me from the fever. In every other cell nothing whole survived. I guess that the device in the ceiling had stopped time and in doing so had stopped the process of its own decay.

Memory stole me back beneath Mount Honas. In the Builders' halls I had seen the remains of many narrow pipes, most just faint traces of verdigris, some bedded in the stone, some running against walls, some so thin that they could only have been strands of wire. The histories have it that the secret fire of the Builders ran along such paths to wake their devices. My watch needed no such fire but perhaps a coiled spring would not suffice for such mechanisms as that which held Fexler. Certainly it had not unwound over all the centuries. Did the machine need to be fed to keep time stationary?

A slow and minute inspection of the walls revealed no sign of

hidden paths bringing fire to the ceiling ring. It took an age of hunting the corridors to find something to support me so I could check the ceiling. In the end I found a collection of bottles, like wine bottles but clear and cylindrical and slender as my arm. Binding all nine of them side to side with my shirt I made a very precarious platform on which to stand. Of all the Builders' artefacts only glass had seen off the years without loss.

From my shifting, clinking platform I discovered that the barrier which enclosed Fexler narrowed as it rose so that at the ceiling I could get to within an inch or so of the metal ring. I used my knife to jab at the stonework around it. Poor treatment for a good weapon, but I had spare blades stashed on Lesha's horse if I ever got back to him, and nothing else to work with.

Once before, in Gelleth, I had driven a blade into some magic of the Builders, a spirit trapped behind glass in the room before the weapon hall. A shock had run through the sword and thrown me twitching to the floor. The memory made me have to steel myself for each scratch and jab as I scored a circle around the ceiling ring. My muscles remembered the shock and kept trying to refuse to dig out a chance at renewing the experience.

The Builder stone started to flake and powder under my attacks. It took an hour maybe, possibly a day. It felt like a day. Sweat ran down me in hot streams and my arm ached, growing weaker by the moment as arms do when used overhead for more than a few minutes. I jabbed and scored, scored and jabbed. Without warning a deafening bang exploded around me, the light went out, and I fell with glass shattering below.

And for the second time since climbing down the shaft I lay bruised and aching in the dark with broken glass embedded in my leg. My makeshift lantern must have been knocked over and doused when I fell. Instead of searching for it I held the view-ring to my eye. The ring showed me the cell in greenish tones, revealing almost as much detail as I might see in daylight. Fexler lay on the floor, sprawled at my feet, the gun still clutched in his outstretched hand, a wisp of smoke escaping the barrel. Around his head a black and spreading pool of blood.

'Thank you.' Fexler - my Fexler from Castle Morrow, a projection of white light - stood beside the corpse, watching the splayed limbs, face unreadable.

'Fexler, good to see you,' I said. And it was. Any company in such a place is welcome. I drew a deep breath, taking in the stink of chemicals and fire from the gun, the tang of blood. The Builder halls felt real at last.

'Why all the silence and mystery?' I edged through the glass and dust to set my back to a wall, in part for support, in part because it's good practice.

'The men of my time lived amongst wonders but they were made no differently from their forefathers who wore skins and ate raw

meat in caves, or from their descendants who carry iron swords and live in ruins they can't comprehend. In short they had the same instincts as any man. Would you trust a copy of yourself?'

'So they set spells on you such that no data ghost could kill the person from whom they were copied?' I asked.

'So that no data echo could harm any human, or ask for them to be harmed, or take actions that might lead them to hurt. It has taken a thousand years of subtle manipulation, of twists and sleights of logic, for me even to reach the stage where I could point someone like you in this direction, Jorg.'

'And why would you?' My hand settled on the fallen oil flask. I gave it a swirl. Maybe a fifth of it remained.

'Data echoes are not just forbidden from harming their original template. In fact whilst the person whose data created any particular echo still lives there are an enormous number of restrictions placed on that echo, for the convenience, privacy, and peace of mind of the person in question. In the world that I inhabit I have been very much a second class citizen for considerably longer than your empire has existed.'

'In Castle Morrow?' *The world that he lives in?*

A tight smile, quick and gone. 'Imagine an ocean wider and deeper than all others, full of wonder and variety, and on the surface a thickness of ice broken only here and there. The echoes that the Builders left behind, "data ghosts" if that's how you want to call us, we echoes swim in such an ocean and the places where we may be seen in this thin world of yours are like the holes in the ice where we can surface. We exist in the joined complexity of the Builders' machinery, and in places such as the terminal at Morrow we may be seen.'

'So why aren't you?'

'Why aren't we what?'

'Seen? Why was it just you haunting that cellar?'

Another smile, more of bitterness in it than of friendship. 'Second class citizen. The menial duties fell to me. Keeping an eye on the savages.'

I had to remind myself that the Fexler who shared anything with me lay on the floor, his blood cooling around him. The Fexler talking to me was not a man, just the idea of a man, an idea held in a machine. I reached out a foot to nudge the dead man. Fexler's echo shuddered as if the action disturbed him.

'So why did he kill himself?' I asked. 'And what stopped him?'

'He started a war,' Fexler said. 'And finished it.'

'Hell I lit up one of your suns, it didn't make me take a knife to my throat straight after.'

'The weapons Fexler Brews launched could not be detonated with a fire.'

'You saw that?' Fexler's ghost had been watching me six years back, under Mount Honas?

'Our weapons burned like suns - exactly the same way. Each needs a trigger to ignite it, a smaller, more primitive implosion. Your fire at Silo Eleven using weapons relocated from Vaucluse melted the implosion components into a critical mass. What you saw was a partial ignition of the trigger that would then light the sun. The fuel for the "suns" is short-lived, it's a matter of half-life, the fuel for the rockets that bore them lasts little longer. All that remains now are the triggers.'

I wondered if the original Fexler had liked the sound of his own voice so much. In any event it was a sobering thought to know I laid waste to Gelleth with a fraction of the spark that would light a true Builder Sun. And despite my words, the dead of Gelleth *had* haunted me, literally and in dreams. To have burned the whole world in such fashion would have been ... uncomfortable.

'And even with his gun he didn't manage to kill himself?' With such toys at their disposal it seemed unforgivable for any Builder to fail in the act of taking a life.

'These cubicles were designed to hold key personnel in stasis until conditions improved to the point where life might be sustained outside again. Fexler was perhaps not thinking clearly as he sat here wrestling with his conscience. Maybe he didn't appreciate that the automatic systems would kick in to preserve him or perhaps he just didn't realize how quickly they could act.'

'Either way, he left you in the shit along with all the real people in the world.'

'He did.' Fexler's image flickered, a frown above his eyes.

I grinned. It must have been odd to spend a thousand years cursing the man you were copied from. 'So now I've freed you and you get to swim in your sea with the big fish, and not waste time watching the savages. What do I get out of it?' Still holding the view-ring to my eye I pulled the gun from Fexler's warm, dead hand, careful not to point the business end my way. He seemed reluctant to let it go.

'Unfortunately we need to watch the savages even more these days,' Fexler said. 'The machines that still keep running won't run for ever, and unless you people get past swords and arrows there's never going to be anyone to maintain them. Maintenance requires civilization, and we're not going to get civilization again until all the wars stop.'

'You couldn't stop your own wars, Fexler.'

'He couldn't.' Fexler looked down at his corpse. 'I'm another matter.'

I pursed my lips. 'Either way - it sounds as though you'd like there to be an emperor on the Gilden Throne.'

## 21

### *Five years earlier*

In the dry and deathless halls of the Builders, beneath the poisoned dusts of Iberico, I sat half-delirious with fever and spoke to a ghost who had helped me kill the man from whom he sprang.

'And *who* do the ghosts in your machines want to rule this empire of servants for them?' I asked.

'Orrin of Arrow is favoured by our projections,' Fexler said. 'A peacemaker. A man of progress.'

'Hah!' I spat from a dry mouth, aching in every limb. 'So you've no real interest in my leaving here to stop him then?'

'Projections favour Orrin,' Fexler agreed.

I kicked the warm corpse at my feet again. 'Are you ... is he likely to stand up again? I seem to have made a new friend, the Dead King. Takes an unhealthy interest in me. I find him watching out of any pair of dead eyes that are handy. Would it upset you if I dismember him ... you ... a little? Just to be sure?' Part of me hoped Fexler would object and save me the effort of all that hacking. He shook his head as if the matter were unimportant.

'Projections favour Orrin, but some of us prefer to bet on longer odds for greater rewards,' Fexler said.

'Why so? What rewards? I'd bet on Orrin too if I had a stake.' The words tumbled from numb lips, the poison pulsed in me, I could smell my wounds. That's what happens when you stop. Take a rest and the world catches up with you. Lesson in life - keep moving.

'You may recall,' Fexler stepped closer, edging between me and his earthly remains, 'that we spoke about a wheel. About how my generation's greatest works were nothing to do with new ways to scorch the earth but how to change the rules of everything, how to alter the way in which the world worked?'

'Vaguely.' I waved a trembling hand. 'Something to do with making what we want matter.' It didn't seem to have worked. I wanted him to shut up now and leave me alone, and *that* wasn't happening.

'Almost.' Fexler smiled. 'The physicists called it an adjustment of quantum emphasis. But the effect was to change the role of the observer. Of you and me. For the will of the observer to matter. So man could control his environment directly through the force of his desire, rather than through machinery.'

I had the feeling that if I died he would carry on saying his piece to my corpse.

'Unfortunately that wheel wasn't just turned - it was set turning. It hasn't stopped. In fact, like so many things in nature, the process has a tipping point and we're reaching it. The fractures in the world, in the walls between mind and matter, between energy and will, between life and death, they're all growing. And *everything* is in danger of falling through the cracks. Each time these powers, the ability to influence energy or mass or existence, are used, the divergence grows. These are the magics you know as being fire-sworn, or rock-sworn, or as necromancy and the like. The more they are used, the easier they become, and the wider the world is broken open. And this Dead King of yours is just another symptom. Another example of a singular force of will being used to change the world and, in doing so, accelerating the turn of that wheel we released.'

A sigh, and a panel I hadn't seen before opened on the wall to my left. Enough light came from the cavity behind to illuminate the room. I lowered the view-ring but Fexler vanished, so I set it back to my eye.

'Take the pills.' Fexler pointed to the cavity. 'Swallow two a day until they're gone. They will cure your sepsis.'

I got to my knees and scraped the handful of yellow tablets from the alcove. They were the only thing there, and I saw no means of delivery. My throat hurt as I swallowed two of them. They could be poison but Fexler likely had a thousand ways to kill me if he wanted that.

'So what do you want from me, Fexler?'

'As I've said, there are many ghosts in the Builders' machines.' I saw his frown as he tried to shape his words to my understanding. 'These ghosts, these echoes, pay your kind scant attention. But their eyes are turning back to the now, to the dust and dirt where we all started. Many of them favour supporting new civilization so that the deep networks can be maintained and repaired. A growing number, however, now care more about the imminent threat as the veils thin. The problems of decay seem less pressing. They feel that the only way to stop the wheel turning, to maintain the barriers that keep earth different from fire, life different from death, is to destroy all mankind. And they've had a thousand years to circumvent the rules that once kept them from such acts. With none to wield these powers, with none left to have a will to exercise, the damage will be undone, or at least halted.'

'So poor Fexler's only fault was that he didn't light up quite enough suns? If he had killed off the last few people there would be no problem?' I snorted. 'It doesn't pay to start a job and not finish it.'

Fexler flickered as if he were a reflection disturbed by the arrival of a stone in a pond. He frowned.

'And which camp are you in, Fexler? Make us your servants to fix your carriage, or kill us all off quick before we break the world?'

'I have a third way,' he said.

He rippled again, mouth twisting as if in pain. The light wavered in the space behind the panel, and died.

'An alternative the others don't yet acknowledge - ah!' He faded, almost vanished, returned too bright, making me squint.

'Take the control ring to Vyene. Beneath the throne there—'  
And he was gone.





## Chella's Story

'Jorg of Ancrath sends you back to me again, Chella.'

Something in the grinding of Artur Elgin's jaw set Chella's teeth on edge. Something in the way the Dead King ground that jawbone when he moved it to shape his words.

'I've brought Kai Summerson to court, sire, a necromancer seeking service—'

'Were you not to Jorg's tastes, Chella? Did he spurn your proposal?'

Just the grinding of that bone, hinge and socket, made her skin crawl. That and the glitter of his eyes. She thought of times when she had swum in foulness, of corpse-work in the darkest places, of hunting men's remains in the deadland borders, enough horror to take almost anyone's sanity ... and yet here she cowered from nothing but the sick click and crunch of a dead man's jaw.

'Chella?' A gentle enough reminder but lesser reprimands than that had sent the Dead King's servants to the lichkin.

'He refused me, sire.' More than five years on and still the Dead King wanted her old failure replayed.

'And you still think him a foolish youth with more luck than judgment?'

'No, sire.' Though she did. Whatever strange emotions the boy might stir in her Chella could see little of genius in his actions. When men bet on long odds in sufficient numbers some of them will walk away with the prize. It doesn't mean those winners will win tomorrow.

'I want him here, Chella, to stand before my court and to answer to me.'

'Yes, sire.' Though what Jorg Ancrath might have to answer the Dead King for she had no idea. A 'why' trembled on her lips but she knew it would never take flight.

'Bring Kai Summerson before me.'

Chella turned to motion Kai forward, drawing a breath of relief to be released from the Dead King's stare if only for a moment. In the coldness of wraith-light Kai aged another decade as the Dead King's regard fell upon him.

'Kai.' The name dropped like a dead thing from Artur Elgin's lips. 'Sky-sworn. Have you flown, Kai? Have you touched heaven?'

'No, lord.' Kai kept his gaze to the floor. 'I saw what the eagle sees, but only with my mind. And now I am death-sworn.'

'Death can ride the winds, Kai. Remember that. Why did you not fly? Was it beyond you? Did you not truly hold the sky within you?'

'Fear kept me on the ground, lord.' Passion in his words now, the Dead King's talent for touching each raw nerve. 'Fear of losing myself.' Chella knew few sky-sworn who took flight ever returned. The winds claimed them. They lost substance and danced in storms, spread too thin to be contained in flesh again. She watched Kai, his knuckles white, nails biting. Did he wish now that he had lost himself in the pitiless blue?

'It's your will, the power of your desire, that counts in this world – in all worlds.' For a moment the Dead King seemed almost tender, something more awful than anger coming from Artur Elgin's dead lips. 'The force of your conviction can anchor mind to flesh if your sense of who you are, your command of what you are, is stronger than the wind. It's that same power of will that reels in the silver cord and draws a necromancer back from their travels in the dry lands. That same sense of self returns what won't pass into heaven back to the shell of a man's body, to what carried him through life, to the groove he scored in the world, be it corrupt flesh, or even bare bone, and when at last bone is lost, it returns him to a place maybe, a home, a room, to haunt the living, because misery loves company and so do all its friends.'

Kai lifted his gaze against the weight of the Dead King's stare. 'Fear held me.'

'Fear holds many men, fear keeps them from their duty, fathers abandon sons, one brother leaves the next to die.'

'Yes, lord.'

'When the storms come, Kai Summerson, show me death on wings.' Artur Elgin's fingers flicked to motion Kai away.

Until the doors closed behind Kai no further words were spoken. Chella remained, the only living thing in the vaulted throne room. Perhaps hers was the only curiosity. The Dead King had need of her. Why else after all this time was she here once more, within the inner circle, humiliating reminders of her failure the only price of admission.

‘Chella Undenhert.’ The Dead King formed the name with care.

‘Sire.’ The last to know that name died six years back on Jorg Ancrath’s blade. None had spoken it in decades.

‘Some might think necromancy a threat to those of us who step out of the dry lands, out of the dust beyond, competition at the very least.’

‘Never that, sire.’ Kai’s words returned to her. Shouldn’t we be the ones to give orders?

‘Do you know what I want, Chella?’

She truly didn’t. ‘Jorg Ancrath?’

‘I want what he wants, what all of our kind need. To rule, to own, to hold the highest ground, to have our will prevail.’

‘To be emperor?’ Chella knew the hunger of the dead, but ambition came as a surprise, though all the signs lay before her. A dead king in a dead king’s throne.

‘The empire will be a start. Remade, it can be a step from which to take everything. I am not called king of here or king of there, they call me Dead King, lord of all that does not live. Do you think in this world I would sit content with “Lord of Brettan”? Or “emperor” of an empire beyond whose borders lie lands unclaimed?’

‘No, sire.’ For all the horror of him a child’s greed and child’s pride lay about the Dead King. Perhaps his interest in the Ancrath kings lay in the mirror they held up to him.

‘Do you know why the Hundred have not united against me, Chella?’

‘They hate each other too much, sire. Gather them on a ship and let it sink – no hand would be spare for bailing or for swimming, they’d all be locked on throats, choking away the air before the waters could.’

‘They have not united because they don’t fear me.’ Artur Elgin rose from the Dead King’s throne. ‘The returned cannot breed, they rot, they know more of hunger than of caution, they can stand against armies only where the ground favours them. It is a wonder that I have taken what I now hold with nothing but corpses to play with.’ Artur’s

hand settled on Chella's shoulder and it took all her control not to flinch it off.

'Empires are won in many ways. Do you know of tactics, Chella?'

'A little, sire.' If he would just take that hand away ...

'And what are the only two tactical advantages of my legions, Chella?'

'I— I— They know no fear?'

'No.' An exquisite agony bled into her shoulder and the Dead King returned Artur's hand to his side. 'A man without fear is missing a friend. An old ghost once told me that.

'My troops have two tactical advantages. They don't breathe and they don't eat. That means that any swamp, lake, or sea, is a stronghold and that I need not maintain supply lines. Past that they are poor servants at best. And it is these advantages that have given me the Isles and allow us to assault Ancrath from the Ken Marshes.

'Beyond this, my ambitions require new strategies if they are to be met on a timescale to my liking.'

The Dead King settled once more in Artur Elgin's driftwood throne. He ran white fingers along the chair's polished arms, and Chella heard the screams of sailors drowning.

'Thantos, Keres.'

Two lichkin detached from their brethren and moved to flank the Dead King. Still Chella's eyes would not see them, returning only glimpses of ghost-wrapped bone.

'Chella.' He leaned Artur's body toward her in the chair. 'Choosing a strategy is like deciding upon a weapon. And a weapon needs a point if it is to pierce the foe, neh? You, Chella, are going to pierce the belly of the empire for me. I'm sending you on a journey. Brother Thantos and Sister Keres will keep you safe. The remainder of your escort is on a ship approaching the harbour as we speak.'

## 23

We made progress, not good progress but enough. Sometimes the guard didn't get their charges to Vyene on time, but it hadn't happened in my lifetime. Even when a member of the Hundred died en route, their corpse would make a punctual arrival.

When towns and villages lay at convenient points we spent the night in commandeered accommodation, otherwise tents were pitched in fields or clearings. I liked those nights best, Katherine and Miana lit by firelight in woods where cold mists threaded the trees, each woman framed by the fur trim of winter robes, all of us huddling close to the heat. Gomst and Osser in their chairs with wine goblets in hand debated as old men do, Makin and Marten kept by the queen ready to make up for my failings, Kent sat quiet, watching the night. Rike and Gorgoth bookended our little band, soaking up the warmth, both looking meaner than hell.

On one such night, with the crackle of the fire and the glow of many others dotted about us through the wood, Miana said, 'Jorg, you sleep so much better out of the Haunt, why is that?' Her breath steamed before her in the night and though she faced me it was Katherine that she watched.

'I've always loved the road, dear,' I told her. 'You leave your troubles behind you.'

'Not if you bring your wife.' Rike snorted and kept his gaze on the fire, immune to the sharp look Marten sent his way.

'In the Haunt you always talked in your sleep.' Miana turned to face Katherine now. 'He practically raved. I had to set my bed in the east tower just to get some rest.'

Katherine made no reply, her face still.

'But now he sleeps like a sinless child, without murmur,' Miana said.

I shrugged. 'Bishop Gomst is the one with night terrors. Should we worry when our holiest rest uneasy?'

Miana ignored me. 'No more "Sareth", no more "Degran", and no more

endless “Katherine! Katherine!”

Katherine arched one eyebrow, delicate, expressive, and delicious. Miana had been irritable all day in the carriage, but then if I’d swallowed a whole baby and it insisted on kicking the hell out of my insides I might be less than my normal tolerant self.

A stick popped with a loud retort, sending embers from the fire.

Defence is always a weakness and I didn’t feel like attacking, so I waited. Katherine had so many options open to her – I wanted to know which she would take.

‘I trust King Jorg only called my name out in torment, Queen?’

I wondered what her hands were doing under that fur wrap. Twisting? Sliding toward a knife? Still and collected?

‘It’s true.’ Miana smiled, quick and unexpected, her frown erased. ‘He never did seem pleased to see you.’

Katherine nodded. ‘My nephew has many crimes to answer for, but the darkest are against my sister, Queen Sareth and her child. Perhaps as he says his sins are left behind on the road. Maybe when we stop at Vyene they will catch up with him once more.’

None around the fire made any move to defend me from the charges.

I spoke up for myself. ‘If there were any justice, lady, God himself would reach down and strike me dead, for I am guilty as you say. But until he does, I will just have to keep moving on and doing what I can in the world.’

Gorgoth surprised me then, his voice so deep at first you might think it a trembling in the ground itself. It took me a moment to understand he had started to sing, something wordless, elemental like the crackle of the fire, and captivating. For the longest time we only sat and listened, the stars wheeling overhead, frosty in the night.

For three nights and days rain thundered from leaden skies, drowning out conversation in the carriage and attempting to drown pretty much everything else outside. The roads before us became rivers of mud. The rivers themselves grew to dark and swirling monsters wielding trees and carts as they surged past. Captain Harran led his force along the alternative routes planned out against such eventualities, taking us through larger towns, through cities where the stone bridges had ridden out many a flood.

I took to Brath’s saddle again. After days pressed against the warmth of Katherine’s cool indifference I could do with a cold shower.

‘Making your escape, Jorg?’ Makin rode up beside me as I pulled away from Holland’s carriage.

The road led like a causeway through a sea of flooded pasture, the waters broken only by half-drowned hedgerows. Hours later the rain failed and the sky cracked open along a bright fault-line. The still waters all around became mirrors, every lone tree reflected, bare fingers reaching below as well as above. So much of the world is about surfaces, the eye deceived, with the truth in the unknown and unknowable depths beneath.

‘Damn.’ I shook my head. I’d come out of the carriage to think about something other than Katherine!

‘My lord?’ A guardsman close at hand.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said.

‘My lord, Captain Harran asks for you at the head of the column.’

‘Oh.’ An exchanged glance with Makin and we picked up the pace to pass those ahead, already slowing.

In the west the sun started to edge beneath the cloud bank to tinge the floodwater crimson. We reached Harran after five minutes of mud and splatter. A small town lay ahead on a rise, an island for now.

‘Gottering.’ Harran nodded to the distant houses.

Marten and Kent joined us.

‘Is the road impassable?’ I asked, the route dipped beneath the flood before rising again just as it entered Gottering.

‘It shouldn’t be too deep,’ Harran said. He leaned forward and touched his horse’s leg to indicate the level.

‘What then?’ I asked.

Marten drew his sword, a slow action, and pointed to the fencing on our left. I had thought it the normal detritus that a flood will wad into any fence or decorate the bushes with, but a closer look told a different story.

‘Rags?’

‘Clothes,’ Harran said.

Kent slipped from his horse and squelched a few steps forward along the road. Bending he retrieved a handful of mud. He held a grimy palm up to me.

I’d noted the white specks but not really paid attention. Inches from my face I could see them for what they were. Teeth. People’s teeth, long-rooted and bloody.

The waters burned red now with the sun drowning in the west. The air held a chill already.

‘And does this mean anything to you, Harran?’

‘The guard travel many places. I’ve heard stories.’ An old scar beneath his eye burned very white. I’d not noticed it before. Harran wore his years this evening. ‘Best get that bishop of yours here. He may have more to tell.’

And so, minutes later, Makin returned with Gomst behind him in the saddle. And Kent who had gone to escort the bishop, not for safety but because of the piety that got burned into him at the Haunt, returned with Katherine.

‘You could have let the princess have your horse, Sir Kent. I’m sure she didn’t want to cuddle up to a crispy bloodhound like yourself.’

‘I wouldn’t let him wade after us in the mud.’ Katherine leaned around Kent’s shoulder and shot me a venomous look.

‘You showed Bishop Gomst your evidence then, Kent?’ I ignored Katherine. I could feel her daring me to say she should have stayed where she was.

Makin let Gomst down on the verge where the ground rose to the ridge along which the fence ran.

‘This is a bad thing.’ Gomst staggered and almost slipped over on the wet grass before he reached the dark shrouding of rags. His hand kept questing for the support of his crook, left back atop Holland’s carriage. ‘Like St Anstals ... I had a report.’ He patted his robes in search, then abandoned the effort. ‘And the ruin of Tropez.’ Wild eyes found me. ‘The Dead King’s work has been done here. Ghouls and rag-a-mauls if we’re lucky.’

‘And if we’re not so blessed, old man?’

‘Lichkin. There might be a lichkin.’ He couldn’t keep the terror from his voice.

Harran nodded. ‘The monsters from the Isles.’

‘Mother Ursula saw in visions that the lichkin would cross the waters. A dark tide would bear them.’ Gomst hugged himself against the cold. ‘They say that the lichkin have only one mercy.’

‘What mercy is that, your grace?’ Kent rasped.

‘In the end they let you die.’

I looked over at the black shapes of Gottering, roofs, a church tower, chimneys, a tavern’s weather vane. It pays to choose your ground and I would rather choose the town than a thin strip of mud amid a vast lake. But had the enemy already chosen Gottering, already laid their traps? Or was too much being read into some rags and a scattering of teeth.



‘Count them,’ I said.

‘My lord?’ Harran frowned at me.

‘How many teeth, how much clothing? Did three peasants brawl here and bring the Gilden Guard to a halt, or is this the scene of a massacre?’

Harran waved at two of his men and they climbed down to inspect more closely.

I nudged Brath closer to the captain. ‘If it’s corpses we’re to fight, best to do it with our feet dry and space to see them coming. How deep is the water around us? I’d say two feet? Three? Not drowning deep? Even if the dead crawled through it a man might mark the ripples in their wake?’

‘Deeper in places,’ Harran said. Another captain disagreed. Harran and two more guard captains, Rosson and Devers, started to argue the lie of the land.

Marten rode through a gap in the fence, down into the flood. He stood in his stirrups to face us in the gloom, the water lapping his toes. ‘It’s about this deep, sire.’

‘Dozens,’ said the man checking the fence, peeling the garments from it. ‘Scores maybe.’

‘We’ll stay here,’ I said. ‘And ride into Gottering with first light.’

I accompanied Katherine and Gomst back to the carriage. ‘I’ll sleep in here tonight,’ I told Miana as she opened the door. ‘I want a sword close to you.’

‘I’ll marshal the guard around the carriage,’ Makin said from the saddle.

‘Put Kent on the roof. Rike and Gorgoth by the doors. Let Marten organize patrols through the fields. Better a drowned guardsman or two than being taken by surprise.’

Cold woke me in the night. Even with Miana pressed against me beneath a bearskin throw, and with Katherine’s weight through the thickness of her own furs, the cold opened my eyes. The faint slosh of horses moving through the standing waters became a fractured sound, a brittle tinkling and a creaking. Ice.

I leaned toward the nearer window, across Katherine, and found her watching me. In the dark her eyes made a gleam without colour. She drew aside the window cover and together we squinted through the perforations of the grille, the steam of our breath mixing.

The screams started faint and grew no louder, but with each passing minute the horror mounted. Screams reaching across the skin of ice, all the way from the dark shapes of Gottering. I knew it for pain. Terror has a different quality

and pain will scare away fear quick enough.

‘I should go out.’

‘Stay,’ she said.

So I did.

Katherine sat up, straight-backed against the cushioned rest. ‘Something’s coming.’ I reached for my sword – she shook her head. ‘Coming a different way.’

For a moment, before she closed her eyes, I swear I saw them: green, grass-green, lit from within. She sat still, ice-still, painted in black and pale by moonlight through the window grille. I thought her perfect and need trembled in me. Screams I had heard before.

She sat without motion as the long night marched past, her lips twitching with an occasional word, muttered and indistinct. Miana and the old men slept, uneasy in their dreams but not tormented, and I watched Katherine, listening to the distant howling, to the crackle of ice, and to the drawing of her breath.

## 24

We came into Gottering at first light. The water sloshed around the carriage floor at the deepest point and brought the smell of the river to us, but we didn't have to get out.

I climbed from the carriage in the town square, with the flood trickling down the step behind me. The place showed no signs of damage, a pleasant enough town in the most prosperous region of Attar. Bunting from the harvest festival still hung across the main street from rooftop to rooftop. A child's hoop beside the carriage wheels. Birdsong.

'Did it seem to the patrols that the screams came from town?' I asked.

Harran nodded. 'Couldn't be more than an hour since they stopped.'

A sniff of the air spoke of rot and shit, cold against the sinuses, what you expect from any town. And something else.

'Blood,' I said. 'There's slaughter been done here. I can smell it.'

'Search the houses.' Harran waved his men on. Dozens of them set off, ducking through doorways, the dawn light gleaming on their mail.

The first of the guard re-emerged within minutes. He held some kind of garment out before him, a pale and wrinkled thing, his face, almost as pale, kept stiff in a mask of revulsion.

'Here!' I called the man to me and put my hands out to inspect his prize.

He placed it in my arms without waiting for further invitation.

Even with it draped across my forearms, with the weight of it, the raw scent, and the faintly obscene warmth still clinging there, it took several moments before I understood what I held. It took an effort not to flinch and drop the thing in that instant of realization. I lifted it up, let the arms hang, the scalp flop.

'It takes some skill to flay a man so completely,' I said. I scanned the company, meeting the gaze of each soldier. 'Terror is a weapon, gentlemen, and our enemy understands its use. Let's be sure that we also understand this game.'

I let the skin drop to the cobbles. A wet sound. ‘Find them all. Pile them here.’

I rode the empty streets with Red Kent and Makin, circling the town at the water’s edge, finding nothing. By the time the sun cleared the rooftops Harran’s men had made a heap of one hundred and ninety skins, taken from cellars, bedrooms, stables, chairs before hearths, all across town. Each of a piece with just the three slices that a practised huntsman would use to take the hide from a deer. Men, women, young and old, children’s skins lay there, all faces wrinkled now. I picked up the hoop toy from by the carriage and fretted it through my fingers as the guard built the pile.

Marten escorted Miana and Katherine from the carriage into the Red Fox Inn, Gottering’s only such establishment. Miana waddled, her belly impossibly large, discomfort written across her face. Marten saw them installed in cushioned chairs and kept their company while they waited, with a fire lit and guardsmen about them, Gorgoth at the door. Outside, Gomst read a benediction over the remains in the square. I trusted Katherine to maintain whatever wall she had erected to keep the lichkin out of our heads, but she would have to sleep eventually.

‘We should move on,’ Harran said, pulling his white mare to Brath’s side. ‘This is not our concern.’

‘It’s true. The Duke of Attar would not thank us for policing his lands on his behalf.’

Harran pushed the gratitude from his face so fast many would have missed it.

‘Prepare to move out!’ he shouted.

I would have been happy to ride on as well – but it felt like being pushed.

Through the small leaded panes of the inn window, stained a faint green by the Attar glass, I saw Marten start to his feet and take Miana’s hand with concern.

‘However,’ I said. ‘Are you not expecting other guard troops to come this way? The flooding narrows the options for travelling from the west. How many of the Hundred are to follow in our wake?’

‘There may be some.’ Honour wouldn’t let him lie. A problem that never troubled me.

‘And aren’t the guard bound to the whole task, to getting the Hundred to Vyene, not just to those in their immediate charge?’

Harran stood in his stirrups. ‘Strike that! I want the victims found. I want each house secured.’ With a growl he rode off to oversee.

‘Whoever has still to travel this way is unlikely to be voting in your favour at Congression.’ Osser Gant levered himself from the shadows of stable block, his gaunt frame supported on a silver-topped cane, a nice piece of work in the shape of a fox’s head.

‘So why am I reminding Harran of a duty he would rather have forgotten?’ I asked.

Osser nodded. ‘And risking yourself.’

‘You’ve spent a lifetime on the edge of those stinking marshes, Gant. How many lichkin have you seen?’

‘An old man like me doesn’t stray far from his master’s hall, King Jorg. But you won’t meet many men who’ve seen a lichkin. You might find the corpse of a man who has seen one, and that corpse might try to kill you, but the man will be long gone.’ Osser nodded, as if agreeing with himself.

‘Not a one in all these years?’ I asked.

‘The lichkin may be old,’ Osser said. ‘I don’t know. But they’re new to the Ken Marshes. They’ve roamed there for ten years at most. Maybe not much more than five years. Even in the Isles they are a new plague.’

Marten came to the inn’s door and beckoned to me. Something important. Sometimes you just know. I swung out of my saddle and stepped down. Walking after an age in the saddle puts an unfamiliar edge on something you do every day of your life – just for a moment as your leg muscles remember how they were made. I opted for a slow crossing of the square. Something told me it might be a short walk but it was taking me a long way.

Marten leaned in close. ‘I think it’s her time. Sarah was like this.’

‘She can’t wait?’ I said. ‘Hold it in?’

‘It doesn’t work like that, Jorg.’ The flickered hint of a smile.

‘Hell.’ I raised my voice. ‘I want more guards around this inn. Secure all the exits.’

I peered through a glass pane. Miana had stretched back in her chair, Katherine in close, blocking my view. I didn’t want to go in. There was a time when I was pleased to find that something still scared me. As the years stacked up I kept finding new things to worry over. Pleasure turning to dismay. It seems men have far more to fear than boys.

I went back to Osser. Makin finished tending his horse and came across with Kent to join us.

‘And how many lichkin are there, Chancellor Gant?’ I asked.

‘I heard tell there were seven in all the world,’ Kent said, his gaze flicking to the bishop praying before the mounded skins. ‘Seven is too many.’

‘There may be seven,’ Osser said. ‘The bishop has a list of seven names written by the sisters of the Helskian Order.’

‘I thought the Pope called for all the seers to be killed. She said the nunneries weren’t built to shelter witches.’ The decree had stuck with me – an example of the lengths to which the Vatican would go in order to avoid unwelcome facts.

‘Her Holiness called for the sisters of Helsk to be blinded,’ said Father Gomst, having finished or abandoned his prayers. ‘And they were blinded. But their visions continue.’

A glance toward the inn’s window revealed little but Marten staring out. Katherine moved across the room with a steaming bowl and a cloth over one arm, becoming lost behind Marten’s broad shoulders.

Rike returned to the main square, a black oak coffer under one arm overflowing with silverware and fine silk. A few of the guards stationed at the entry points gave him disapproving stares but none went as far as to challenge him. Gold armour or not, I would be surprised if any professional soldier would turn down a choice piece of loot when searching Gottering. Even so, something was wrong with the picture. I pursed my lips and frowned.

‘Brother Rike.’ He walked over, sullen despite his takings.

I reached out and plucked at the silk, a lustrous orange I’d not encountered before. ‘What is it with you and fabric, Rike? I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you leave a burning building without a bolt of stolen cloth. Something you’re not telling us?’ The idea of Rike in a dress painted as nasty a picture as the heaped skins. But that wasn’t the problem. The answer struck me. ‘You can carry more than that.’ When did I last see Rike stop looting before the weight of his takings made it impossible to gather any more?

Rike shrugged and spat, colour coming to his face. ‘I’d had enough.’

‘You never have enough, Brother Rike.’

‘It’s the eyes.’ He spat again and started to tie the coffer to his horse. ‘I don’t mind the fingers – but the eyes don’t look dead.’

‘What eyes?’

‘Every house.’ He shook his head and fastened another strap. ‘In the drawer with the knives and forks, on a shelf in the cupboard, behind the jars

in the larder, everywhere you go to hunt out something worth taking. I don't like them.' He tightened the last strap.

'Eyeballs?' Makin asked.

Rike nodded and I shivered despite myself. No doubt they were removed as neatly as the skins. I think the precision of it unnerved me. I've seen a raven pluck a ripe eyeball from a head black with decay and kept right on eating my own meal. But something in the lichkin's neat slicing felt unnatural. I shook it off.

Marten came from the inn, banished by Katherine. A moment's hesitation took me. Could Katherine be trusted alone with my child when she held me responsible for her nephew's death? Might she have saved Miana from the assassin's knife just for the chance to twist the life from my infant son? I threw the thought away. Revenge is my art, not hers.

Martin stopped beside Rike and me, ignoring us both, staring at the heap of skins, some lost question leaving his mouth open.

I shrugged. 'Men are made of meat. Lichkin like to play with the pieces. I've seen worse in a fleshmonger's shop. Hell, I've seen worse when men take against their captives.' That last bit was a lie, but the truth was that it wasn't conscience that stopped men short of the lichkins' excesses – men just weren't such accomplished butchers.

I watched Rike rather than Marten. Nothing natural put the fear into Rike. Some things might set him running, but he'd be angry as hell while he ran and planning his revenge all the way. The last time I'd seen him run in terror had been from the ghosts on the lichway. Fingers and eyeballs stashed away in peasant houses wouldn't do it. I'd seen him take both, and he hadn't much cared if the former owners had finished using them.

My gaze returned to the skin heap. Something in my imagination kept making it seem to crawl. 'Burn that,' I said. 'It's not as if it's needed any more.'

I went to the inn. Time to step through that door.

'Damnation! Jorg where the fuck have you been?' Miana snarled that 'Jorg' past small white teeth. I always said she had a pretty face and a foul mouth. And they say even the most proper of maids can swear like a sailor when labouring over a child. What words would she find when it came to push and shove? Strange to say that we're born to our mothers' cursing but ever after they think the young have tender ears and can hear only what might be said in church. I closed the door behind me, leaving it just an inch or two

ajar.

Inside the inn smelled of wood smoke, hot and close, and older less pleasant taints, perhaps of murders done here before the sun rose.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ Miana gasped and spat, clutching herself. She lay back in a great armchair heaped with cushions. Sweat beaded skin, tendons straining in her neck. ‘I don’t want my baby here. Not here.’ Katherine glanced at me across the swell of Miana’s breasts. On the walls brown smears where skinless bodies had touched rough timbers.

I hadn’t wanted my child born on the road. It’s a hard enough place to live, and not a fit place to enter the world, not even with a gilded carriage and an honour guard decorated just as richly. And this village of the dead bore even worse omens. I thought of Degran small, frail, broken in my hands. The lichkin held Gottering in its hands – waiting – and Miana was ready to deliver.

Gorgoth turned from the doorway of the inn, taking more wood for the pyre in the square. A thick log in each hand, lifted from those racked against the wall. Guardsmen had joined in, tearing shutters from windows, breaking up an abandoned cart. Others came from the inn’s cellar with flasks of brandy and urns of lamp oil to quicken the flames. I pulled the door open and followed Gorgoth.

‘Get back in here, you whore-born bastard!’

I closed the door on Miana, watched by the Gilden Guard to either side. Eyebrows raised.

‘The queen is not herself,’ I said.

Six golden-helmed heads snapped back front and centre as I passed between them.

The lichkin held the town, held us all, though many of our number didn’t yet know it. Perhaps a little fire might loosen its grip and cleanse the air. Gottering was a spell now, an enchantment, a single great rune set out in pieces of men. Blood-magic.

When the timbers lay doused and heaped around the pile of flayed skins I drew Gog from his scabbard. The blade gleamed in the winter sun so’s you could imagine flames dancing on its edge. I set it to the wood. ‘Burn,’ I said. And flames really did dance on that keen line.

The blaze took fast, leaping amongst the broken wood, devouring the oil and spirits, sinking hot teeth into timber. Almost at once the meaty tang of



burned flesh reached out, stronger than the smoke. Memory took me to the Haunt, walking out between scorched corpses to meet Egan of Arrow. And just a moment later, another memory, the shrieks of those the fire had left alive. Only – not memory.

‘What?’ I tilted my head to locate the sound. A high keening.

Captain Harran broke into the square on horseback. ‘It’s from that copse, on the ridge to the west. Hollow Wood.’

As we came into Gottering there had been another island in the flooded fields, three hundred yards to the west, a few acres of tangled woodland.

*The lichkins’ mercy, Gomst had said, is that in the end they let you die.*

But not yet.

The people of Gottering still lived. They still felt it. Somewhere in that wood close on two hundred townsfolk, flayed, without fingers or eyes or teeth, howled as I burned their skins.

‘Jorg!’ A shout edged with scream. Katherine at the doorway, pale, framed by auburn curls.

I ran, sword in hand. I pushed past her.

‘It— It got stronger. I couldn’t stop it,’ Katherine said behind me.

Miana lay before the fireplace and the crackling logs on bedding from the inn rooms, skirts hitched around her hips in many layers. Pain had twisted her limbs. The firelight shone on skin stretched too tight across her womb. White against that red flesh, set over my hidden child, the print of a three-fingered hand.

‘Miana?’ I stepped close, slamming Gog back into his scabbard. ‘Miana?’ A cold touch flickered across my chest. Perhaps that same three-fingered hand, reaching in. I have no truck with poets and their flowered words but in that moment my heart truly froze, turning to a heavy and clenched wound to see her there – a physical pain that staggered me. A weakness the lichkin infected me with, no doubt.

‘Miana?’ The eyes she turned my way did not know me.

I swung around for the door, almost knocking Katherine down.

‘You’re leaving?’

‘Yes.’

‘She needs you.’ Anger. Disappointment. ‘Here.’

‘The lichkin is reaching for both her and my son,’ I said. ‘And wherever this lichkin is it is not here.’

I left her, left Miana, left the inn. I hastened past the pyre where skins

bubbled and melted, fats running and steaming over the flagstones.

With the brothers at my heels I ran to the corner by the bakers' kilns, to a step that offered a view west across bright waters toward the bare trees where my enemy waited. I paused, willing my limbs to stillness, letting heartbeats count out time – time for judgment and clarity to catch me up. Moments passed with nothing but the distant howling and the black reflection of branches reaching out toward Gottering.

'Surfaces and reflections, Makin,' I said. 'Worlds divided by such thin barriers, unseen, unknowably deep.'

'Your pardon, sire?' Makin took sanctuary in formality rather than try to follow me.

Every fibre of me screamed for action. My wife lay marked and tormented, a stranger to me, a prison for my son. My son!

My father would tell me, 'find a new wife'. Nail the pair, mother and babe, to the floor with one sword thrust and ride on. Let the lichkin choke on that. And I would do it too, if no better choice remained. I would do it. I told myself I would do it.

I held still, just a tremble in my fingers. 'Consider the problem in hand, Lord Makin. The good bishop tells me there are at least seven lichkin, maybe more. And we know they're striking across Attar for the first time. Maybe they're attacking along other routes into Vyene? Spread thin? It seems that if there were many and they were confident of victory over soldiers rather than peasants, they would have come to us last night. That or they're toying with us, cat to mouse.

'Well I would rather find out about a new enemy by first encountering one on their own, so this is a chance not to miss, rather than a horror to run from,' I said.

It wanted us to run. All this – all this was about fear. It wanted Miana bundled into a carriage and half a thousand guardsmen to gallop off along the road to Honth.

'And if it's the cat toying with the mouse?' Makin asked.

I smiled. 'What better chance will the mouse ever have to kill the cat?'

I drew Gog and the fire that burst out along the sword made pale all flame that had ever burned there before. I set off toward the black trees and the weakening screams of Gottering, wading through dark waters with the brothers treading in my wake. And I walked rather than ran, though a fire burned in me near as fierce as that on my blade, because surfaces divide

known from unknown, and though I might walk where angels fear to tread, I  
try not to rush in like a fool.

## 25

Floodwater always has the same stink to it, of earth after rain but gone too far, tainted with rot. The coldness of it made me clutch at my breath, rising by inches as I waded on. My face blazed with the heat of the fire on Gog's blade, reflecting in dark and hungry water. Some foolishness made me think of the River Sane's gentle meander through Crath City, at the bend past the Bridge of Arts where stone pillars jut from the slow current to mark an area for swimming. Mother would take us there in the high summer heat when the Sane still remembered winter. As tiny boys we would edge in, inch by inch, squealing. That shriek and gasp as the river took our privates in icy hands – I felt it again and bit down the exclamation.

'Brisk!' Sir Makin said behind me. 'Don't think my balls will be coming back down for a month.'

'Why are we even going?' Rike from the back.

I glanced over my shoulder, at Gorgoth almost naked despite the cold, pushing a bow wave before him, Red Kent, his short sword and hatchet held out above the water, Makin with a grin, Rike with a sour sulk on him, Marten frowning, determined, the device on his shield the black spars of a burned house on a green field.

'Why?' Rike repeated.

'Because it doesn't want us to,' I said, pressing on.

I made a mental note to change my ways. If, every time an enemy demands you sit down, instead you jump up, well that predictability becomes a ring through your nose by which you can be pulled when pushing fails.

'Enjoy yourselves.' Rike sounded further behind me.

I stopped and turned. Rike had never really taken to the business of me being king. I might have seven nations where men bent their knee to me in their thousands, through love or fear, mainly fear, but with Rike the only knee-bending took place when not to do so would get that knee broken.

'Do we have to do this now, Brother Rike?' I asked.

He sneered. 'What are you gonna do? Cut my skin off and scoop out my eyes?'

Apparently the lichkin scared him more than I did.

'Of course not.' I shook my head, showing him the old smile. 'I'm a king!' I took a stride toward him. Lowering Gog's point to the water so it sizzled, jumped, and spat, the steam rising between us. 'I'll have a professional do it. Somebody who really enjoys it. Kings don't dirty their hands.'

Gorgoth let out a deep laugh at that. Makin joined him. In the end even Rike gave that 'hur' of his and we carried on. Jokes come hard when you're past ball-deep in icy water and heading toward hell, but fortunately my audience wasn't too discerning. Also I wasn't joking.

Closer to the copse now, water around my waist, each step sinking into hidden softness. Three times I caught myself from falling, tripped by some submerged briar or fencepost. Makin went down once and came up cursing and spluttering.

The water seemed colder closer to the trees, plates of wafer-thin ice gliding in our wake, and a mist rising, tendrils reaching to mix with the frosting of our breath. The mists rose with us as the gradient led us from the flood among the outermost of the black and dripping trees.

I saw the first ghost only as a glimpse between trunks, a figure moving fast but not stirring the calf-deep water. Just a glimpse, ragged black hair, muddy, a child. The name Orscar floated through me, though I couldn't place it. I turned to warn the brothers, sword still levelled at where the boy had been. And of course found only mist to meet me. Mist and an iron cross, a pendant hanging from a low branch, a blob of red enamel at the crossing point. For the blood of Christ.

'I know this game of shades, dead-thing!' I swung Gog in a slow circle, mists shrivelling back before the flames. 'Bring my dead mother, William, the baby if you must. Bring the dead of Gelleth, bring Greyson's ghost with his eyes gone, bring Lesha carrying her head. You're playing the wrong hand against me. I've known worse.'

'Have you now?'

A sharp pain took me in the chest. I turned again and the fire on Gog died, blade dropping as the strength left my arm.

Father stood, wolf-robed, iron crowned, iron in his hair, winter in his eyes.

'You're not dead.' The words left me, soft and without emotion. 'Not a ghost.'

‘Am I not?’

‘You’re not!’ Beneath my breastplate blood spilled, pumped from an old wound, soaking my shirt and the woollens over it, running in hot rivulets down across my belly. ‘The Tall Castle wouldn’t fall to marsh corpses.’ I shook my head. ‘And your men are too scared to slit your throat.’ I blinked. He stood there, the water rippling around his high boots, solid and meaner than nails, not some grey spectre.

‘You’ll be a father within the hour, Jorg.’ He looked at his hands, spread them before his belt, turning them palm to back, back to palm.

‘Don’t—’ Loose fingers found a tighter grip on Gog’s hilt. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Ghosts know what they know.’ He turned to stare into the fog.

‘You’re not dead.’ It wasn’t possible. He couldn’t die. Not that old man. And not without me being the one to do it. ‘How –’

‘The wrong son died, Jorg.’ I never knew anyone to match Father’s talent for cutting across a man’s words without raising his voice. ‘It should have been William taken from the thorns. He had my strength. You were ever your mother’s whelp. Better Degran even than you. Better even him.’

‘Who killed you?’ I made it a demand.

‘Who?’ Those eyes found me again. I had thought it cold before. ‘My heart gave out, pounding that pretty Teuton of mine. What was it you called her? The Scorrion whore.’

The waters rose about us, swirling, eddying around the trees. Knee-deep, thigh-deep.

My strength left me with each heartbeat, limbs icy, the only warmth that of the blood spilling from the old wound, the one Father gave me, the one that should never have healed. ‘You’ll be a father soon, Jorg. That little southern wife of yours will push out a son. In slime and blood, shouting at the world. Just like mine did. The Pope’s man failed. I told her, “send three, two at the least”, but the silly bitch sent just the one. Said he was her best. I had high hopes, but he failed.’

‘You knew?’ The flood reached my chest. Without its support I doubted I could stand. When it touched the wound I felt the coldness pour into me, as if black water were filling me like a hollow gourd.

‘It’s good that you won’t see your boy,’ my father told me. ‘You’re too weak to raise a son.’ His wolfskin lifted on the flood but it meant nothing to him. He watched me with just the hint of a smile, a thing as cold as his

regard.

The water spilled around my neck, putting a chatter in my teeth, my hair floating around me, drawn by the current. The weight of my armour, of the sword held in a numb hand, the pull of the mud, all held me down.

I thought of my child, of Miana with the white hand seared on her belly, and a spark of anger lit in me despite the cold. ‘You were mine to kill, old man.’ I snarled it before the water closed my mouth and swallowed me.

I looked up at a distant surface through dark weeds – the tangled drift of my hair. Far above me, impossibly far, a rippled surface fracturing the daylight to send weak glimmers down into the icy depths. A hand hung over me, limp, reaching for the sky. My hand. The dim and greenish light moved ripple patterns across my fingers.

I stared. Stared at that distant sun. It could be a million miles away. Lundist had said a million. More than a million. The waters held me. I hung limp and stared until that twinkling patch of green-tinted light became all I could see, became my world.

Shapes resolved. Green-tinted. And it seemed, though the water held me, though my chest ached for air and my heart pounded behind my ribs, that I looked not at the sky through water, but through the faint green stain of Attar glass into an inn room. A room where a fire burned in the hearth, where Miana lay, and Katherine crouched at her side.

I saw the lichkin come for them, the door flying apart in splinters. It walked in, slow and measured, a bone-thing, shrouded in dead space where the eye can’t see. The creature had left us a trap in the Hollow Wood and waited for us to leave. While we lay drowning the lichkin slipped into Gottering.

Guardsmen came hard on its heels. On her heels. Somehow I knew the lichkin for a she. They fell choking, perhaps drowning with their own ghosts, strangled by lost loves, choked by disapproving parents, or whatever tawdry fragments of their past haunted them. We all carry the seeds of our own destruction with us, we all drag our history behind us like rusted chain.

Katherine rose to meet her.

‘You shouldn’t have come.’ Somehow Katherine’s voice reached me, cut through to my dying brain, past the thunder of my heart.

The lichkin advanced on Katherine, only its hands clear to me, white, bone-like, root-like. My vision pulsed and prickled. In a moment I would take

the breath my body screamed for.

‘You don’t know much, dead-thing.’ Katherine stood before it, the muted reds of her travel-gown swaying around her. Even dying I saw her beauty. Without desire – just as a statement, like the glory of a stained-glass window, or the play of light and shadow across mountains. I saw her fear too, and the strength that held it down.

Those hands reached for her, fast but slowing, as if finding some invisible resistance.

‘You can’t be very old, dead-thing,’ she said. ‘It’s written in the oldest books. Sleep and death are brother and sister. The Bard knew it. For in death’s sleep what dreams will come? And believe me dead-thing, I know dreams.’

The lichkin howled and raised a grey swirl around Katherine. Her skirts whipped about her. At Katherine’s feet Miana twisted and moaned. Shapes moved in that swirl. Shapes and suggestions.

‘Enough,’ Katherine said, sharp voiced. ‘Ghosts, is it? But dreams are populated by ghosts and little else. Ghosts are made of dreams, dead dreams, lost dreams, bad dreams, dreams that get stuck in tight little circles, that carve their own rut in the fabric of the world and won’t let go.’

Katherine’s hand snaked out and caught something from the swirl, held it by the throat. To me it was Orscar from the monastery, Sunny lashed to the Bad Dogs’ pole, Lesha wanting me to save her, the boy in Albaset beaten by the smith. You can’t save them all so why save any? She choked it, fingers turning white with strain. At the last Father’s face hung there, black with blood. And then, poof, it was gone, a wisp of smoke, nothing more.

Katherine stepped forward, a quick step. And the lichkin flinched. It turned to run. But she caught it. Caught its bone-white hand in hers. Katherine held the lichkin, rigid with effort, hand growing white, veins growing dark and darker still, but she refused to release it.

‘You shouldn’t have come.’

And I broke the surface. Retching and gasping, I sat up, the water about me a foot deep, eighteen inches maybe. No more. I drew in the sweetest breath and parted the black veil of my hair. All about me, at the edge of the Hollow Wood, the brothers sat, choking and gasping, spitting water, purple in the face.





## Chella's Story

The carriage jolted across frost-stiffened mud and Chella cursed again. On the bench opposite, Kai looked far more comfortable, on the edge of sleep almost, as if bounced in his nurse's arms. She clutched the armrest, fingers white on the leather. Five years starved of necromancy, five years since the Ancrath boy had drained her, shrivelled up her power in the firestorm of his ghosts. She had thought the Dead King merely cruel to punish her so, to leave her stranded once more on the shores of life, plagued by the everyday aches and pains of flesh, mocked by trivialities like temperature. Now she appreciated his cunning too.

'Damnation.' Chella hugged her furs close about her. 'Who made the autumn so chill?'

'Who decided to hold Congression on the edge of winter?' Kai asked. 'That's the more reasonable question.'

Chella felt cold, not reasonable. Kai's easy manner irked her. She returned often now to the day the mire-ghouls had dragged him and the girl to her through the reeds. Mud and slime in their hair, horror frozen into their fresh young faces. Each display of his returning confidence, each hint of the mild contempt that hid behind his smile, made her regret deciding to use him the more. Better he had died with his pert little strumpet.

Necromancy at its heart is a guilty pleasure, a surrender to the darkest instinct. The fact that Golden Boy had picked up his old self-assurance again, his charm and his winning smile, as if he just dabbled in a secret vice, a necessary evil, dug at her moment to moment. That he proved so good at it made her want to claw the face off him. He seemed to think it something he could set aside when no longer required, like he had that girl. What was her name? Sula? She wondered if Kai could still remember it.

Necromancy has to cost you. It had certainly cost Chella. Jorg might have taken a bite for free, but all he got was a taste. Golden Boy on the other hand had picked it up as though it were nothing but juggling, and had yet to drop a ball.

'I hate being alive,' Chella spoke to the passing world through the carriage grille, hedgerows edged with hoarfrost so thick that every twig bristled with thorns of ice.

'And yet we hang to it so dear,' Kai said. 'Sometimes by fingertips.'

He had walked the dry lands now. Thought he knew it all. Thought he knew both sides of the coin from his stumbling in the borders where newly dead sometimes lost their way. Chella wondered how the deep voyaging would change him. What it would be that took the ease from his smile. Somewhere past Absolution, in the places where angels fear to tread, maybe even across the black sands to the caves where lichkin dwell. It waited for him out there – and on the day of his dark epiphany she would forgive him his slights and his superiority for they would be broken things that no longer held use for him. Until that day, though ... one more cheerful encouragement and she would take his face.

The roll and rock of the carriage made her stomach jump. Her bones ached so it hurt to sit. And the cold, the damp, insidious cold! She wiped her nose, leaving a glistening trail across the back of her hand, then sniffed, noting and pretending to ignore Kai's look of faint disgust.

We play with corpses and my mucus offends him!

Being so alive made her petty and weak.

The carriage rolled to a halt, the coachman banging three times on the roof.

Kai looked up. 'Trouble?'

Chella sensed nothing but in her diminished state that meant little. She shrugged, leaned forward, and opened the carriage door.

Axtis stood in the mud, his golden armour bright in the winter sun, hurting her eyes. More of the Golden Guard pressed around him on horseback. 'Smoke rising over the town ahead.'

'Which town?' Chella squinted. Leaving the carriage didn't appeal, the sun promised warmth, but it lied.

'Gottering.'

‘Never heard of it. Send riders ahead and drive on.’ She leaned back into the carriage and closed the door. ‘Two hundred and fifty men! Worried over smoke. If the place was one big bonfire we could ride through.’

‘Perhaps our friends have been here before us.’ Kai caught the mist of his breath and shaped it into a question mark, fading between them. Old tricks.

‘Lichkin are no one’s friends, Wind-sworn. You’d do well to remember that.’

The carriage juddered into motion again and before long rolled on into smooth mud and tinkling ice crusts.

‘The road is flooded – we’re fording.’ Kai, head back against the rests, eyes closed. ‘There’s a pyre of sorts in the town square. No bones.’

Kai had told her his wind-sight grew hand in hand with his dead-sight. She hated him the more for it. His eyeballs twitched beneath his eyelids, looking ahead of them, seeing what she could not. Still, she allowed herself a smile. There were things ahead that Kai would not see coming, however far his vision rode the wind. The Dead King’s cunning had set them on this path. Two necromancers sent to Congression. The necromancy necessary to his purpose, and just as necessary the fact that they stood close enough to life to pass as untainted, Kai too new to his calling to raise alarm, and she too distant from her old power to seem a threat.

Dark waters seeped around the door join as they went, the carriage half-floating now. Then, as it seemed they would sink, the wheels found the road once more and they jolted back onto dry land. Chella caught the stink of roast meat.

‘It’s a funeral pyre.’

‘There are no bones,’ Kai said. ‘And the festival flags are out. A celebration maybe?’

Chella knew death. She shook her head.

Stepping from the carriage she jumped to the ground before it came to a halt.

‘What is it?’ Kai dropped down behind her.

Chella raised a hand to silence him, not that she listened with her ears, but it felt good to shut him up.

'Screaming ...' she said. Horrible agony. Her skin burned with it. A hand rose before her face and for a moment she didn't recognize it as hers, hanging on invisible thread, one long finger, bony in the knuckle, pointing. The questing hand settled, indicating the open waters between the town and a nearby copse. 'There.'

'I can barely sense it,' Kai said.

'It's hiding.' Chella brought her hands together before her, shaping her will. She might have only an echo of her power but she wielded what she held with lifetimes of experience. 'Help me bring it out.'

Drawing forth dead things from behind the veil always put Chella in mind of the cesspit back in Jonholt. A hot summer and the stink rose between the boards, acrid, strong enough to make her eyes water that day, the day she dropped Nan Robtin's brooch. Dropped was the wrong word. She had pinned it carefully to her smock, piercing coarse wool with the steel pin. And even so it fell, turning in the air, sparkling, making diamond fractures of the light, though it was only glass and mirror. She missed the brooch twice in the air, fingers brushing it, then fumbled it, sending it skittering across the boards and down the dung hole.

For the longest time Chella had stood and stared at the hole. The image of the sparkling brooch falling into darkness played across her vision. She hadn't asked to take it. Nan would have said no. It's borrowing if you bring it back, she had told herself.

'Stealing if you don't,' she whispered, there by the cesspit behind the scrub lilacs.

She had lain flat upon the boards, nose wrinkled, breath held against the physical force of the stench. Cheek to the wood, arm reaching down, the stained boards scraping her bicep through her smock. Fingers found the filth, the coldness surprising, a crawling sensation of revulsion as she dipped in, stomach heaving, her hand enveloped now, wanting to make a fist and yet stretching out, questing.

The need to draw breath built in her chest, a hammering demand. Eyes screwed tight. Toes curled, legs drumming, hand questing. YOU WILL BREATHE. And in the end the body's wants prove stronger than the mind's and you always take the breath.

Chella had lain gagging, a thin spill of acid spew drooling from her

panting mouth, and still her fingers hunted in a cold world, half-solid, half-liquid.

And after all that – the sudden bite of the brooch pin made her scream and whip her hand out, empty, splattering filth.

‘The trick,’ she muttered to Kai, ‘is to let it bite.’

When the bite came Kai fell shrieking, and Chella endured with grim satisfaction, hauling to bring out what was lost and hidden. Weak as she was, Chella used the life that filled her to tempt and anchor her prey. At the last, when her bones threatened to tear through flesh and skin if she did not release her hold, Chella pulled harder still and a mist began to coil about the surface of the flood. Frost patterns spread beneath the mist, racing in wild, angular profusion over dark water.

It rose in a splintering of ice, something both more white than the frost, blacker than the waters, a creature of bone-pale limbs cast with midnight shadow, blade-thin, hands dividing root-like into three fingers. And somehow, despite the lack of defining features, undeniably female. Mouthless, her pain scaled a different register, resonating in an ache deep in the sockets of Chella’s teeth. Men of the guard staggered around her, choking, tearing at their eyes.

‘Keres!’ Chella named the lichkin, sealing it back into the world.

‘What happened?’ Kai climbed to his feet, hauling in a breath. ‘I can see it. What’s changed?’

‘I—’ Something had changed, the lichkin lay revealed, stripped of its shroud of ghosts.

Kai clenched his jaw against the lichkin’s resonating agony.

The ghosts were gone – flayed away.

And in that moment Chella understood.

‘She’s been skinned.’

*Five years earlier*

I lay a long time in the dark, gripped by fever. I lay in the dust beside the fresh corpse of a thousand-year-old man and from time to time, when my mind grew clear enough to understand the slurred demands of my leathery tongue, I drank.

Without light and without sound, dreams cannot be told from delirium. I talked to myself - mutters and accusations - and sometimes to Fexler, face-down, the back of his head a wet mess of soft and sharp. I held his gun - my totem against terrors in the night. In the other hand I clutched the thorn-patterned box, refusing the urge to open it even in the madness of fever.

I spoke to my demons, addressing each with long and dreary monologues as I twisted in the dust. Lesha's head watched me from the alcove where the pills had been, her skin luminous, blood oozing black from the stump of her neck. Sunny came eyeless to stand vigil, the words from his seared tongue as incoherent as mine. William came hand in hand with mother, her eyes worried, his hard as stones.

'I tried to save you.' Same old story - no new excuses from Jorgy.

He shook his head, blood and curls. We both knew thorns would not have held him.

The dead of Gelleth came to stand watch, and my brothers from the mire, collected by Chella just for me.

And in time Fexler's medicines worked their slow magic, my fever broke, and dreams faded into darkness, William's eyes the last to go, hanging like an accusation.

'I'm hungry.' The bones of my spine grated as I sat up.

I didn't know how long I'd lain there - long enough for Fexler to smell the wrong kind of sweet. But even that didn't stop the growling of my stomach.

I made a meal of the hardtack in my pack, finding it with blind fingers and chewing in the dark, spitting out the occasional inedibles fished out by mistake. I looted Fexler without squandering my light, a fingertip search discovering and

exploring his many pockets. In one hand I held my blunted knife ready, not trusting his cold and stiff corpse to suffer my attentions without protest. He lay quiet, though. Perhaps the Builders had the means to defend their halls from such influences just as the seals the mind-sworn place on royal tombs hold their charges safe. I found a lightweight rectangular box, like a card case, with heavy, rattling contents, elsewhere several flexible cards that felt like plasteek, tubes that might have been writing instruments in his breast pocket. All of them went into my pack.

At last, when I felt ready to move, I relit my flask-and-wick lamp.

Getting into the shaft proved every bit the nightmare I had imagined it. Climbing up to a point at which I could snag the rope proved worse. Missing the rope, falling, and having to repeat the process nearly ended my tale with a dusty skeleton at the bottom of a deep, dry hole.

When I heaved myself out into the noonday sun, bloody-handed, panting, too dry to sweat, Balky and the stallion were waiting where I left them, offering the same looks they had seen me off with. The stallion had flecks of white foam on his muzzle and both carried the signs of dehydration, sunken flesh and an unhealthy glitter to the eyes. I stood before them, bent over with exhaustion, heaving in my breath, eyes screwed tight against the brightness of the day. I wondered if the Builder-ghosts felt this way when they came out into one world from another. Did they have to struggle from the deep places of their strange existence to emerge like Fexler did, painted by machines for human eyes? Those old ghosts watched me as I straightened, as one hand lifted to shield my gaze. I sensed their attention. As blank and unreadable as the mule's and surely more alien.

The last of the water from the skins on the stallion's back did little more than take the edge from our thirst when split three ways. I would have taken it all of course had I not thought we could all three make it out and back to the Bad Dogs' barrels.

The Bad Dogs' camp held few signs of its former masters. A split bone here and there, the weapons, tatters of cloth, scraps of armour, all filmed over with dust. I stayed long enough to take one of Toltech's bitter pills and fill my water-skins.

I took a look through the view-ring before I left. Part of me wanted to see Fexler there, to tell him how much his freedom had cost, to see if he cared. The ring showed nothing, just the world through a hoop of silver-steel. As I took it away the view flicked to the one seen from the lower slopes of paradise, nations laid out in browns and greens, without regard for the boundaries on men's maps, the oceans swirled about in deepest



blue. And there, on the coast to the south, on the thin arm of sea that divides our lands from Afrique ... a red dot, burning.

'I'm not your toy, Fexler. You can't set me chasing across empire to join your little dots.'

Balky snorted, as if wondering whether I'd gone mad in the heat. I put the ring away. 'Dammit.' I'd been planning a journey to that exact spot.

'King Honourous Jorg Ancrath.' The flunky with little rod for rapping doors afforded me the introduction he omitted on my first visit.

The provost sat in her ebony chair as if she had remained there since I left, seated the whole time with her ledgers and tallies, amid the geometric splendour of her Moorish halls. The writing desk beside her lay empty, the scribe perhaps dismissed while the provost checked his work. She watched me cross the floor with sufficient interest to pause her quill-scratching.

'Sanity prevailed, King Jorg?' she asked. 'You turned back before the Hills? When I sent Leshia to guide you I had hope that it would be her scars that showed you the way - back through the city gates.'

'Your granddaughter was both a caution and an inspiration, Provost.' I came to the step of her dais and offered a deeper bow than she merited. I carried bad news after all. 'She was an explorer. Our world needs more like her.'

'Was?' The old woman didn't miss much. I felt rather than heard the tensing of the two men at the door.

'Outlaws attacked our camp while we slept. Perros Viciosos.'

'Oh.' That made her old, those two words. Years that had only toughened now for a moment hung their weight upon her head.

'Better to have found the fire a second time.'

'Leshia died in the struggle before we were taken, Provost. My man, Greyson, was not so lucky. His was a hard death.'

*And yet you survived.* She didn't say it. The Hundred and their spawn have an instinct for survival and it never pays to ask the cost.

The provost sat back in her chair and set her quill on the armrest. A moment later she let her papers fall. 'I have sixteen grandchildren you know, Jorg?'

I nodded. It didn't seem the time to say 'fifteen'.

'All bright and wonderful children who ran through these halls at one time or other, shrieking, laughing, full of life. A trickle of them at first, then a tide. And their mothers would put them on my lap, always the mothers, and we'd sit and goggle, young to old, a mystery to each other. Then life would sweep them on their way, and now I could more quickly tell you the names of the sixteen district water marshals than of those children. Many

I wouldn't recognize in the street unless you told me to watch out for one.

'Lesha was a bold girl. Not pretty, but clever and fierce. She could have done my job maybe, but she was never meant for city life. I'm sorry now that I didn't get to know her better. More sorry for her father, who knew her even less well perhaps but will weep for her where all I have are excuses.'

'I liked her. The same force pushed us both. I liked Greyson too,' I said.

It struck me that finding someone I might call a friend had been a rare thing in my life. And in the space of three short months I'd discovered and lost two.

'I hope whatever you found proves worth the sacrifice.'

The gun hung heavy at my hip, wrapped in leather. Almost as heavy as the copper box on the hip opposite. The provost took up her quill again. No talk now of receptions, feasts with merchants, mass with the cardinal. Perhaps she first wanted to tell her son that his daughter was dead.

'A man who can't make sacrifices has lost before he starts, Provost. There was a time when I could spend the lives of those around me without care. Now, sometimes, I care. Sometimes it hurts.' I thought for a moment of the Nuban falling away after I shot him. 'But that doesn't mean that I can't and won't sacrifice absolutely anything rather than allow it to be used to rule me, rather than have it be made into a way to lose.'

'Well now, there's an attitude that will serve you well at Congression, King Jorg.' The provost offered me a grim smile, tight in the creases of her face.

'Your granddaughter though was not something I gave up to advance my cause. I did my best to save her from pain.'

The provost took a scroll and dipped her quill. 'These Perros will face justice soon enough.' She shot me a cold look. 'These road-brothers. This order will send enough of the city guard to hang them all.'

'They're all dead, I believe. Perhaps one or two escaped.' I remembered flinging the hatchet, the man's arms thrown up as he fell, the second runner vanishing over the rise. 'One.' I wanted to go back and hunt him down myself. With effort I unclenched my jaw and met the provost's gaze.

'We know of the Perros Viciosos in Albaseat, King Jorg. Tales are brought through our gates, many tales.'

'Well, let them add that to Lesha's own story. At the last she brought an end to the Bad Dogs and saved many others from their predations. And I was the end she brought them.' I thought perhaps Lesha might have approved of that.

The provost shook her head, just a fraction, telling me her disbelief without words. 'It can't be that there are less than scores in that band, not with the trouble they have caused, the

atrocities ...'

'Two dozen, a few more perhaps.' I shrugged. 'It doesn't take many hands or much imagination to build a reputation on blood and horror.'

'Two dozen - and yet you killed all but one?' The provost arched a brow and set her quill down again as if unwilling to record a falsehood.

'Dear lady, I killed them from youngest child to oldest woman, and when I was done I blunted three axes dismembering their corpses. I am Jorg of Ancrath - I burned ten thousand in Gelleth and didn't think it too many.'

I gave her my bow and turned to leave. The men at the door, wide and gleaming in the black scales of their armour, stepped aside sharply.

## *Five years earlier*

I turned fifteen on the voyage to Afrique. I had always imagined such a journey as an endurance at sea, like the storm-tossed odysseys of legend that end clinging to a raft of wreckage, hidden from the sun by a square of tarpaulin, on the point of drinking your own urine as the faint haze of land rises over the horizon.

The truth is that from Albaseat you can travel by good roads through the kingdoms of Kadiz and Kordoba and come to the Kordoban coast where a promontory ends in a vast rock miles wide - Tariq's Mountain. Look south from the watchtowers on the heights of this wave-lapped mountain, across two dozen miles of ocean, and the shores of Afrique may be seen, bare peaks rising in challenge above a morning sea mist. Look west, across Tariq Bay and you'll see Port Albus where many ships wait to carry a man with gold in his pocket to whatever corner of the Earth he desires.

It isn't that Afrique is so far away that gives her mystery. From the realms of the Horse Coast you can almost reach out to touch her, but as I've learned with Katherine, touching is not knowing. The fringes of Maroc may be seen from the watchtowers of the Rock, but the vastness of Afrique sprawls south so far that at its extreme are regions more distant from the Horse Coast than the frozen north of the Jarls, as far as Utter in the east, as far even as the Great Lands of the West across the ocean.

In short then I was at sea for only a day, and on that day, midway between two continents, out of sight of all land - thanks to the persistence of the coastal mists - the hour of my birth came and went and I entered my fifteenth year.

I had arrived at Port Albus burned dark by the Kordoban sun, which in truth is much the same as the sun of Kadiz and of Wennith and of Morrow, though the Kordobans like to claim it as their own. I negotiated passage across the straits on quays thronged with as many Moors, Nubans, and men of Araby as with men of the Horse Coast or Port Kingdoms. Captain Akham of the *Keshaf*

agreed to carry me that morning. I waited while thick-muscled Nubans, black as trolls, brought ashore the last of his cargo. They stacked up white salt-blocks thick as a hand span and a foot square, carried from the unknown across great deserts on camel trains. And beside them, baskets of fruit from the groves of Maroc. Lemons larger than any I'd held, and objects picked from no tree I had seen before. I had a stevedore name them for me, pineapple, star fruit, hairy lychee. I bought one of each for two copper stallions, both a little crimped, and went aboard an hour later with sticky hands, sticky face, sticky dagger, and a mouth wanting to taste more of foreign shores.

While I waited and ate my fruit a man joined me at the barrel-stack, just opposite the gangway. A man stranger than any on the quay, though by no means the furthest flung.

'Sir Jorg of Conaught.' I sketched him a bow. 'And you'll be a Florentine?'

He nodded, a curt motion beneath the tall cylinder of his hat. No part of his flesh showed, save his face, a plump and pasty white beneath the two-inch brim of that hat. How it didn't burn scarlet I don't know.

'I've not met a modern before.' I hadn't liked the curtness of that nod so I spat out any politeness with the tough skin of the pineapple chunk I'd been chewing on.

He had nothing to say to that and looked away to where two men struggled with his luggage, a large trunk, covered with the same black fabric his frock coat, trows, waistcoat, and shirt appeared to have been cut from. A symphony in black with only his white cotton gloves and, of course, his pale face, to sour it. Sweat trickled along the side of his nose, his coat looked thick with it, shiny with human grease.

'A Florentine banker bound for Afrique with not a bodyguard in sight?' I asked. 'I'll keep the footpads off you for a few days if you have the coin.' I thought I might attract less attention as the guard to a man even more out of place than myself.

He glanced my way, failing to keep his distaste hidden. 'Thank you, sir, no.'

I shrugged, yawned and rolled my head. I imagined the wideness and wildness of the world must be a shock to any of the banking clans after the swordless peace their clockwork soldiers maintained in Florence. The next piece of pineapple glistened on the point of my dagger - gone in one noisy mouthful.

'Your name, banker,' I said.

'Marco Onstantos Evenaline of the House Gold, Mercantile Derivatives South.'

'Well good luck, Master Marco.' I turned my back on him and followed his trunk onboard. He would probably need all the luck he could afford, but reason demanded that he must have something to him or he wouldn't have survived to get this far from the

counting tables of the Florentines.

On the bleached white decks of the *Keshaf* I spent hours watching the swelling sea from the prow and discovered that though the south had stained me I would never be so dark that the sun couldn't burn me that bit more. The second half of the voyage found me skulking in the sails' shade.

'My lord?' The captain's boy with water in a leather mug.

I took it. Never refuse water in dry places - and there is no place more dry than the seas off Afrique. 'My thanks.' Thirst made me grateful.

I travelled as a down-at-heels knight rather than a king, with letters from my grandfather to ease passage where needed. Losing the weight of my title made life far more simple. I sipped the water and leaned back against coiled rope, more at ease than I had been in an age. I had had enough of formality in Albateat, even if I did escape the threatened receptions. Better to learn the ways of empire incognito, from the streets, from the sewers if need be, than amongst the fountains and scented shade of the rich.

At times like these, finding peace in anonymity, I could only wonder, if I gained such pleasure in slipping the bonds of kingship why I kept repeating my claim to a greater throne, a heavier crown? With the creak of timbers about me, the flapping shade of the sails, and a cool sea-breeze to take the sweat away, replying to such questions came hard. My fingers found the answer. A copper box, thorn-patterned. Even here, in the wide blue sea, driven by restless winds, the child would find me, and though the box might hold the worst of my crimes, enough of them still roamed free, such that if I ever lingered too long, however bright a paradise I may have found, the past would catch me up, rise around me in a dark tide, and devour peace.

If you must run, have something to run toward, so it feels less like cowardice. And if you must run to something, why not make it the empire throne? Something suitably distant and unobtainable. After all, getting everything you wish for is nearly as dire a curse as having all your dreams come true.

Yusuf Malendra came to stand beside me at the ship's rail. A tall man, slim, the wind billowing his loose cottons around him. Captain Akham introduced us as I boarded, the only other passenger other than Marco and me, but since then he'd hidden himself away - a difficult feat on a small ship. The modern, Marco of the long title, had thrown up over the side almost before we left harbour, nearly losing that fancy hat of his. He vanished below decks soon after. Perhaps Yusuf had been hidden down there too.

'Impressive is it not?' He nodded toward the Rock - Tariq's Mountain, miles behind us yet still huge.

'Very. This Tariq must have been a great king,' I said.

'Nobody knows. It's a very ancient name.' He gripped the rail in both hands. 'All our names are ancient. The Builders wrote their names in machines and now we can't read them. The suns burned all that was written on paper except the oldest of writings, that were stored in deep vaults, did you know that? The writings we found were the most precious, valued more for their antiquity than the secrets they held. When the lands became habitable and men crept back to them most of the records they recovered were the works of Greeks and Romans.'

'So we're behind the Builders in all things, even names?' A short laugh escaped me.

For a while we watched the gulls wheel, listened to their cries.

'You are visiting a relative in Maroc?' he asked. 'Getting married?'

'You think your ladies would like me?' I turned my burns toward him.

Yusuf shrugged. 'Daughters marry who their fathers tell them to.'

'And are you getting married?' I lifted my gaze from the slim and curving sword at his hip to the dark mass of his hair, an expanding confusion of tight curls, imprisoned with bone combs.

He threw his head back and laughed. 'Questions for questions. You're a man who's spent time at court.' He let the swell lean him back into the rail and shot me a shrewd look. 'I'm too old for more wives, Sir Jorg, and you perhaps think yourself too young for the first?' Dark lips framed his smile, darker than the caramel of his skin. I guessed he might be thirty, certainly no older.

I shrugged. 'Surely too young for any more. And to satisfy your curiosity, Lord Yusuf, I am merely travelling to see what the world has to offer.'

A wave slapped the hull sending up an unexpected spray over both of us.

The Marocan wiped his face. 'Salty! Let's hope the world has better to offer than that, no?' Again the grin, teeth long, even, and curiously grey.

I grinned back. An odyssey would have been all right with me, barring the drifting wreckage and the consumption of urine. One day at sea was too few. Besides, entering a new world deserves a journey of consequence, not just a hop across a thirty-mile channel.

'You will come and stay with me, Sir Jorg. I have a beautiful home. Come with me when we disembark. Let it not be said Maroc offers a poor welcome. I insist. And you can tell us what you hope to find in Afrique.'

'You honour me,' I said.

We stood without speaking for a time, watching the gulls again

and the white flecked waves, until at last the distant mist and haze offered up the mountains once more, the jagged coast of a new world. I wondered what I would tell my hosts when they asked at table what brought me there. I could give away my rank and speak of Congression, of how the provost of Albseat put into my mind that in Vyene the empire throne might be won in a different kind of game, with less bloodshed and more lying. And that to play in this new game I needed to know more about the key figures in the Hundred, more than they chose to show before the Gilden Gates. I could perhaps speak of the Prince of Arrow. Of how, more than the wind in the *Keshaf's* sails, his derision drove me to see the borders of empire for myself, to know what I would own, to give me better reasons for wanting it. And at the last, if foolishness took hold, I might speak of Ibn Fayed and of a mathmagician named Qalasaki. I had spent years in pursuit of revenge against an uncle who killed my mother and brother, and here was a man who would have slain all my mother's kin in one night and left me holding the blame. Surely he deserved no better than Uncle Renar got?

The port of Kutta sprawled across a long and dusty arc of coastline, hemmed between the sea and mountains that launched skyward, browns and dark clumps of greenery soon giving way to bare rock. We stepped ashore onto a long and rickety quay crammed with so many people it seemed that at any given moment a dozen of them threatened to fall into the water. I let Yusuf forge a path. The balance between the force that may be exerted in such endeavours and the nature of the response when offence is taken varies with geography. Rather than pitch headlong into a pointless fight mere yards into what I planned to be a long journey through Afrique, I let myself be led, and kept close and watchful.

There seemed no reason for the crowd, all of them but the half-naked Nubans swathed head to foot in robes, either white or black, most turbaned in the Maroc way, the shesh covering head and face, leaving just eyes to contend with. The noise also! A wall of sound, a harsh jabber, half-threat, half-joke. Maybe the peace of the voyage made it seem so, or it's that a throng is more raucous when the language is unknown to you, or perhaps just the heat and press of bodies amplified the clamour. Struggling behind Yusuf in that mass of humanity I knew that for the first time I had stepped into somewhere truly foreign. A place where they spoke a different tongue, where minds ran different paths. Maroc had been part of empire for centuries, its lords attended Congression still, but for the first time I had entered a realm that bordered kingdoms not ever part of empire. A place where 'empire' would not suffice but needed to be qualified with 'holy' for they knew of other empires. In Utter they call us 'Christendom' but in Maroc we are the Holy Empire, more fitting



since nineteen in every twenty of Maroc's people answer the adhan call when the muezzin sing from their minarets.

The crowd even had a different stink to it, spices overwriting any odour of unwashed bodies, mint, coriander, sesame, turmeric, ginger, pepper, others unknown, carried on the men themselves as if they sweated it out.

'Keep up, Sir Jorg!' Yusuf grinned over his shoulder. 'Show but the slightest interest and you'll be penniless by the time we reach the java house, laden down with rugs, brass lamps, enough dreamweed to kill a camel, and a hooka to smoke it through.'

'No.' I pushed aside embroidered rugs from two salesmen, passing between them as if through a curtained entrance. 'No.' They spoke empire tongue well enough when a sale stood in the offing. 'No.' Once more and we were through, crossing a wide and dusty square pursued by barefoot yammering children wearing dirty linens and clean smiles.

Hemming the far side of the square a dozen or so java houses opened with tables sprawling out into the shade from awnings in faded green and red, behind us the quays and ships - boats mainly, the larger ships tying up at more substantial quays before great warehouses further around the bay.

Apart from the children in their whites, and what could be old women or old men hunched in black wrappings, set on various slow journeys along the shaded margins of the square, nothing moved. The crowds through which we forged a path remained resolutely jammed along the narrow stilted walkways, their cacophony hushed behind us, mixed with the gentle threshing of ocean waves against breakwaters. The sun's heat pushed down, an immense hand, making even the flies struggle, stripped of their frenzy, languid almost.

A man approached us from one of the alleys between the shops, leading three horses, a tall araby stallion and two mares, all pale. Five such stallions had been part of the compensation Father accepted for Mother's and William's deaths.

'My man, Kalal. We can ride to my estate, or sit awhile first and watch the sea.' Yusuf gestured at the nearest and grandest of the java houses. 'You'll like the java in Maroc, Sir Jorg. Hot and sweet and strong.'

I didn't like the java in Ancrath or Renar, cold and sour and weak, and expensive, above all expensive. I doubted increasing its strength would change my opinion. Yusuf must have read my frown, though I had thought myself good at writing on my face only what I chose.

'They serve teas also. And I could introduce you to our national sport,' he said.

'Tea sounds promising.' Never refuse a drink in a dry place. 'And this sport, does it involve camels?'

Both men laughed at that. Kalal, perhaps a kinsman, had the

same colouring and, when he laughed, the same faintly grey teeth.

'Dice, my friend.' Yusuf set an arm about my shoulder. 'No camels. It is the game of twelve lines. Do you know it?'

'No,' I said. 'Show me.'

Yusuf steered me toward the tables where old men sat in white robes and red fez, smoking from their water-pipes, sipping from small cups, bent across their boards of triangles, counters, and dice. He barked two harsh words in the Berber tongue and Kalal led the horses off with one last grey grin.

'A game of chance?' I asked. Dice rattled in their shakers as we approached.

'A game of calculation, my friend. Of probability.'

I thought then of Qalasadi's black smile, of how the mathmagicians despite their science of numbers still kept to tradition and mystery to instil a magic beyond mere arithmetic. I wondered how such teeth might look with the stain of the betel leaf scoured away. Grey perhaps?

'Yes,' I said. 'I would like to play such a game. Tell me the rules. I always like to know the rules.'

### *Five years earlier*

The board lay between us, the game of twelve lines, counters marshalled, dice ready in the cup. I knew the rules well enough: we had the game in Ancrath, almost the same but named battamon. Yusuf's explanation of the mechanics gave me time to study him, to consider my options. The way he spoke of the game, of the combinations, the scatter of odds, and the basic strategies, all marked him out as a mathmagician. If not for the teeth though I might not have done my own arithmetic and added the two and the two.

'Why don't you go first?' I said.

He took the shaker and rattled the dice.

Clearly they had done their sums, worked a little magic, and anticipated me. Had they predicted me with certainty, or just mapped out the paths that I might take, weighted them with probabilities, and deployed their resources appropriately? Either way it unsettled me to find myself the subject of calculation.

Yusuf threw the dice, a three and a three. His hand moved almost too fast to see, clicking counters along the board.

'Don't expect me to do well, I'm a slow study.' I took the shaker and dice from him.

The Moor seemed relaxed. He could afford to be if he had me figured out, if he knew before I did what course I would take. How many slates had they covered with their equations, how many men passing their calculations back and forth to balance and simplify my terms? Did they know already at what point I might draw steel for an attack? Did a man stand ready for it at a dark window, crossbow wound and aimed at the spot I would choose? Did they know the hour when I might elect to slip away, or the direction I would take? If they all had Qalasadi's skill I would not be surprised to find they had already written down the next words to come from my mouth.

'Well that's not good!' A one and a two. I advanced my counters.

Yusuf shook the dice. All around us men played the game,

smoked, sipped their dark and bitter brews. From time to time a face would turn my way, lined and sun-stained, usually the grey hairs outnumbering the black. No smiles for the traveller here, nothing to read from those incurious eyes. I wondered how many of them worked for Qalasaki? All of them. Only Yusuf and his servant?

I could stand and make for the *Keshaf*, still tied at the quay. But they already knew if I would or not. Maddening.

Yusuf threw and took his move. White counters sweeping around the board. My tea arrived, and his java. Would it be poisoned? I lifted it to my lips.

'Oranges?'

'It is scented with the blossom of the orange tree,' Yusuf agreed.

If they had wanted me poisoned the deck-boy on the *Keshaf* could have put powders in the water he brought me. I touched the cup to my lips, a thin work of porcelain set round with a delicate pattern of diamonds. They would want me as a hostage for Ibn Fayed's war against my grandfather.

The tea tasted good. I threw the dice and made my moves, taking longer than I needed to puzzle them. Yusuf's next moves seemed wrong to me, not foolish, but overcautious. I reminded myself that even mathmagicians are fallible. They had meant to poison grandfather, and yet he lived. They had meant to further Ibn Fayed's cause, and yet a dozen and more highborn deaths along the Horse Coast were now piled at his door, dishonourable killings. The stench of them tainted his house.

I rolled the dice. Six and four.

Beneath the table my fingers curled around the hilt of my dagger. 'Do you know what I'm going to do next, Lord Yusuf?' I asked.

I could have the blade in his throat quicker than quick.

A slow smile. 'No, but I can guess.'

I took my move.

Yusuf hesitated a moment before scooping the dice into the cup. A frown creased his forehead. Perhaps he was recalculating.

While the Moor took his go I made a mental list. A list of six options, choices other men might make.

1. 1) Rike: Reach out, catch Yusuf behind the head and slam his face very hard into the table. Go with the flow thereafter.
2. 2) Makin: Make a new friend. Turn on the charm.
3. 3) Gorgoth: Part company without fuss. Take a path to protect those most depending on me.
4. 4) Father: Purchase whichever loyalties can be bought. Dispense

whatever justice can be paid out without loss. Return home to consolidate my strengths.

5. 5) Gomst: Pray for guidance. Follow Yusuf, obey the rules, run when a chance presents itself.
6. 6) Sim: Show no defiance. Go with Yusuf and his man. Murder them both in a lonely spot. Continue on disguised as the Moor.

The dice came my way again. I picked one out. If I let the die choose, if I let chance decide among unlikely options, that might break the network of prediction that had me snared.

'Maybe one at a time will improve my luck,' I said.

Yusuf smiled but said nothing, watching with intent.

I rolled the die. Predict this!

A two. Make a friend? Damn that!

I set the second cube spinning across the table. *Alea iacta est*, as Caesar put it. The die is cast. I would tie my fate to this one.

It spun for an age on one corner, caught an edge, clattered off the table. Yusuf bent to follow it and brought it up in his hand. 'Another two!'

Damnation.

I moved my counters, hoping for some kind of inspiration. Yusuf was already pretending to be my friend. How to turn that into something real I hadn't a clue. In fact I wasn't entirely sure I understood the difference.

A disturbance in the white heat outside caught my eye. A hunch-backed giant in black mobbed by a sudden crowd? No, mobbed by children, a man surrounded by ragged children as he dragged something across the square.

'Your pardon, Yusuf.' I stood, rewarded by momentary confusion in the Moor's eyes.

Short steps and sharp turns brought me through the clustered tables and into the sunlight. The modern in his blacks, his hat dangerously askew, pulled on his trunk whilst the children, mocked, taunted, threw pebbles, or tried fishing in his pockets.

'A friend in need ...' I shrugged and strode across, raising my arms and doing a passable impression of Rike scaring chickens to death. The children scattered and the modern managed to slip, losing his hat in the process. I scooped it up and had it ready as he got to his feet.

'Marco Onstantos Evenaline of the House Gold, Mercantile Derivatives South,' I said. 'How the hell are you?' And I handed over his ridiculous hat.

I hadn't formed an impression of the modern's age on the ship and even now it was hard to pin down. Beneath that hat Marco

maintained a wispy comb-over, pale hair failing to hide a fish-belly scalp. The style demonstrated a talent for self-deception – such a man could forgive himself anything.

'My thanks.'

I'd never heard thanks offered with less gratitude.

After close and suspicious examination of his headgear Marco settled it back in place and dusted down his jacket.

'The House Gold can't stretch to a porter and a guard?' I asked, watching a couple of the boldest urchins edge from the shadows again.

'Not one at the quay could speak the empire tongue.' Marco frowned. 'They wouldn't take my coin.'

'Well I already told you I'd take your coin, banker.' I gave him what I hoped might be a friendly smile. I'm not used to pretending to like people. 'And I speak six languages.' I didn't mention that none of those were Moorish, but I find hand gestures and a sharp edge go a long way toward cutting through misunderstanding.

'No,' he said, quick enough that I thought he must have seen me for what I was the moment he laid those small black eyes upon me.

'I'll help you without charge, gratis, pro bono.' I tried a different smile, imagining Sir Makin stepping ashore with a joke to hand. 'You could use a friend, now couldn't you, Marco?'

At the last, still heavy with mistrust, the banker managed a smile, as ugly as mine felt. 'You can bring my trunk and find us some transport.' He held out a hand in its white cotton glove.

'Friend.'

I met his grip, a soft one, moist despite the glove, and released him quick enough. 'And where are we bound, Marco?'

'Hamada.' He pronounced the word carefully.

'And what's in Hamada?' I kept close watch on that pasty face, wondering once more if I were playing a game of chance or if chance were playing a game with me.

'Banking business,' he said, pressing thin lips thinner.

I nodded. Ibn Fayed had his palace in Hamada. There would be no banking business in that city that was not also Ibn Fayed's business.

The banker's trunk weighed far more than I had expected. I put my back into it and hauled it toward the java house, with new respect for the modern's strength. I'd worked up a good sweat by the time we reached the shade.

'If you'll attend the trunk for a moment, Marco, I will make my apologies to Lord Yusuf.'

I found Yusuf studying the board, his java cup resting at his lips.

'I'm not a lord you know, Sir Jorg. We have our rulers on the north coast, sultans, caliphs, emperors, all sorts. And below

that we have a vast array of princes, more than you can count, some as poor as mice. Anyone you meet with silks or a jewel who does not declare themselves a merchant will be a prince. And beneath the princes, beneath the ones with lands and great houses at least, you have the friends of princes, most often soldiers, but sometimes sages. When our patron calls we are at their service - when they do not call we are our own men.

'So, you will journey with this modern? You should come to my home, meet my wives, eat pomegranate, try roast peacock. But you won't. Travel with the modern then, and take a care, my friend. The man is not welcome. No harm will be done to him but the desert is a hard place without the support of fellow men. And strangers, men like yourselves from gentler lands, will die in the Margins before you even reach the sand.'

I held out my hand and he took it, his grip firm and dry. 'Sometimes men must take their chances,' I said, and leaning in I took the nearest die. 'If I may. You never know when one of these might save your life.'

'Go with God, Jorg of Ancrath,' he said and returned to the study of the board.

## *Five years earlier*

Marco stood beside his trunk, stiff, uncomfortable in his frock coat.

'Is there a law says you can't take that off?' I grinned and took hold of his half-ton trunk.

'Your breastplate must chafe in this heat, Sir Jorg?'

I had strapped it back on as we came into port. Not something to go overboard in, but worth suffering ashore.

'The blacks will stop a dagger thrust?' I asked.

'Tradition will stop anyone from trying,' Marco said.

The banking clan privileges hadn't meant much to me as a road-brother but certainly in the courts of the Hundred and in the corridors of Vyene they were afforded protections above that of kings.

'Let's find us some transport.' I nodded down the largest of the alleys leading from the plaza. All the streets in Kutta looked to be narrow, hemmed in by tall buildings to manufacture shade. A tight fit for wagons, but the serious cargos would be unloaded further down the coast at Tanjer, a larger and more commercial port.

Marco followed me, keeping his distance as if spurning my protection and putting me firmly into the role of porter. Perhaps he was safer than I. Men everywhere knew that to strike down a modern was to open an account with the clans, and that gold would spill from Florentine coffers until the debt had been paid, the ledgers balanced. In a broken empire though, the promise of eventual death on an assassin's blade proved less protection than the bankers might have hoped when set against the certainty of immediate gold. Perhaps in less wild and more honourable lands the moderns' traditions offered more surety. Certainly the Moors held merchants in high esteem and kept better order than we did in the lands closer to Vyene.

Dragging that trunk in search of stables, my decision to leave Brath safe in the care of a Port Albus farrier seemed more foolish by the yard. By the time we reached what I was looking



for the curses were spitting from me, sweat dripping, arms burning. It appeared to be a stable of sorts. Camels lounged around a covered water-trough, mangy beasts with clumped collars of moulting fur and cracked skin around their knees. I'd met a camel before, long ago in Dr Taproot's circus. A surly creature, ungainly and given to spitting. These looked no better.

'Wait there.' I stood Marco out of sight.

I knocked at a door of bleached and fractured planks, answered in time by an old man with one milky eye. In the shadows behind him I heard the snort and clomp of horses.

'*As-salamu alaykum.*' I wished peace upon the old thief. All horse-traders are thieves. 'Two mounts and a pack-mule.' I held up three fingers and in the other hand a gold florin stamped with grandfather's face, and I finished with, '*Insha'allah.*' Thereby exhausting all the local phrases I'd learned from Yusuf on our crossing.

He watched me with his good eye, running fingers over his chin, white stubble, skin the colour of java and milk. A shadow fell across us, a man on camelback. I glanced at him, a warrior riding high on the saddled hump, all black wrappings, just the flash of eyes in the slit of his shesh. He moved on.

'Two horses,' I repeated.

The old trader spouted gibberish at me and waved his hand in negation. He knew what I wanted, nobody with something to sell in Kutta lacks the rudiments of empire tongue required to conduct a sale.

'Two!' I added a second coin and rubbed them between finger and thumb.

It hurt him to do it but he shook his head and stamped off muttering. The door shuddered closed.

'They really don't want you getting to Hamada, Marco.'

I crossed over to him. He scowled each time I said his name, flinching at some breach of manners, some over-familiarity.

'Marco,' I said, leaning close enough to smell the sourness of him, 'it's a long walk. Have you no friends in Kutta?'

'No,' he said.

I wondered if he had any friends anywhere. Heading off across the desert to Hamada with him, horses or no horses, seemed a fool's errand. Someone with influence, quite possibly Ibn Fayed himself, did not want Marco to get there. Moreover, at least three mathmagicians appeared to have anticipated my arrival, which meant that Ibn Fayed knew my intentions. The only sensible course of action was to turn around and sail for Port Albus. Except that such a move would be encompassed in the calculations carried out long before my arrival by Yusuf, Qalasaki and others. To behave as predicted would only draw me deeper into their net. Perhaps into an arrest at the docks, or an accident at sea - arranged for my return trip whilst I had been playing the game of

twelve lines and sipping tea. Coming here in the first place had been a misjudgment - in truth an arrogance, a child's conceit.

'So what would you have me do, Marco?' Abandoning him to his fate seemed the most sensible choice. But the die had told me to make a new friend, and sensible choices were predictable choices, which this far into the net would like as not get me killed.

'I'll need a room.'

'That I can do.'

I went alone, collared a street urchin and let a copper coin lead us both to a guesthouse. The heavy and ancient door the boy took me to looked unpromising, sitting alone in a wide blank wall. When I knocked, a woman glared at us through the grille. A crone, older than the bleached wood and rusted nails she hauled open. Too wrinkled and bent to need a veil to keep her modest she cast a disapproving eye over me and led on in. The interior surprised me. A short corridor led to an inner courtyard where lemon trees grew in the shade of balconies rising four storeys on each side. Enamelled tiles decorated all surfaces, blue and white, geometrically patterned. An illusion of coolness, if not actual coolness.

I took two rooms, paid in coppers from half a dozen nations, and went to fetch Marco. He had waited where the crone couldn't see him through the grille and I let her complaints, the sharp and the guttural, run off me as I hauled his trunk through, the modern following in my wake.

'It's too small,' Marco said. Sweat ran off him in rivers but it didn't seem to bother him. I'd yet to see him drink. I wondered if soon he'd start to shrivel. Something about him called to the death-magic in me, to the necromancer's heart. It tingled at my fingertips.

'Too small for what?' I collapsed onto the trunk. Dragging it up two flights of stairs had half-killed me.

Marco scowled. I had expected bankers, especially travelling bankers, to be closer to diplomats, masters of their own demeanour, but this one made no effort to hide his distaste for me. Perhaps he hoarded his charm along with his gold, for I'd yet to see so much as a glint of either.

'You owe me for the room, and the guide, banker.'

'Guide? A child in rags led you off.'

'A child that I paid,' I said, still flat out on the trunk.

'I am keeping tally, Sir Jorg. Now, if you will afford me some privacy ...'

I levered myself up and went to my room where I collapsed again. I lay with closed eyes imagining the sharp winds over the icy shoulders of Halradra. In six months I had crossed half the empire. And like Goldilocks with her bears and porridge, I'd found parts too hot and parts too cold. And for the first time I wanted to be back in the Highlands, back where it felt just

right. For the first time I thought of my kingdom as home.

When you stare at the cracked blankness of a ceiling your mind will wander. Mine made a list. A list of reasons that brought me here. A list of the answers I would give to that question. None of them sufficient on their own but together a compelling force that had driven me into this foolishness. Orrin of Arrow had sent me, with his talk of oceans and distant lands. Perhaps I thought that with broad horizons of my own I could capture some of whatever magic he held. Fexler Brews had sent me with his little red light, now blinking over the caliphate of Liba. Curiosity had led me into the Iberico and tied me to the Bad Dogs' torture pole. It would be fair to say curiosity had its hooks in me. Short of opening a certain box curiosity could get me to do most things. Qalasadi had sent me with his treachery. Ibn Fayed with his threat. Grandfather when he judged me worth saving and told me not to go. In the end perhaps, though I called it vengeance, it was not this time the need to strike back that drove me but the need to defend. I had a family.

Long ago my mother had charged me to look after William, to keep my little brother safe. And though I have failed many duties since, that was the first of my failures and the one that bit deepest - deeper than the thorns whose scars record the event. Like Marco I had ledgers to balance, and though this duty was a poor substitute, I would see it through. I had a family once more. That old man in his castle by the sea. The old woman who loved him and who had loved my mother. My uncle, soldier though he was. And no thorns to hold me back. A threat hung over them and this time nothing, man or monster or ghost, would keep me from saving them.

Clarity of vision is a thing much prized. I find when you turn that clear sight upon yourself - and see through to the truth behind your own actions - it might be better to be blind. For the bliss of ignorance I would tell myself that only vengeance drew me, as it did of old, when choice lay black and white like pieces on a board, and life was a simpler game.

The heat, the immediate quiet, and the faint sounds that distance made familiar - smoothed of their alien edges - all conspired to lull me to sleep. A buzzing brought me to my senses, reaching for the knife at my hip. Something on my chest? I slapped a hand to the hot metal of my breastplate. The buzz again, as if a huge fly had crawled beneath the armour and become trapped.

Cramped fingers found the buzzing thing between iron, cloth, and sweating flesh. I fished it out. The Builders' view-ring! I took the thong that held it from around my neck and let the ring make slow revolutions. It buzzed once more, tiny vibrations seen only as a blurring of the surface. I held it to my eye and at once the whole of the wall between my room and Marco's became

over-written with pulsing red light.

'Curious.'

I moved to the wall and set my ear to it. The sounds of a conversation reached me, too indistinct to make out the words or even the language. Outside my window the balcony overlooking the lemon trees served all the rooms. I slipped out and edged to Marco's window. He had the shutters closed.

Any in the courtyard below who chose to look up, or any guest on their balcony, would see me. However, the banking clan seemed less popular than genital warts in Kutta so I thought it unlikely that anyone would complain about my spying. In fact the lack of attention I was getting made me sure that they were all busy spying on me.

I set an eye to the shutter slats. I shouldn't have been able to see much, looking from the brightness of the day into the gloom of a shuttered room. The Builder ghost glowed with its own light though, described in whites from bone to magnolia, and so I had no trouble seeing it, or in seeing Marco, cast into pasty relief by the pale illumination.

Spying is well and good, but in general I don't have the patience for it, and what patience I do have is soon lost when it gets hot. I dug my fingers between the slats and wrenched the shutters open. The catch came free and skittered across the floor, fetching up against the polished leather of Marco's shoe. I stepped in and closed the shutter behind me.

'So sorry.' I sketched the faintest of bows. 'But I really wanted to see what you were up to.'

The modern staggered back, his face twisted halfway between murder and terror.

The trunk lay open at the centre of the room, the bed set on end and leaning against the door to make space. Inside, the sharkskin exterior gave over to metal, plasteek, and muted patterns of light beneath glass that reminded me of the hidden panel at the weapon vaults beneath Mount Honas.

'Ah, the aberration.' This Builder ghost spoke with none of Fexler's warmth, dropping each word stillborn. He looked younger, maybe thirty, maybe forty, hard to tell in a picture drawn from shades of pale. His clothes too were different, many layers, close-tailored, buttons along the front, a breast pocket.

'Aberration? I like that. I've been called many things, but you're the first to use "aberration". And what should I call you, ghost?'

'Kill him!' Marco hissed, his hat held to his chest like a talisman.

'Well that's no way to treat a friend.' I gave Marco my smile, the one with edges, then looked to the data ghost. 'Instead of that why don't you tell me how it is that you need Marco here to drag you halfway across Maroc when you should be able to look out

of a thousand hidden eyes, step out of all manner of hidden doors in scores of nations? And what do you want with Ibn Fayed?’

‘You may call me Michael.’ The ghost grinned, a smile selected from one of thousands stolen from the Michael made of flesh, a man now centuries old dust. A real smile but somehow wrong, as if sewn into position on a dead man’s face. ‘And I need to be carried because Ibn Fayed has a new faith - one that bids him seek out any trace of the Builders and erase it. Which of course answers your question about my business with him, Jorg.’

‘Well and good then. I too have business with the man. It’s just the getting there that is proving problematic. Perhaps you have some wonder of the ancients that will fly us all there like birds?’

Marco snorted, managing contempt. But the Builders had flown. I knew it from my father’s library.

‘Well?’ I asked. If this turn of events lay within the mathmagicians’ calculations then I may as well have admitted defeat - but given that I didn’t think it did fall within their plotting, I found renewed interest in crossing the desert to the court of Ibn Fayed with my two new friends.

‘I can do better than that, Jorg of Ancrath,’ Michael said. ‘We can go by ship.’

## 31

Sleep became a rare commodity after the arrival of our newest travelling companion. Day by day Gottering fell further behind us. On the fifth day, Captain Harran declared we would push on through the night to reach Honth by dawn. On that long and rumbling journey a moment of quiet visited and exhaustion dragged me down quicker than the mud of Cantanlona. Jolted by rutted miles, the occupants of Holland's carriage exchanged partners periodically. I rolled open a sleep-burred eye at one such bump to see Osser Gant's grey head cradled in the bishop's lap. Another lurch took my head from Miana's shoulder, another still put Katherine's head on mine.

In the darkness of my dreaming Katherine's skin burned against me, but we shared nothing save warmth. When she lifted me from my quiet nightmare of thorns and rain she gave no warning.

'Katherine?' I knew her touch. Perhaps my show and tell of childish woe hadn't scared her from my dreams as well as hoped. Perhaps like me she merely thought how stupid I had been to let old Bishop Murillo capture me in the first place. I have the church to thank for teaching me that last lesson in reading the signs, in seeing the trap rise around you, in never lowering your guard. A lesson that has served me well.

'Katherine?'

A dark hall. I moved through bars of moonlight behind shuttered windows. My head turned for me, my fingers trailed the wall without asking permission. Familiar. All of it familiar, the hall, the smell of the place, the roughness of the wall, and of course, the being trapped in another's head. Steps down, a long and winding stair.

'This is like that night at the Haunt – when the Pope's man came calling,' I said, though no lips moved to speak my words.

The end of the stair. I turned a corner. Familiar, but not the Haunt. More steps down. My hand – his hand – took an oil lamp from its niche.

'Katherine!' I made my silent voice louder, more demanding.

‘Ssh! You’ll wake him, you idiot.’ Her voice seemed to come from a deep place.

‘Wake who?’

‘Robart Hool of course! Your spy back at the Tall Castle.’

A door. Hool’s fingers on the black iron of its handle.

‘If he’s my spy why are you using him?’ Espionage was never my forte but I had been rather proud of having a man so high in the king’s guard on my payroll. Until now.

‘Sageous opened him up to true-dreams,’ Katherine said from her well. ‘He sleepwalks and the castle guard know not to wake him or there can be trouble. He’s good with a sword. I use him so I can watch over Sareth when I’m not there.’

‘And now—’

‘Ssh!’

‘But—’

‘Shut. Up.’

Hool moved through the doorway and along a corridor, shadows swinging around him. We came to the Short Bridge, a yard of mahogany crossing over the recess from which a steel door could be summoned to seal the vaults. He crossed over and started down the steps beyond.

It grew colder. We were no longer in the keep of the Tall Castle but below it in a long Builder-made corridor that leads by zigs and zags through the upper vaults to an ancient annex excavated by the dear departed House of Or. Built to house their dead. Less ancient than the castle itself of course, but having the decency to wear its years more openly. In the tomb-vault the walls ran with cracks and in places the stone facings had fallen to reveal rough-hewn rock scarred by pick marks.

Hool’s feet slapped bare on cold stone, his nightclothes thin comfort against the subterranean chill, but his scabbard bumped against his legs, a better kind of comfort altogether. Sleepwalking or no, a swordsman always buckles on his blade. Makin taught him well, back in the days of wooden swords in the courtyard. I hope he’d learned the lesson I taught him too, that afternoon in the duelling square when I stepped outside the rules of the game and felled him with a punch to the throat.

Hool’s footsteps echoed and his breath steamed before him. When the Ancraths displaced the Ors my ancestors were quick to empty the mausoleum, turning out each sepulchre ready for fresher occupants. And in

time we started to fill the place. The old statues were replaced, or sometimes just altered. With creditable economy and lack of sentiment my great-grandfather had the masons chip the moustache from the founder of the Or dynasty, reshape his nose a little, and stand over my great-great-grandfather's corpse in passable representation of the man.

If Katherine used Hool to watch over Sareth, why were we in the tomb vault? Unless of course Sareth had died? What did Katherine want to show me? Another death to stain my hands? Or was she leading me to the place where she had me dragged on the day I returned from Gelleth, where she took me to keep my father from finishing what he started? Reminding me of the life I owed her? He would have cut my heart out if that had been required to stop it from beating, I know that much. Were we returning to Mother's tomb?

The image of a sunlit surface woke in me. A surface high above me. The pressure of cold water. And floating from those depths came a memory that seemed less real now in the Tall Castle, in the house of the Ancrath dead, than it had in the mists of Gottering. My father was dead? I hadn't spoken of it to anyone. Katherine had shown me ghosts were made of dreams. The lichkin could have lied to me – she must have been lying to me. That old man was too mean to die. Especially a soft death in the comfort of a bed. Was that where we were going? Had we come for that? To see him in his tomb?

We turned a corner to see a light vanishing around the next turn thirty yards ahead. I caught a glimpse of two men at the rear of the party before the corner took them. Something wrong about them – something familiar. The air held a sour reek.

People heading to the tombs. To where Mother and William lay beneath marble lids. Behind enchanted seals.

Hool sped up, no urgency in his movement, just a quicker pace, Katherine's touch light enough not to wake him, firm enough for acceleration. At the next turn we had clear view of the last three figures. Each a thing of sunken flesh, stained dark, not by sun but by mire, hair lank and patched, hanging down across black rags. They carried pipes and darts. Mire-ghouls.

How would such creatures have penetrated the castle? Why hadn't Katherine raised the alarm when she had the chance?

Another turn, the end of the Builder corridors, entering the decaying works of Or now.

Why hadn't Katherine raised the alarm? Because that would wake Hool up



and she'd lose her eyes in Ancrath, she wouldn't know the reasons. And after all, reasons can be worth their weight in gold. Fexler had sent me to his tomb to put a proper end to his remains, to bring him into his full strength. The dead were not so different. Necromancers returned them to their flesh or bones to find their strength once more. But what drew them here?

Dust hushed Hool's footsteps now. Unlike every other cellar in Crath City, mouldering and dank, some magic in the Builder foundations kept the vaults dry as bones. A parched and whispering place like the dry-lands where souls fall.

The oldest of my relatives lay furthest back, great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, grandfather, wives, brothers, sisters, also lesser-born Ancraths who were, despite the cardinal sin of their birth, great champions. A horde of them, all but forgotten. Statued relics staring into dark infinity above old bones. But the glow came from a closer set of steps leading to a chamber better known to me.

Robart Hool's fingers closed around the hilt of his sword.

'Don't! He'll wake up!' Katherine's voice, in my ear or in his, I couldn't tell.

The sword whispered from its sheath, a decent blade from the forge of Samath down by the Bridge of Change, runed for sharpness. Ahead of us the ghouls would be entering Mother's tomb.

'I won't let him.' Quite how I would stop Hool waking wasn't something that concerned me. Perhaps just wanting it enough would make it happen in this world the Builders had left us. Though whatever Fexler said it seemed that wanting seldom made it so.

Katherine had set Hool striding – I made him sprint, whipping his sword in a figure eight to get a sense of its weight and balance. I don't know quite how I worked his strings. It's possible Katherine took pity on me and lent her strength, but I've found that when my blood kin are threatened, even when they're dead already, my will takes on an edge.

When you've committed yourself to violence it takes an almost inhuman effort to stop short. It's one of those things that once you've started need to be finished, rather like coitus, interrupting that's a sin, even the priests say so. I stopped though, and Robart Hool didn't wake. Charging in would likely provide a fresh corpse for the ghouls, and whatever friends might be accompanying them, to play with. But to raise the alarm might take us too far away, take too long, and let the invaders escape with whatever prize they

came for.

Instead I ran Hool back up the corridor, up the steps, to the Short Bridge. He reached it breathing more heavily but not winded. In wall recesses to either side of the bridge lay silver panels with smooth silver buttons. Some combination of the buttons would raise the door, an implacable slab of Builder steel from which a thousand swords might be forged – one of the Ancrath treasures.

I'd never seen the door raised. No one had ever told me which buttons to push.

'Father never dreamed the combination for you I suppose?' I asked.

Katherine didn't reply but Hool shuddered for her. I wondered if Father's dreams were too dark for her to tread.

'Fuck it.'

I drove Hool's blade through the panel. The door slammed up with such speed that one of the balanced planks hadn't time to fall away. It became splinters. Along the corridor behind me glow-bulbs flickered on in several places, creating islands of reddish light. In some distant place a siren started up, sounding for all the world like the voice of the Connath watchtower, though I doubted three strong men had taken to the winding handle of some similar device. This voice came more crisp, more clear, the work of a more ancient machine. Where the running and the stabbing and the crashing of steel doors had failed, this distant wailing started to undo my grip on Hool, peeling my fingers back one at a time, lifting him from sleep as if he were a diver in some dark sea now struggling for the shimmer of the surface. I pressed him down again, the action pushing me toward that surface, at once both close and far away. The sounds of the carriage started to leak into my ears, the creak of the frame, rumble of wheels, Gomst's snores.

'No.'

Hool and I ran back, bare feet slapping, following the turns as if remembering a waking dream that is slipping through your grasp even as you seize it.

*Close now. One more corner.*

Darts came hissing out of the darkness. One struck the oil lamp and glanced away. The other sunk into Hool's chest, the thick pectoral muscle on the left. A small red circle grew around the black shaft of it.

*Keep running. Keep dreaming.*

Hool proved to be too fast on his feet and the line of sight too short for a

second volley. He threw the lamp and raced after it rather than run while splashing oil with each step. The lamp shattered against the wall where the corridor turned, the bloom of fire silhouetting two ghouls, lurking at the corner, quick fingers pushing new darts into their blowpipes. He reached them as they drew breath for their shots. The swing of his sword destroyed both pipes. They moved swift and sure, these creatures, different from the dead men Chella set walking, corrupt but alive, once men perhaps but shaped by the poisons of the promised lands.

Both leapt for us, and Hool's next slash opened one in the air, shoulder to hip, pale grey guts slopping out in a welter of black blood. The other bore him to the ground, talons in his shoulders, grey teeth filed to points snapping before his face. With the sword trapped between us and the ghoul Hool could do little but roll and push. The creature hadn't much weight to it, maybe half of what a grown man might weigh, but its wiry limbs held a fearsome strength. Its breath stank of graves, and those teeth straining so hard to close on flesh put a horror in me even though it wasn't my face it wanted to eat off the bone.

Desperation lent Hool the brute force needed to win free. He lifted himself off the ghoul using the sword between them as a bar. Its talons raked his shoulders, the blood spattering down across its chest. Panting and cursing Hool pinned the ghoul with his knees and turned the blade to skewer it through the neck.

He cast around, wild, lost. It occurred to me that despite the blood spilling down our chest, soaking scarlet into our nightshirt, I felt no pain.

'Jorg! Wake up!' Katherine's voice in my ear, the warmth of her breath on my neck, the rumble of the carriage behind her.

No.

Hool turned to follow on.

No.

I pushed the image of the dart into his eyes, hanging to him by fingertips.

He reached to pull it free. The thing held tight, tenting his flesh around it as he tugged. *Just a thorn! One sharp yank, rip it out barbs and all, let it bleed clean.* And he did.

'God damn it!' He spat blood, looked around again. 'Where the hell?' I felt his lips move, felt Katherine shaking me half a thousand miles away.

Images from his dream got him moving again. Things he'd seen with his own sleeping eyes. The door sealing the vaults, a third ghoul, maybe more

entering the Ancrath tombs. I fed him my anger too, burning against the numbness that would be tingling in his fingers by now.

Not so far ahead, the sound of a hammer striking iron, again and again.

Somehow I hung on as he ran, leaving the dying glow of the broken lamp behind us. A hard left into darkness and ahead of us, in the stolen burial chambers of the House of Or, another glow. Slower now. Slow, up the steps to Mother's tomb, the intruders' light catching gleams from Hool's blade, still slick with the black blood of ghouls.

And there in the light of a single lantern, a third ghoul and three dead men, their stained flesh marked with the scale tattoos of Brettan sailors, all of them watching the fifth of their party, a pale man, black-cloaked, black-cowled, kneeling by the smaller of the two sarcophagi, chipping with hammer and chisel at the runes set around its lid.

To his credit Hool made no challenge or battle-cry. He moved in behind them without hesitation, lined up his swing, and carved halfway through the ghoul's head. Even as Hool attacked I wondered at the dead men watching. The minds of such things are filled with the worst of what once lived there, and idle curiosity is not a sin, at least not one dark enough to return to a corpse. And yet they watched the tomb, avid, careless. Hool wrenched his blade free and hacked the head from the first of the dead men before the other two turned. Not a perfect swing, but he had some skill, did Master Hool and while his sword kept its fine-honed edge it would forgive him his minor errors.

The dead men came at him, faster than I had hoped. Released from their fascination with my brother's tomb they proved a different proposition from the shambling dead more often encountered. Hool chopped the arm from one, taking it at the elbow. The dead man caught Hool's sword arm in its remaining hand, and the second threw itself at his legs.

As Hool went down, the necromancer rose.

I may not have counted Robart Hool high in my esteem, but he died well. He took the sword from his trapped arm and rammed it left-handed through the neck of the corpse man falling to cover him.

Pinned by the one-armed corpse, grappled at the legs with the other dead man biting flesh from his thigh, Robart roared and fought to rise. The necromancer came in fast and touched cold fingers to the wrist of the hand straining to free the sword. All the fight left Robart. Not the pain, not the horror of the dead man's teeth chewing at the tendon high on his thigh, but

the fight. I knew what a necromancer's touch could do.

The dead sailor kneeled then stood, its grin crimson, blood dripping from its chin. The eyes that watched us weren't the eyes it first saw us with. Something looked through them. The necromancer kneeled, paler now, more pale than I thought a man could be.

'My lord,' he said, not lifting his gaze from the flagstones. 'My king.'

'My lord!' Gomst's shrill voice.

'My king!' Osser Gant.

'Wake up you fool boy!' A sharp slap and I found myself looking into Katherine's eyes.

'Damn you all!' Miana said, and the baby started howling.

‘Hold the baby, Jorg.’

Miana thrust our son at me, red-faced in his swaddling cloths, drawing breath for a howl. She clambered onto the carriage bench and knelt up at the window to peer out. The walls of Honth made a dark line to the west.

Little William reached capacity and made the slight shudder that presaged a yell. He couldn’t manage much volume yet but the mewl of babies has been designed with great cunning to tear at an adult’s peace of mind, parents especially. I shoved the knuckle of my little finger into his mouth and let him forget the scream while he gave it a vicious gumming.

Katherine sat beside me watching my son with unreadable eyes. I hugged him close, my breastplate now strapped to Brath’s saddlebags in its wraps of lambskin and oilcloth. I’d found babies don’t appreciate armour. William spat my knuckle out and drew breath for another attempt at yelling. He’d come into the world red-faced, bald but for black straggles, skinny in the limbs, fat in the body, more of a little pink frog than a person, drooling, malodorous, demanding. Even so I wanted to hold him. That weakness that infects all men, that is part of how we are made, had found a way into me. And yet my own father had set it aside, if it ever once found purchase on him. Perhaps it became easier to set me aside as I grew.

The howl burst out of William’s little mouth, a sound too big for such small frame. I jiggled him quiet and wondered just how large a stick I’d given the world to beat me with.

I watched Katherine for a moment. We hadn’t spoken of the night’s dreaming. I had questions and more questions, but I would ask them without an audience and at a time when I could take a moment to settle around whatever answers she might have. She didn’t meet my gaze but studied my son instead. I had worried once that she might mean him harm but it seemed hard to imagine now, with him in my arms.

‘There’s someone close by who would kill that child given the slightest

chance.’ Katherine looked away as she spoke, her voice low as if it were a small matter, almost lost in the rattle of the carriage.

‘What?’ Miana turned from the window grille, fast, eyes bright. I didn’t think she had been listening, but it seemed she paid close attention to whatever passed between my aunt and me.

‘If I explain, I want your word that this person will be safe from you and your men, Jorg,’ Katherine said.

‘Well that doesn’t sound like me, now does it?’ I made an effort not to let the tension in my arms crush William. Miana reached for her baby, but I held him closer. ‘Suppose you tell anyhow.’

‘Katherine!’ Miana reached across me for Katherine’s hand. ‘Please.’

For a moment I saw the red explosion of Miana’s firebomb in the Haunt’s courtyard. It would not go well if Katherine refused her.

‘The man rides under the Pax Gilden,’ Katherine said.

The guard would kill anyone who tried to attack him, hunt down anyone who succeeded in killing him. Just as they would intervene in, or avenge, any violence in our carriage.

‘You’re not Father’s only representative.’ I should have realized from the start, but finding Katherine in the Ancrath carriage threw off my game. ‘He found a replacement for Lord Nossar.’

She nodded. ‘Jarco Renar.’

‘Cousin Jarco.’ I leaned back in my seat and unclenched the fingers knotted in William’s cloths. I’d heard no report of the man since he escaped his failed rebellion in Hodd Town. That had been a year before the Prince of Arrow arrived at my door. We had us a murderous little struggle: civil wars are always brutal, old wounds left too long festering get to spill out their poison over new generations. The battles left the Highlands weakened, short on men, and empty-coffered. I had thought Jarco’s funds came from Arrow, but perhaps Father had been spending my inheritance.

Nothing would please Jarco more than getting his hands on my son. After all, I killed his brother at Norwood, took his father at the Haunt, and usurped his inheritance. And of course he had his fair share of the family flair for vengeance. I wondered if he were riding as one of the guard. Perhaps he convinced them it was the only way to keep him safe from me. Or they might have him hidden among the straggle of camp-followers reaching back behind us. Finding him would not be easy.

‘How could you not have mentioned this before?’ Miana asked, hands

whitening around Katherine's. 'He could have attacked any of us.'

'William is not under the guard's protection,' I said. Jarco wouldn't sell his life just for a chance at mine, but he could kill my son and have the guard defend him. That might strike him as an opportunity too good to miss. Quite the joke.

'Well put him under the guard's protection!' A certain shrillness entered Miana's voice. Katherine winced, though whether from the volume or beneath Miana's grip I didn't know.

'Children may not be advisors or representatives.' She knew the rules as well as I. On the bench opposite the old men nodded their heads.

'But—' Miana hushed as I gave her back our child and went to the door. I hung half-out, over the mud and ruts, and hollered for Makin. He rode up sharp enough.

'I want you all around the carriage – Jarco Renar is armoured in gold and looking for a way to reach Prince William.'

Makin glanced around at the nearest riders. 'I'll kill him myself.'

'Don't. He's under the Pax.' As I said it I wondered whose life I might be prepared to spend for Jarco's death. I waved Makin closer and leaned in so only he would hear me. 'On second thoughts, I always knew I kept Rike around for a reason. Tell him there's a hundred gold ducets for him if he kills Jarco. He'd best be prepared to run afterward, though.'

Makin nodded and hauled on his reins.

I called after him. 'A hundred gold and five Araby stallions.' It seemed fitting somehow.

'You!' I shouted to the nearest guardsman. 'Get Harran here.'

The man nodded his golden helm and spurred off toward the head of the column.

'Give me Makin and Marten and we'll ride home to the Highlands,' Miana was saying behind me.

'I would give you Rike and Kent and Gorgoth as well and you still wouldn't be safe, Miana. We're too far from home in lands that love us not.'

By the time Captain Harran drew level, flanked by two other troop captains, Katherine and Miana were arguing in fierce whispers with William interjecting the odd protest.

Harran lifted his visor. 'King Jorg.'

'I will speak with Jarco Renar,' I said.

'Jarco Renar is under my protection. I have advised him not to show



himself to you, in order to avoid any unpleasantness.'

'Oh I can assure you, Captain, there will be far more unpleasantness if you don't bring him before me.'

Harran smiled. 'Jorg, I have nearly five hundred of the emperor's best soldiers here precisely to make sure that you can't hurt Jarco Renar and Jarco Renar can't hurt you. Getting our charges to Vyene is what we do. By my count you have four men with you capable of bearing arms. Best let us get on with our job, no?'

'That's King Jorg to you, Captain Harran,' I said.

The four men he mentioned had joined us now. In truth I had three since Gorgoth was his own man and would be as likely to stand with the guard as with me.

A slap to the carriage's side brought us to a halt. 'Would you hand me that, Lord Makin?' I pointed to the Nuban's crossbow, tied to Brath's saddle.

I took the bow, stepped down into the mud and crossed to the bank beside the road. The weight of their attention settled on me as I bent to wind the bow.

'The guard here are assigned to protect myself, Lord Makin, and my advisors?' I didn't look up.

'Yes,' Harran said.

'And they would offer me violence under what circumstances?' I knew the rules. I wanted to hear Harran speak them.

'Quarrel,' I said, hand outstretched. Makin slapped an iron bolt into my palm.

'If you attempted to harm any of the Hundred, their advisors, or delegates.' Harran's stallion gave a nervous whinny and stamped.

'Makin, if you would be good enough to foreswear the need for any protection from me, as my banner-man. Just so there's no confusion.' I set the bolt in place.

'I do so swear,' he said.

I looked up, held Harran's dark stare, took his measure one last time. 'I like you well enough, Harran, but my son is in that carriage and Jarco Renar will like as not try to kill him since he is not under your protection. So, I need to speak with my cousin in order to reach some arrangement.'

'I've explained King Jorg, that cannot—'

I shot Harran in the face. He half-lurched, half-leapt from the saddle, caught by his stirrups he came to rest at an odd angle, almost jutting from the

side of his horse. The beast took flight, cantering back along the line, dragging Harran through the leafless hedges. His golden helm caught in the thorns and ripped free, blood dripping from it.

‘Quarrel,’ I said, hand out. Makin supplied one.

I started to wind the bow again.

‘Captain Rosson is it? And Captain Devers?’ My question caught them with blades half-drawn. ‘Why are you baring steel at me when your single most holy duty to the empire is my protection?’ All around me the guard were reaching for their swords, others urging their horses in closer to discover the cause of unrest.

‘You just shot Harran!’ Rosson, the man on the left, spat.

‘I did.’ I nodded. ‘I’m going to shoot you next. I figure I’ll be able to kill twenty of you before I need to start digging the bolts out of your corpses in order to continue. Now must I repeat my question? On what grounds are you drawing steel against me? I’m sure Captain Harran would not have approved. He at least knew his duty!’

‘I—’ Captain Rosson hesitated, his blade not yet clear of the scabbard.

‘Your duty, Captain, is to protect me. You can hardly do that by hacking at me with your sword now can you? The only circumstance that would permit you to attack me is if I threatened another of your charges. But I’m not doing that. I’m just going to kill the few hundred guard assigned to me.’

‘King Jorg – you— you can’t be serious,’ Captain Rosson said.

I failed to see how I could be more serious, but some men take time to adjust to unfamiliar circumstances.

ChooOOOoom.

Rosson hit the mud with a dull splat. At a range of two yards no breastplate, however fancy, is going to stop a crossbow bolt from a mechanism as heavy as the Nuban’s bow.

I set to winding again, starting to feel the ache in my bicep. ‘Captain Devers? Are you going to bring Jarco Renar to speak with me? Remember, if I try to kill him you can cut me to pieces.’

Rosson twitched in the mud. He tried to say something but only blood came out.

Miana and Katherine crowded the carriage door, Gomst peering over the pair. Osser Gant appeared to prefer his ledgers.

‘Jorg!’ Katherine’s hair fell around her in dark red curls, a heat in those eyes. ‘These are honourable men!’

‘And I am not.’ I held my hand out. ‘Quarrel.’

‘Men with families, lives to live ...’

Miana said nothing, her face held tight against emotion, my son clasped to her breast.

I ignored Katherine and addressed the guard instead, lifting my voice to carry on the cold afternoon breeze. ‘I quite liked Captain Harran. You saw where that got him. The rest of you I hardly know. My newborn son is at risk. I hunted down a lichkin to ensure his safety. Do you think I will flinch at murdering each and every one of you?’

‘I suggest Jarco Renar be brought before me, or this will not end well.’

Viewed along the length of my crossbow Captain Devers looked pale and unhappy. He had flipped up his visor to reveal a thin face decorated with scars and pockmarks, a short, dark beard hugging his chin.

‘Bring Renar here!’ he shouted.

While we waited I mounted Brath and backed him in a tight circle. He had been well trained and the smell of blood didn’t bother him. Captain Harran’s helm came free of the hedgerow thorns and I held it in one hand, the crossbow in the other, steering Brath with my knees.

Sir Kent clambered from his horse onto the top of the carriage. Choosing the right position had kept Kent alive more times than any armour or skill with a blade.

‘Bring me some more captains.’ I raised the crossbow toward Captain Devers again.

‘No wait!’ He put up his hands, as if that would stop a quarrel! ‘He’ll be here!’

‘But you will not.’ I squeezed the trigger, but before I’d applied sufficient pressure the guard ranks parted and Jarco Renar sat before me on a roan mare in golden armour. I turned the crossbow toward him.

‘I would have sent out someone else,’ I told him. ‘Just to see if I knew what you look like.’ It happened that I knew what he looked like, though we had never met.

Jarco hadn’t his brother’s chubbiness, or that deceiving amiability Marclos had. A taller man, broader in the shoulder, he had more of my uncle’s look about him, more of the Renar wolf.

I advanced Brath toward him. Hands tightened on sword hilts all around me.

‘Here.’ I gave Captain Devers the loaded crossbow, leaning in for a

conspiratorial whisper. 'If he attacks me be ready to shoot him. You're here to protect *me*, remember. Cousin Jarco has his own defenders, the guard who rode with him out of Crath City.'

I pulled Brath's head around. 'Jarco, so pleased you could join us.'

'Cousin Jorg.' His horse stepped around Captain Rosson who was taking a damned long time to die for somebody shot through the chest.

A squeeze of the knees brought Brath in closer. Harran's empty helm dripped dark blood on my leg.

'I'm not happy with you, Jarco,' I told him.

'Nor I with you, Cousin Jorg.'

'That rebellion of yours left me weak in the face of my enemies, Jarco.' With the soldiers lost taking Hodd Town back under control, the defence against the Prince of Arrow would not have been quite so desperate. The battle had left Hodd Town rather the worse for wear too, and it had been ugly to start with.

'You sit in my throne, Cousin.' He had a touch of Father's coldness in his eyes, and some of Uncle's wildness. I would have paid well to be a spy at court the day Jarco came to beg King Olidan's favour. How had my father greeted his nephew? 'You rule over my people,' Jarco said.

'They love me well.' I smiled to irk him. Jarco knew it for truth. Kings who bring victories are always loved and the price paid soon forgotten. The Highlanders had found new pride at being the centre of a realm of nations. As Uncle's subjects they had been a footnote in the business of empire, forgotten often as not. Happier, safer no doubt, but men will spend such coin to hold themselves in better esteem, for we are shallow creatures, brutish and raised on blood.

'What is it you want of me, Jorg?' He faked a yawn and stifled it.

'I note that you worry over your inheritance, Cousin, but you seem to have forgiven me for your father.' A shrug and a tilt of the head to show my puzzlement. 'And your sweet brother.'

'I do not forget them.' Muscles bunching around his jaw.

'Perhaps you would like something to remember them by, to remember your lost heritage? Your lost pride. It can be hard to lose your family.' I slid Gog from my scabbard, hilt toward my cousin. The blade had been Uncle Renar's, ancient work, forged from Builder steel and brought into Ancrath hands by my father's grandfather when he took the Highlands for his own as the empire crumbled.

Jarco took the sword, quick as you like. Better to have it in his hands rather than mine. I could see the hate burning in him. To some men there's no poison worse than a gift, none worse than a measure of pity. I would know.

'Of course,' I said. 'Should some harm befall me, should the Highlands ever cry for a trueborn Renar on the throne, it wouldn't be you who gets to wear the crown.'

The blade stood between us, his ancestral steel.

He frowned, black brows crowding. 'You make no sense, Ancrath. I hold title before that mewling babe of yours.' William let out an obliging cry before Miana stuffed his mouth again.

'But even in your grasping for your father's title, Jarco, you would admit that *his* right to it outweighs your own?'

'My father ... ?' The point of his sword, of the blade I'd named Gog, aimed at my heart. My breastplate lay neatly wrapped behind me, strapped to the saddlebags.

'I should have let Uncle die. A better man would have. But I do so enjoy our chats. Enough to walk down all those steps to the dungeon several times a week. He speaks of you often, Jarco. It's hard to understand his words these days, but I don't think Uncle Renar is well pleased with you.'

It took one more smile to make him crack. He had a quick arm, I'll give him that. Even deflected with Harran's helmet Jarco's thrust ran through my hair as I ducked.

ChooOOoom! And Captain Devers did his duty.

Jarco fell backwards off his nag, feet coming up out of his stirrups. I had to laugh.

Katherine jumped down beside him in the mud, careless of her skirts. Miana offered me a wordless stare. The look of someone who's got what they asked for, bitter or not, and knows it.

'You didn't have to kill him.' Katherine looked up with murder in her eyes. I like people who have the grace to show their anger.

'Captain Devers killed him,' I said, and took my bow back from the man in question and slung it over a shoulder.

'My apologies, Brother Rike.' I handed him Brath's reins and slid from the saddle. A few strands of cut hair floated down with me.

I scooped Gog from the dirt and wiped the blade clean on Rosson's cloak. He watched me from a white face.

'Did anyone ever once tell you I was a nice man, Rosson?'

He didn't answer. Dead at last perhaps.

Gorgoth loomed over me, silent, watching.

I looked up. 'I might have grown past the killing of men on a whim, Gorgoth, but be damned sure I consider the safety of my son more than a whim.'

I sheathed Gog then climbed back into the carriage. Miana waited with William, Osser with his ledgers, Gomst with God's judgment. I spoke to Katherine instead, down in the mud with Jarco.

'You know he had to die. Or at least you will know it in an hour, or a day. What makes us different is that I knew it from the moment you spoke. And in the end, my way is quicker, cleaner, and fewer people get hurt.'

## *Five years earlier*

'Very funny.' I wiped the camel spit from my leg.

My unnamed steed curled its lip, showing narrow and uneven teeth, then turned to face the backside of the camel ahead.

'When we're through with this journey I plan to buy you and eat your liver,' I told it.

Riding a camel is nothing like horse riding. You're a yard higher in the air and perched on a creature that regards you as an unforgivable insult. The beast's natural gait is designed to throw a passenger off at each stride, lurching you first forward and to the left, backward to the right, forward to the right, backward to the left, in endless repetition.

Om al, one of the drovers for the camel-train, came alongside. 'Sail him, Jorg. You came by sea, no? Sail him. Not horse - camel.'

Michael promised me a ship. The drovers' agents who came to our lodging to collect us for the 'train' had laughed at that. 'Camel! Camel! Ship of the desert, effendi.' And grinning like loons, as if to humour us, they had loaded Marco's trunk onto one of the beasts then led us away to join the caravan.

How Michael arranged to have us travel with the caravan I didn't know, but it seemed clear that whilst Hamada might be blocked to the Builder-ghosts, they still had ways into Kutta at times of need. I hadn't asked him. Instead I had seated myself in a wicker chair that looked too frail for the task and said, 'I would guess you're one of the ghosts that wants the Prince of Arrow for emperor so he can earn us the peace we need if we're to school ourselves for service to your machines.'

Marco's tight little mouth dropped open at that. Despite the common saying, there are few men whose jaws actually do drop in surprise. Marco's did, dry lips parting with an audible pop. I could have held tight to my knowledge, for such snippets can be a valuable commodity and the banking clans do so love to trade. However, Fexler had left me such meagre scraps I thought it better to spend them carelessly in the hope that scattering my

crumbs might convince others I had reserves of such lore and should be treated with respect.

I added, 'If you stood with those that want to burn all life from the world, well I'm sure you know of other places like the vaults in Gelleth where you could find enough fire and enough poison for the job?'

Marco's open mouth snapped closed and he turned to Michael, eyes blazing. It didn't seem to occur to him that I could be lying. An observation that I tucked away for future need.

I continued, 'In fact I'd like to know what stops them, these scorched-earthers, from wiping the slate clean? Does a war rage in all the Builder relics, humming to themselves in the dusts of the promised lands, scattered and hidden in cellars, secreted in luggage ... ?'

Michael's eyes were the least convincing part of his illusion, as though something wholly alien watched me through two holes punched into a man's face. I wondered what the real Michael had been like, and how far a thousand years had moved this creature from its starting template.

'It's very easy to kill most of the people,' Michael said. 'And very hard to kill absolutely all of them. To do so would require a consensus, cooperation between all, or almost all, of my people. Rather like Congression. Perhaps on the day you finally elect a replacement for your dead emperor you should start to worry that my kind might find a similar unity of purpose.'

'And what of Fexler Brews?' I would play a closer hand here. Fexler spoke of a third way, and neither of the first two were to my liking.

'Brews?' It heartened me to see the Builder ghost sneer. At least that much humanity persisted in the data echo. 'A servant, barely more than a maintenance algorithm. He is free to act now, but after a millennium on the margins of our world he is hardly the spokesman for you to listen to. Would you want me to judge you by the man who winds open your gate to let me in?'

As I swayed through the Margins, only a little more easy in my saddle than Marco lurching on the mount ahead of me, I knew Fexler Brews for what he was. A glorified gatekeeper with delusions of grandeur.

The Margins of the Sahar Desert are a vast and barren wilderness of cracked mud. A fissured geometry stretches across these lands, repeating at ever-larger scales, dust-blown, unbroken by mountain, lake, tree, or bush. In places the cracks are paper-thin, elsewhere you might stick your arm down them, and there are others still that would swallow a camel. Twisted creatures skulk in the fissures, hiding from the sun at



surprising depths where the mud still remembers ancient rains. In the darkness they emerge.

Our train comprised six score camels and fifty men to ride them, the desert Moors or Taureg as they called themselves. Most of the Taureg were traders, or drovers like Omal in their employ. They sold goods from the Port Kingdoms in Hamada, and returned with salt blocks. The salt they purchased from factors who in turn bought it from the Salash, almost-men, capable of enduring the oven heat of the deep Sahar where even the hardest of Moorish tribes could not travel.

Along with the merchants and their workers, a dozen Ha'tari accompanied us, warriors from a mercenary clan of great repute. They slouched on their mounts by day, dead to the world, and earned their keep at night, driving off predators that emerged from the cracked landscape.

On the first night of our journey around the camel-dung fires of Taureg we sat with our backs to the night and sipped hot java from cups no bigger than thimbles. I still hated the stuff but the expense made it an insult to refuse. The stars gave more light than the fire, a white-hot blaze of them across the sky. The Moors chattered in their harsh tongue, and in whispers I quizzed Marco. The discovery that not only was I known to the Builder-ghosts, but knew of them, had moderated his opinions somewhat and if he still held me in contempt at least he made some effort to disguise the fact.

'Ibn Fayed must know we're coming,' I said. 'He made efforts to thwart us, and yet he allows our progress now. Surely a dozen Ha'tari aren't going to stop his men?'

'Clearly his objections to my audit are not sufficiently large to incur the bad feeling that slaughtering a Taureg salt caravan would engender. Those objections were, however, large enough to motivate efforts to deny me transport.' Marco sipped his java, sucking it through his teeth.

'And he has no objections to my visit?'

A large dung beetle scurried over my boot. Eight legs, a mutant. For a moment little Gretcha watched me from the fire-glow. I scowled and the fire flared then dimmed, causing the drovers to shift back, muttering.

'Your visit? Why should he even know of it?' Marco's permanent frown deepened.

'Yusuf knew of it.'

'And what is Lord Yusuf to you or me?'

For someone who dragged the means to speak to a Builder ghost around with him, Marco seemed to know very little.

'Yusuf is a mathmagician.'

Marco raised an eyebrow at that. 'Abominations, all of them. But Ibn Fayed doesn't own such creatures. They have their own agendas. Don't think the only reason the numbered men may seek

you is in the caliph's service.'

Beneath my travel cloak I toyed with the view-ring, rotating it through my fingers. A thought struck, a bolt from the diamond-scattered night, piercing me skull to toes. The fingers around the ring closed in a grip that might have crushed it if it were only a little less robust.

'Why do you have to drag that trunk with you, Marco? Why is it so damn heavy?'

The banker blinked at me.

'It weighs more than the two of us!' I said.

He blinked again. 'How heavy should it be?'

I clutched the view-ring and thought back to a time when it had taken both Gorgoth and Rike to carry a work of the Builders from a vault deep beneath the Castle Red.

The trip through the Margins took three days, our journey punctuated by the crossing of the widest fissures on a bridge of three planks, carried for the purpose, laid down and picked up, time and again. We travelled without landmarks, beset with dust storms, always too dry, always too hot. At one point we passed the carcass of a vast beetle, its hollowed carapace large enough to stable camels. In three days those remains were the only thing to break the monotony of flat, cracked, mud.

The desert announced itself as ripples on the horizon. With remarkable speed the hardpan and dust gave over to sand, rising in white dunes to heights I would not have imagined possible.

In the desert the Tauregs' skills became obvious. The way they navigated, counting the dunes as if they were landmarks rather than identical shifting masses. The way they trekked up the lee of each white mountain, threading the path of least resistance, finding the firm-packed sand for good-footing, finding the best respite from the wind, and in the evening, blessed intervals of shade.

An unease rose in me. Each mile took us further into a prison. Neither Marco or I could leave again without the goodwill of men such as these: the desert trapped us better than high walls.

The white sands multiplied the sun's heat and made a furnace in which we cooked. Marco made no concession to the temperature, wearing all his blacks, the frockcoat, waistcoat, his white gloves. I began to think him changed, like the Salash of the deep Sahar. No human could endure as he did. And beneath his tall hat his skin stayed paste-white and unburned.

By night, shivering beneath the cold blaze of the heavens, we sat among the merchants with the dunes rising all about, ghost pale, huger than the waves on the roughest sea. On such nights the merchants would tell their tales in murmured phrases, so little animation in them that it was hard to tell who spoke

behind their shesh, until at some punch-line the storyteller would start to wave his hands and the whole circle joined in with harsh jabber and raucous laughter. Behind us in the drover circle the men played the game of twelve lines on ancient boards, silent save for the chatter of dice. And around the fire circles, phantoms in the night, walked the Ha'tari, passing a low and haunting song between them, and guarding us from dangers unknown.

## *Five years earlier*

Somewhere in the loneliness of the Sahar, amongst the twenty days of our crossing, we passed unnoticed from Maroc into Liba. The Taureg spoke of a land that had lain between the realms long ago, devoured by nibbles until Maroc met Liba in the sands. A land of people who would have done well to heed the saying about inches given and miles taken, or as the locals have it, 'beware the camel's nose' after the story of the camel who begs his way by inches into the tent, then refuses to leave.

Hamada rises from desert sands in low mud buildings, rounded as if by the wind, and whitewashed to dazzle the eye. They look at first like pebbles half-bedded in the ground. There is water here: you can taste it on the air, see it in the stands of karran grass that stabilize the dunes and hold back their tides. As you begin to move among the white buildings you see grander structures beyond, nestling in the slight hollow that holds the city. In some ancient time a god fell to earth here and fractured the deepest bedrock, bringing to the surface the waters of an aquifer untapped in any other place.

'I don't think I've ever been as far from anywhere, Brother Marco.' I shaded my eyes and watched the city through the heat-shimmer.

'I'm not your brother,' he said.

Omal, riding between us, snorted. 'Far from anywhere? Hamada means "centre". This is the heart of Liba. Hamada.'

We rode in with the morning sun throwing our shadows behind us, hauling on our reins to keep the camels from bolting for the water. Even so they picked the pace up, snorting and blowing, licking at their muzzles with coarse tongues. Faces appeared at shadowed windows and the drovers called out halloos to old friends. In the shade of tiny alleys scrawny children chased scrawnier chickens.

Deeper in, the streets of Hamada boast tall houses of whitewashed plaster over brick with high turrets to catch the wind. Further still and our column came in sight of great halls

in white stone, public buildings to dwarf the works in Albaseat, constructed to the sparse and grand arithmetic of the Moorish scholars. Libraries, galleries for sculpture, pillared baths where desert men might settle in the luxury of deep waters.

'Not too shabby.' I felt like the dirty peasant come to court.

'Gold has been made and spent here.' Marco nodded. 'Gold and more gold.' For once the sneer had left him. It's an unsettling business having to re-evaluate your world view. Neither of us were enjoying it.

Our caravan turned from the centre road and entered a vast market square with pens partitioned for camels, goats, sheep, and even a few horses. Here black-clad crowds thronged, merchants anticipating the camel train and ready to haggle. Omal and his comrades helped Marco down and set his trunk on the sandy flagstones before him. He approached it with the bandy gait of a man too long in the saddle.

'I'm not dragging that thing again,' I said, glad to be off my own camel. 'It's been carried twenty days and more, it can be carried for the last mile.'

Rattling a few coins soon found a toothless old rogue with a donkey willing to help us along to the caliph's palace. The beast looked as ancient as its master and I fully expected its legs to fold beneath it as the three of us lowered the trunk to its back. It proved as contrary as Balky, though, and just hee-hawed its complaints whilst the old man secured the load.

Standing in the heat, sweating while I watched the old man work, the worries that eluded me in the emptiness of the desert returned in force. Since that moment in the Kutta java house when I understood the nature of the trap, it seemed that like Brother Hendrick, impaled on that Conaught spear, I had been driving the blade deeper. Sensible hope of revenge, not that it ever had been sensible, had gone out the window as soon as I realized they knew me, realized I was anticipated. Now in the midst of a desert that could hold me prisoner on its own, I aimed my path at the enemy's court, set no doubt just a few score yards above the dungeons I would soon rot in.

'Here's to you, Brother Hendrick.'

'Your pardon?' Marco poked at the brim of his hat to peer at me.

'Let's get this done,' I said, and started walking. Beneath desert robes the copper box, the gun, and the view-ring all rubbed at me, uncomfortable in the heat. It seemed unlikely that any of them would offer salvation.

Broad streets, where the wind scoured only a whisper of sand, brought us past bathhouse and library, law court and gallery, to a steeper dip where beneath the steel sky of the desert a wide and flawless lake reflected the caliph's palace. Between us and the waters the pillared ruins of an amphitheatre rose from a

scattering of rubble. Some work of the Romans, unimaginably old.

'And what's that?' I pointed to a tall tower, the tallest in Hamada, set apart from the palace yet casting its dark shadow down across high walls into the heart of the compound.

'Mathema,' the old rogue said over his gums.

'Qalasadi?' I jabbed my finger at it.

'Qalasadi.' He nodded.

'We'll go there first,' I said. Revenge had brought me here. The need to strike back when struck. Ibn Fayed owed me a debt of blood, but Qalasadi, his debt had a face on it and I would settle that first.

'Go where you like, Sir Jorg,' Marco said. 'My business is at the palace.'

'And what business is that, Marco? Come now, friend, you can tell Brother Jorg. We've travelled many a mile together.' I showed him my teeth.

'We're not brothers—'

I fished into my robes. For an instant Marco flinched, as if he thought I would pull a knife on him. Instead I drew out Yusuf's die.

'On the road we are family, Brother Marco.'

I knelt and set the die spinning on the flagstones, whirling like a top on one corner.

'I've come to collect a debt,' he said. 'From Ibn Fayed.'

The die rattled across the ground. A two.

'Go with God, Brother Marco,' I said.

I came alone to the door of the mathmagicians' tower. No guard stood there, no windows overlooked it. The tower reached a hundred yards above me, an elegant spire, maybe twenty yards in diameter at the base. The first windows opened about halfway up its length, stepping in a spiral toward the heights of the spire, the stone too smooth for scorpion or spider.

The door had been fashioned of black crystal, flaws glimmering in its upper layers where the sun reached in. I knocked and where my knuckles struck, a circle of numbers appeared, written in gleams, the ten digits the Arabs first gave us.

'A puzzle?'

I touched one digit, the 'two', another grew brighter, the 'four'. I touched that. The circle vanished. I waited. Nothing.

A harder knock, but my knuckles made no sound against the crystal, just summoned the circle of numbers again. I pressed, chasing the glowing numbers in ever-quicker circles, trying to read the patterns, keeping track for a few seconds then losing the thread.

'Damn it, I didn't come to play games.'

The place lay deserted. A few figures moved among the distant

ruins, Marco and other visitors toiled up the broad steps before Fayed's palace, and a thin crowd loitered around the sandy margins of the lake, but not a soul lay within earshot.

I tried again. Then again. Clearly whatever it took to be a mathmagician I wasn't made of the stuff. The glowing numbers danced their perimeter, fading as I watched. I scowled at the door, and that didn't work either. More out of frustration than judgment I knocked again and as soon as the number circle appeared I tore the view-ring from its thong and slapped it dead centre. Immediately the procession of numerals sped up, sped again, and blurred into a circle of light. The door began to emit a hum, high pitched and rapidly scaling the octaves. Small lightnings started to fork through the crystal, spreading from the points where the view-ring touched it. My fingertips buzzed with the vibration. Hum became whine became shriek. Vertical became horizontal. And I found myself trying to rise amongst jagged black chunks of what had been a most impressive door.

With ringing ears and numb fingers I located the view-ring amid the sparkling rubble and hastened through the doorway. A corridor led straight ahead, appearing to divide the ground floor. At the far end I glimpsed steps - presumably the stair that wound around just inside the tower walls. Half a dozen young Liban men in white tunics headed toward me from arches to either side of the corridor, their looks those of scholars, astonishment rather than anger on their faces. I drew my knife and let the sleeve of my robes fall around it. Looks can be deceiving.

'Something's wrong with your door.' Without pause I strode between them.

On reaching the stairs, which led off down and up, I chose up. I retied the view-ring on its thong, fumbling the knots, fingers still buzzing.

I had it from Omal that the mathema was more by way of a university, a place of study for the mathmagicians. Qalasaki was some sort of teacher. A tutor to the caliph's children, a guide for students come to study at Hamada, an arbiter in the affairs of lesser lights amongst the numbered men, as they liked to call themselves. The tower was not his home, not his domain or fiefdom, but even so, somehow I thought I might find him at the top.

Equations kept pace with me as I walked the worn steps, climbing the mathema tower knife in hand. Some ran the full length of the spiral stair, others started and ended within a few yards to be replaced by fresh calculations, all carved into the stonework then inlaid with black wax to make them legible. I passed door after door, each set with a letter from the Greek, starting with 'alpha', next 'beta'. By 'mu' I had reached the first of the windows and a cooling breeze spiralled up with me. I passed two mathmagicians coming down, both old men, wrinkled like

prunes and so deep in conversation I could have been on fire and gone unremarked.

And finally, where the last window offered Hamada in a broad, bright panorama, the steps ended at a door set with 'omega', inlaid in brass into the mahogany. I gave myself a moment. I'd rather climb mountains than steps.

I let my sleeve hide the blade once more and pushed the door. It swung open with a soft complaint of hinges and there, leaning over a wide and glossy desk at the centre of a single circular room, Qalasadi, Yusuf, and Kalal. They looked up in unison and the moment of surprise written on those three faces proved all the reward I could want for my long climb. Yusuf and Kalal immediately bent their head back to the papers as if hunting for an error amidst their scratchings. Both men clutched quills, their fingers stained as black as their teeth.

'Jorg.' Qalasadi recovered his composure in the space between two breaths. 'Our projections indicated the front door would take you considerably longer to pass.'

Yusuf and Kalal exchanged glances, as if asking what other errors may have crept into their calculations.

'Your projections? For men who want to put out the Builders' eyes you surely sound a lot like them.'

Qalasadi spread his hands, empty, ink-stained. 'It's our actions that define us, not the manner in which we reach the decision to act.'

I threw the dagger, moving my arm across my body so the action would not be telegraphed. The blade bedded in the gleaming table, hilt quivering, a hand's breadth from Qalasadi's groin. I'd been aiming for roughly that spot but it was a tricky throw, a flat angle and an awkward motion. I'd thought it a reasonable chance the knife would glance off and end up in his scrotum.

'Is that on your papers? Had you figured that one out?' I strode toward the table. 'Did you have the knife's trajectory plotted?'

Qalasadi put a hand on Yusuf's shoulder. The younger men ceased their scribbling and looked up, still hung with frowns as if more concerned by their calculus than my sharp edges.

'Can I get you a drink, King Jorg?' Qalasadi said. 'It's a long climb up all those steps.' The ivory wand he'd used to write in the dust of my grandfather's courtyard lay in his hand now.

I came to the table, just its width between us, my knife skewering a sheath of papers, all covered with tight-packed symbology, and spoke in a calm voice, as reasonable men do. 'Part of being in the business of prediction, a large part perhaps, must be the art of giving the impression that things are unfolding according to your expectations. A victim who believes himself anticipated at every turn is not only crippled by uncertainty but also easier to predict.'



All three men watched me without reply. No sign of nerves, save perhaps Qalasaki's fingers rubbing at the short curls of his beard, and a faint sheen of sweat across Kalal's brow. Yusuf had taken the combs from his hair and bound it all back, tight to the skull. He looked older now, more clever.

'You must have known I would decide to hit the table with that throw or you would have tried to stop me ... unless you didn't know I would throw the knife at all?' I found myself digging into the crippling uncertainty I'd just spoken of.

'And the drink?' Qalasaki said.

I did have a thirst on me, but that was too predictable. Besides, you don't cross nations to hunt down a poisoner and then drink what he gives you. 'Why did you try to kill my mother's kin, Qalasaki? A friend told me the mathmagicians have their own purposes. Was it just to please Ibn Fayed? To keep his good will and stop him turfing you out of this rather fine oasis?'

Qalasaki rubbed his chin across the top of his palm, closing his fingers about his jaw in consideration. He had the same even pace to him that he showed in Castle Morrow. I had liked him from the start. Perhaps that's why I showed off for him, maybe gave him the information he needed to deduce my story. Even now, with vengeance a sword thrust away, I had no hatred for him.

'It's an irony of our times that men seeking peace must make war,' he said. 'You know it yourself, Jorg. The Hundred War must be won if it is to stop. Won on the battlefield, won on the floor of Congression. These things are of a piece.'

'And Ibn Fayed is the man to win it?' I asked.

'In five years Ibn Fayed will vote for Orrin of Arrow at Congression. The Earl Hansa would not. The vote will be close. The Prince of Arrow will bring peace. Millions will prosper. Hundreds of thousands will live instead of dying in war. Our order chose the many over the few.'

'That was a mistake. They were my few.' A heat rose in me.

'Mistakes can be made.' He nodded, thoughtful. 'Even with enchantment to tame the variables the sum of the world is a complex one.'

'So you still intend to gift the realm of Morrow to Ibn Fayed? To let the Moorish tide back yet again into the Horse Coast?' I watched Qalasaki, his eyes, his mouth, the motion of his hands, everything, just to try and read something of the man. It maddened me to have them stand there so calm, as if they knew at each moment what was on my tongue to speak, in my mind to do. And yet did they? Was it part of their show of smokes and mirrors?

'We intend that the Prince of Arrow win the empire throne at Congression in the 104th year of Interregnum.' Yusuf spoke for the first time, his voice edged with just a touch of strain. 'The Congression of year 100 will be a stalemate: that cannot be changed.'

'It may be that the caliph's domains can more easily be expanded in other directions.' Kalal spoke, his high voice at odds with a serious mouth. 'Maroc may fall more easily than Morrow or Kordoba.'

The amount of relief that suggestion brought surprised me. 'I came to kill you, Qalasadi. To lay waste to your domain and leave behind ruination.'

He had the grace or commonsense not to smirk at my apocalyptic turn of phrase. Most likely they knew of Gelleth even in Afrique. Perhaps they saw the glare of it, rising above the horizon. Lord knows it burned bright enough, and high? It scorched heaven!

'I hope that you will not,' said Qalasadi.

'Hope?' I drew my robe aside, setting hand to hilt. 'You don't know?'

'All men need hope, Jorg. Even men of numbers.' Yusuf pressed a smile onto his lips, his voice soft, the voice of a man ready to die.

'And what do your equations say of me, poisoner?' My sword stood between us now. I had no recollection of drawing it. The rage I needed flared and died, flared again. I saw my grandfather and grandmother laid out pale on the deathbed, Uncle Robert in a warrior's tomb, hands folded across the blade upon his chest. I saw Qalasadi's smile in a sunlit courtyard. Yusuf wiping the sea from his face. 'Salty!' he had said. 'Let's hope the world has better to offer than that, no?' Words spoken at sea.

I slammed my sword hilt onto the table's polished wood. 'What do your calculations say?' A roar that made them flinch.

'Two,' Qalasadi said.

'Two?' A laugh tore out of me, sharp-edged, full of hurting. He bowed his head. 'Two.'

Yusuf ran a finger across pages of scrawl. 'Two.'

'It's what the magic gives us,' Qalasadi said.

Something cold tingled at my cheekbones. 'Why two?'

And the mathmagician frowned, as he had in the courtyard at Castle Morrow, as if trying once again to remember that lost sensation, to recall a forgotten taste.

'Two friends lost in dry-lands? Two friends to be made in the desert? Two years away from your throne? Two women who will own your heart? Two decades you will live?' The magic lies in the first number, the mathematics in the second.'

'And what is the second number?' Anger left me, the remaining image two sad mounds in the dirt of the Iberico, fading.

'The second number,' Qalasadi said, without checking his papers, 'is 333000054500.'

'Now that is a number! None of these twos, threes, and fourteens you plague me with. What the hell does it mean?'

'It is, I hope, the coordinates where you abandoned Michael.'

## *Five years earlier*

It came as something of a relief to discover the order of mathmagicians didn't require my death, as it seemed likely they could have arranged to take it, certainly after I'd delivered myself into their hands with such cunning. Also good to learn that they now considered there were better routes than those that led to Morrow, other ways to place the necessary voting power into Ibn Fayed's hands and to assure the Prince of Arrow's ascendance. It meant that I in turn did not require their death.

It is true that I had a bad record with soothsayers and the like predicting glory for Orrin of Arrow. For once, however, I felt able to step around it and move on. Maybe I was growing up. I comforted myself with Fexler's words about the changing world and the power of desire. Perhaps for those whose burning desire was to know the future rather than live in the present, perhaps for them it was that desire more than the means they employed that gave them some blurry window onto tomorrow. Whether it be Danelore witches casting rune stones, or clever Moors with equations of fiendish complexity, maybe their raw and focused desire delivered their insights. And if my desire were the greater, maybe I would prove them wrong.

The need for vengeance, for retribution against Qalasaki after his attempt on my family, had never burned so bright as the imperative that took me to Uncle Renar's door. In fact it felt good to let it drop. Lundist and the Nuban would have been proud of me, but in truth I liked the man and it was that rather than any newfound strength of character that allowed me to set it aside.

In some chamber above us a mechanism whirred and a great bell began to sound out the hour of the day.

'Yusuf and I will accompany you to the caliph's court,' Qalasaki said, voice raised.

'He won't want to execute me? Or lock me in a cell?' I asked.

'He knows you are here, so whether you go to court with us, or are taken there later under armed guard, is unlikely to change

events,' Qalasadi said.

'Though if his soldiers have to drag you there, projections do slide toward less desirable outcomes,' Yusuf added.

'But you have already calculated what will happen?' I frowned at Yusuf.

'Yes.' A nod.

'And?'

'And telling you will make the outcome less certain.' Qalasadi closed the book he had just opened and picked it up. Yusuf threw an arm over my shoulders and steered me toward the door.

'And Kalal stays here?' I asked above the tenth and loudest intonation of the bell.

Yusuf grinned. 'The sums don't do themselves, you know.'

To their credit neither Qalasadi or Yusuf raised an eyebrow at the tower's lack of a front door, and I guessed it was not one that would be easy to replace. The younger men in their whites, still with the blackened teeth, alarming in their wrongness, had gathered the fragments together in a small sad heap to one side of the doorway, and others from within the mathema had joined them. Several dozen of the students sat in a circle, murmuring, passing crystal pieces amongst one another, the occasional cry going up when they found two fragments that matched. They fell silent as we passed.

'I see you found a new solution to the door, Jorg,' Yusuf said, his voice dry.

'It presents a better puzzle now,' Qalasadi said, 'though one that is less of an obstacle.'

We crossed the plaza under the sun's blaze. You could almost see the lake boiling away, but it put a hint of coolness in the air, a blessing worth more than gold in the Sahar. The steps up to the caliph's gates were broad and many, larger than steps made for men, deceiving the eye so that as you climbed the true size of the palace became apparent in a slow dawning.

Supplicants queued on the steps in the shade of a grand portico. Gates, that looked to be made of gold, towered above us all, and royal guards in polished steel stood ready to receive the caliph's visitors, bright and faintly ridiculous plumes bobbing above conical helms. Qalasadi and Yusuf bypassed the score and more of black-robed petitioners. I spared a smile for Marco, wedged in the midst of the locals and struggling to heft his trunk up another step.

'*As-salamu alaykum.*' Qalasadi wished peace upon the giant who stepped to bar our way. A sensible wish given the size of the scimitar at the man's hip. Hachirahs, Tutor Lundist's book had called them, their blades sufficient to hack a man in two.

'*As-salamu alaykum, murshid mathema.*' The man bowed, but not

so low that one might stab him unawares.

More words exchanged in the shared tongue of Maroc and Liba. I had enough of it to judge that Qalasadi was assuring the guard of my royal status, despite appearances to the contrary. It might have been politic to spend some time and some gold cleaning off the desert and dressing the part, but it seemed wiser to meet with Ibn Fayed before Marco gained an audience.

We entered by a gate within the gate and three plumed guards led us along marble corridors, marvellously cool. The silence of the palace enveloped us, a peace rather than the sterile absence of sound in the Builders' corridors, and broken on occasion by the tinkle of hidden fountains and the cry of peacocks.

The caliph's palace had nothing in common with the castles of the north. For one thing, it had been built for pleasure, not defence. The palace sprawled rather than towered, its halls and galleries wide and open, running one into the next, where they should divide into bottlenecks and killing grounds. And we passed not a single statue, painting, nor any but a few tapestries depicting only patterns in many bright colours. The men of the desert lacked our obsession with raising our own images, setting down our ancestry for the ages in stone and paint.

'We're here.' Qalasadi's warning felt redundant. Double doors faced us, taller than houses, fashioned from vast slabs of ebony inlaid with gold. Wood is a rarity in the desert: the ebony spoke more loudly of the caliph's wealth than did the gold.

Palace guards with polearms stood in alcoves to each side, the bladed ends elaborate in shape and catching the light from small circular windows in the ceiling far above.

'Well,' I said, then ran out of words. I have stepped into the lions' den before, but perhaps not since I walked alone into Marclos of Renar's personal army had I put myself so deeply into the hands of an enemy. At least with Marclos my brothers were just a few hundred yards away in a defensible position. I stood now in a well-guarded palace in an alien city amidst a vast desert in a strange land a continent away from home. I had nothing with which to bargain, and no gifts to offer, except perhaps for the trick I had played in the desert. I couldn't say if Qalasadi's coordinates were correct, but I did know that the Builder ghost, Michael, would not be accompanying Marco to court.

'We will wait here. Your audience is to be a private one.' Qalasadi set a hand to my shoulder. 'I can't tell you that Ibn Fayed is a good man, but he is at the least a man of honour.'

One of our escorts stepped forward to knock three times upon a boss set across the join of the doors. I turned to face the two mathmagicians.

'A pity it wasn't three friends your spells predicted I would make in the desert.' I could do with friend like the caliph, even if that friendship only extended to letting me leave.

Behind me the great doors stole into motion. A breeze ran cool across my neck and I turned to face my future.

'Good luck, Prince of Thorns.' Yusuf spoke at my ear, voice soft. 'We became friends at sea, you and I, so you still have a friend to make in the desert. Choose well.'

The walk from doors to throne, along a silk runner the colour of the ocean, took a lifetime. In the vast and airy marble cavern of Ibn Fayed's throne room, walking between sunlit patches as if through the light and shade of forests, ideas, phrases, lines of attack, all bubbled up in fragments, roiling one over the next whilst all the time my gaze rested on the figure in his seat, first distant, drawing closer. Around the perimeter of the chamber great window arches stood to catch the breeze, each screened by elaborate shutters, more perforation than wood.

The whole expanse of the throne room stood empty. Only on the dais was there any sign of life. Fayed in his sic-wood throne amid the glitter of gemstones, on either side Nuban servants wafting him with fans of ostrich feathers on long poles. A circle of imperial guard on the lowest step, ten men. A wild cat of enormous size on the third step, and a heavy-muscled man to hold its chain, crouched beside it, both ready to spring.

Still I had no plan. No idea of what words might flow when my mouth opened. I prepared to surprise myself. Maybe I would tear Fexler's gun from my hip and lay waste. I doubted that had figured in anyone's calculations. Save perhaps those of Fexler himself.

A thin man in close black robes rose from his cushion on the step below the throne. Sun-stained but perhaps not from birth, not young, but with his years hidden. Like the very fat, the very thin play games with their wrinkles and disguise their age.

'Ibn Fayed, Caliph of Liba, Lord of the Three Realms, Water-Giver, welcomes King Jorg of Renar to his humble abode.' Spoken in empire tongue with no trace of accent.

'I'm honoured,' I said. 'Hamada is a jewel.' And in truth, standing there in the warmth and light of the caliph's palace I couldn't imagine what he would make of the castles and cities of the north. What would Ibn Fayed see in the great houses of my homeland, cold, cramped, and dirty, places where men spilled blood over narrow and muddy tracts of land, all smoke and filth.

'The caliph has wondered what would bring the King of Renar so far from his kingdom, unattended?' The Caliph's Voice kept any judgment from his tone but his eye twitched across my raggedness in disapproval.

I watched Ibn Fayed, deep in the grasp of his throne, so clearly a warrior despite his silks. He met my gaze, eyes hard and black. Of an age with the Earl Hansa, the years had grizzled him, a beard cropped so close as to be little more than stubble trekked white across the darkness of his skin, reaching for his

cheekbones.

'I came to kill him for the disrespect shown to my grandfather.'

That reached him. For a moment his eyes widened. No need of a translator to whisper behind his throne - he knew my meaning.

Where my honesty won a moment of surprise from the caliph it almost set his Voice back on the cushions. For the longest moment he stood slack-jawed and staring. Not a twitch from the guards though - they heard only the gabble of a northman.

Ibn Fayed muttered something and the thin man found his tongue.

'And is that still your intention, King Jorg?'

'No.'

Another mutter then, 'You no longer believe you can achieve your goal?'

'I doubt I could escape afterward. I think the desert would defeat me,' I said, drawing a grunt of amusement from the caliph. 'Also, I have gained new perspective on the matter and think perhaps that there is a third way.'

'Explain.' The Caliph's Voice clearly knew his master's ways well enough not to require a prompt at every turn. His terse command convinced me that he truly was to be treated as nothing more than a conduit, speaking exactly as Ibn Fayed would if he cared to raise his voice.

'By coming close to the source of the attacks upon my grandfather's house I have gained distance from the Castle Morrow. Even the Horse Coast has grown small from so far away.' I thought of Lord Nossar in his map room at Elm, inking back the faded and forgotten lines on ancient charts, laying claims that would see Martin's son and little girl into the ground. 'I see that actions taken at such a remove may still be those of an honourable man though when viewed from the halls of my grandfather's castle they cry for justice and retribution. I see that the Prince of Arrow was right when he told me to travel, to meet the peoples against whom I might make war.'

'And if assassination was the first way, what are the second and the third?' asked the Voice.

'The second way is war. For my grandfather to turn the wealth of his lands into more ships, a greater navy to scour the coasts of Liba.' I didn't speak of invasion. While the Moors might find a foothold along the Horse Coast it seemed to me that the lands of Afrique would swallow armies whole without the need for the natives to do more than wait for the sun to work its will. 'The third way is alliance.'

Now Fayed laughed out loud. 'My people have ruled here four thousand years.' His voice so dry it almost creaked. He waved at the thin man who carried on without pause.

'A chain of civilization stretching back unbroken across

millennia. And you come here ragged, empty-handed? Only through the knowing of the mathema do we recognize you as king. It is true that charts render small what may hold many lives, but in our map room Renar may be found only after careful search and can be covered with the thumb.' He made the appropriate gesture, as if squashing my kingdom like a bug. 'Whereas a man may scarcely cover Liba with his hand.' The thin man spread his fingers. And with the hand still raised, open and turned toward me, 'There is a saying in the desert. Don't reach for friendship with an empty hand.'

'What would the Earl Hansa pay to have you back, boy?' Fayed's croak from the throne.

I made the least of bows. 'My hand only looks empty, Ibn Fayed.' I didn't know what my grandfather might pay, but I guessed Fayed would ask for more than coin. Even if I survived the negotiations, to return dragging such a failure with me would undo any ties I had made in Morrow.

'What then does it hold?' the Voice asked.

'Tell me, Excellency, did you need your magicians to tell you I was coming?'

The Voice bridled at being questioned, anger written into the sharp lines of his face. Fayed made the briefest wave and the answer came, calm and without offence. 'Hamada is a fortress that needs no walls. Only by caravan can the dunes be crossed. And rest assured that all who travel the salt roads are known in this palace before they come in sight of the city. Known by name and feature, their cargo known, down to the last fig in their saddlebags.'

'And if you knew of my approach you would know also of my travelling companion,' I said.

'Marco Onstantos Evenaline of the House Gold, Mercantile Derivatives South. A Florentine banker.'

'He is waiting at your gates, Caliph. Why is he here?'

Again the wave to quell his Voice's objections. When a man doesn't bother to keep secrets from you, you know that you're in trouble.

'He comes to claim against a contract. Our payment for an old debt sunk off the Corsair Isle. Though the Florentines had agents aboard and had taken the monies into their care they say that under the agreed terms no payment is properly transacted until docked in Port Vito.'

'Interesting,' I said. 'And although his visit is not welcomed or encouraged, you afford him the protections and diplomatic privileges agreed for the clans under empire law.'

'Yes.'

'And those old agreements might allow him a secret fig or two in his saddlebag ... Perhaps you should bring him in and I could show you what's in my hand ...'



The Voice had no answer. A long silence, nothing but the wafting of feathers as Ibn Fayed considered. The faintest of nods.

'He will be summoned.'

Our audience proved less private than advertised for no further order was issued. And yet I assumed it was being acted upon.

'An interesting cat you have there, Excellency.' I don't count small talk amongst my skills but we couldn't just watch each other for the next ten minutes waiting on Marco.

'A leopard,' the Voice replied. 'From the interior.'

A long pause. I'm really not good at idle chat.

'So you're destroying all the Builders' works? I'm interested in hearing the reasons why.'

'It is no secret.' The Voice looked uncomfortable even so.

'The caliph's proclamations have been called out after prayers across Liba for close on a year now. This new wisdom came to him in a dream at the end of the Holy Month. On the Day of A Thousand Suns there came a dawn so bright that many of our ancestors who died that morning could not see the way to paradise. They sought the darkness of their machines to hide from that unholy light. But they became trapped there, djinns, haunting the relics of their past. It is out of mercy that we act. We break open their prisons and set them free to ascend to their reward.'

He delivered his lines with conviction. Whether he believed them, or whether he could have made a great actor, I didn't know.

'Let us hope those trapped souls understand the mercies that you heap upon them,' I said. 'And whose idea was it? Some scheme out of the mathema?'

'Mine.' Ibn Fayed laid the claim from his throne, his hands closing into fists.

A distant, hollow sound, repeated, and again. I glanced back along the silk runner to see the doors open. Marco Onstantos Evenaline stepped through, in his blacks as ever, but with his hat in his hand. He must have been plucked from the line shortly after we passed him and have followed in our footsteps.

We all watched his slow advance across the width of the hall. Ibn Fayed really did have a hell of a throne room. It occurred to me that a large portion of the Haunt would fit into it, and certainly the entirety of the villages of Gutting and Little Gutting.

At last Marco drew up alongside me, looking pleased for the first time since we met. The absence of his trunk had changed him, he stood taller, more proud.

'Ibn Fayed, Caliph of Liba, Lord of the Three Realms, Water-Giver, welcomes Marco Onstantos Evenaline of the House Gold, Mercantile Derivatives South to his humble abode.'

'As well he should,' Marco said. 'Though courtesies will prove

no shield from the consequences of his actions.'

'You dare?' The Voice may have spoken an alien tongue but the volume and tone drew ten curved blades from the scabbards of the imperial guard.

'Harsh language to use over an unpaid debt, Marco?' I did my best to ignore the glittering steel a foot to my left, the guardsmen having included me in the insult. 'By the look of things I would say the caliph is good for it?' I didn't wave my arm at the opulence of our surroundings, concerned that someone might lop it off.

'You wallow in ignorance, Jorg of Renar, like a pig in filth. It will please me to see you burn.'

'Marco! I thought we were friends?' I tried not to smile but I was never the actor.

He looked away from me toward the throne. 'Ibn Fayed, you are sentenced to die. All of Hamada is forfeit.'

Two long steel bolts appeared in Marco's chest, jutting out at diverging angles. I took a moment to recognize them as projectiles, fired from some overlarge crossbows that must be concealed in galleries above us.

Marco staggered half a step and raised his hands. 'Die.' Joints crackled as he formed a fist. It put me in mind of that scorpion in the Hills as I unwound it. For a heartbeat he hypnotized all of us, stood there impaled on those bolts, his hat rolling on its brim at his feet. Fist slammed into palm.

And nothing.

Though perhaps it seemed brighter for a second, as if the sun had peeked out from behind clouds.

Marco pounded fist into palm a second time. 'No!' He swept us with a wild gaze, looked down at the shafts in his chest, and collapsed.

'This is what is in your hand?' the Voice asked. 'A madman?'

'Look out of your window, Ibn Fayed.' I pointed west.

A sharp clap sent one of the guards running to haul open the shutters.

The man pulled on a concealed rope and the screens parted, the brightness of the day dazzling us. For long moments we stood blinking in the desert light, trying to see into the brilliance of the outside world. And there it rose, boiling upward over the dunes, a fierce column of orange and black, fire threaded with night, opening into a inferno, mushrooming above the sands, and above that, impossibly high, a white halo of cloud spreading, outpacing the flames.

The burned half of my face pulsed with warmth, a heat on the edge of pain, the light of it filling my eye and making something new of the flame-cloud, lending it an ethereal beauty and the aspect of a gate, or fissure in the world, opening onto something that could be heaven or could be hell.

'It would take you two days on camel back to stand dead centre beneath that explosion,' I said.

'I don't understand.' Ibn Fayed stood from his throne.

'Have Marco's trunk brought here,' I said.

The caliph nodded. His Voice called out the command.

We had no need of small talk while we waited. The explosion demanded the eye. None of us spoke. Even the servants laid down their feathered poles to watch. And after five minutes we saw the dunes rise, the sand leaping into the air, one after the next, bang, bang, bang, faster than an arrow in flight. The sound hit us, a wall of it, loud enough to take every shutter from its hinges and leave a finger's width of sand across each inch of the marble floor. The rumble that followed drew out for an age, deep and full of terror.

Qalasadi and Yusuf came through the great doors, six guards behind them carrying Marco's trunk. If they knocked we didn't hear them.

They set the trunk beside Marco's corpse.

'You have checked this?' The Voice pointed at it.

'We have.' Qalasadi nodded. 'In any event, nothing of the Builders' magic can pass the gates and seals set upon this palace.'

'That's n-' I bit off the words and patted my chest. Gone! The view-ring wasn't there. 'How in hell--'

'I cut the thong just before we left the mathema,' Yusuf said. 'Kalal stayed to pick it from the floor.'

'A light touch, Brother Yusuf. I hadn't taken you for a thief.' It unnerved me to think he had held a blade at my neck, but I supposed they had had me in a noose since I set foot on the quay at Kutta port.

'Theft is about timing, Jorg, and timing can be calculated.' He seemed unashamed.

I remembered the bell sounding as we left the tower, holding my attention, drowning out other senses, over-writing the clink of view-ring striking floor.

'Besides,' Yusuf continued. 'It would have been detected and taken at the palace gates, casting you in a very bad light. A friend couldn't let that happen to a friend.'

I shrugged. There seemed little else to do. In any event, they hadn't detected my gun. Perhaps when they spoke of the Builders' works they meant the ones with more magic and less mechanics. The ones where lightning ran trapped in metal veins.

'Open it.' Ibn Fayed, returned to his throne, gaze flicking from window to trunk, trunk to window.

Qalasadi kneeled, undid the catches, worked some magic on the lock - a lock I knew to be very tricky - and threw back the lid.

'Sand?' The caliph leaned forward.

The desert taught me many things. Two of those things were about Marco. The desert is a quiet place. Not silent. There is always the wind, the hiss of sand, the plod of feet, and the complaint of camels. But it is a place where a man can be heard and where a man can listen. When I listened to Marco I noticed that he whirred, he creaked, and he ticked. All these sounds existed on the edge of hearing, but once noted could be found in any quiet moment, especially if he exerted himself, then I would hear it more clearly, that whirring, like the cogs in my watch.

And in discovering this strangeness I found myself watching Marco Onstantos Evenaline, the white man in his black suit, unburned by the sun, sweating but never wilting, a man curiously unsuited to what should be, excluding the harshness of ledgers, a business of warm handshakes and human bonding.

The second thing I learned at night, watching the infinite stars. I noticed that they shimmered. Only to be expected of course. Stars twinkle. But it seemed to me, in the dead of night, with the sands about us cooled and the air cold enough to set me deep into my blankets, that the stars above Marco's camel twinkled too much. And I remembered that heat haze I had seen in the Iberico Hills, with just the eye ringed by the burn that Gog left me by way of a thank you. The haze I saw with a second sight. The haze that warned of secret fires.

A week later, in the dead of night, two days out from Hamada, I rose from my blankets. The Ha'tari were used to men leaving the caravan to water the sands. In the Margins we had a trench cut to save us wandering out amongst the fissures and the horrors that lurked there, but in the desert we could find a quiet spot among the dunes. It was far less common that a man should lead his camel out into the sand. And I wasn't even leading mine, I was leading Marco's. Perhaps they thought me a city boy, too long without the company of women, and tempted beyond reason by the twitching rear of the camel ahead. Probably they thought I wanted to steal from the banker. Either way, none of them liked him, and they liked my gold.

I didn't go far. In the dip between two moon-pale dunes I hefted the trunk from the camel's back and set to working at its tricky lock with tiny picks I keep from my years with the brothers. There's little call for anything more sophisticated than an axe when faced with a lock on the road, but they always fascinated me and I learned a few techniques from men in our band who had found their way into disgrace through less violent paths than mine. I worked veiled, with the sand gauze across the eye-slit, using only touch.

In time I had the case unlocked. I dug a grave in the sand, more of a dent - you can't scoop a deep hole in the dunes any

more than you can dig in water. It took much of my strength to tip the trunk onto its side. The view-ring's capabilities told me plain that only a fraction of the machinery before me was required to manufacture Michael's image. I had to wonder at the weight of the rest and the wisps of hidden fire rising from it.

I guessed that the contents would separate from the container easy enough. No ancient's hand had stretched the sharkskin over its frame, nor wood panelled the interior. Marco would want to be able to change the casing without effort in order to disguise his cargo when required.

I opened the lid from the side and tipped the trunk forward so it fell open-mouthed into the pit ... into the dent at least. Some fiddling, the application of my knife's point in two places, and enough shaking and grunting to alarm Marco's camel, soon won the trunk free of its contents. I used a stolen plate to heap sand over the rectangular block of silver-steel and plasteek. The machine buzzed once during the process then fell silent.

With sand mounded smoothly over the device I turned my attention to filling the trunk. Half an hour later, sweaty and dry-mouthed, I near killed myself hauling the thing onto the camel's back once more.

'How did you know the Builder-ghosts would not just explode the device while you were burying it?' Qalasaki asked.

'How could they know what was happening? And such things are of immense value - they cannot be made again. They would not destroy it unless all hope of recovering it had gone,' I said.

'Why would they allow the banker to detonate it if it were not close enough to the palace to destroy Ibn Fayed?' Yusuf asked.

'I didn't know for sure that they would,' I said. 'It seems though that the Builder-ghosts see less than we might think, especially in the desert and where their works have been targeted for destruction. They must have placed their trust in Marco to act in their interest. Even if they knew where the device lay, they could not with certainty say that the caliph had not entered the radius of destruction. Or perhaps they expected it to be more devastating.'

'More?' The Voice drew a deep breath.

I shrugged. 'In any event, Marco didn't need to bring his trunk into the throne room to do its work, or into the palace. He could have destroyed Hamada from a mile off amongst the dunes. Whether his bravado before the throne was on the Builders' instructions or what he felt to be a fitting exit from the world, I don't know.'

'The Builders threw their suns from one side of the world to the other on tongues of flame, and where they burned whole countries were reduced to char,' Qalasaki said. 'Why have one

lone banker haul the weapon here on a camel?’

‘There’s not much that still works after a thousand years.’ I closed the trunk and sat on the lid. ‘The rockets and the greatest of their weapons are spent and useless. Only the triggers are left intact ... the sparks that lit the suns, if you like. They need to be moved by agents to the city that is to be destroyed.’

‘And this is their vengeance for my ...’ Ibn Fayed looked old, a tremor in his hands. ‘I was too proud. For my people’s sake I will—’

‘You may have put yourself at the head of the queue, Caliph, but I think there is more to it than that. Michael, he called himself. It may not be chance that he shares his name with the archangel, warlord of God’s armies. The Builders have larger worries than one desert ruler breaking what machinery he can find above the dunes. Some among them plan to kill us all. Hamada was to be a demonstration. A model to be repeated.’

‘Lucky for us that you arrived on our shores when you did then, King Jorg.’ Qalasaki bowed his head.

‘Was it luck, magician?’ I tried to see his eyes but he kept his face down. ‘You knew the Builder-ghosts were mounting some kind of attack. You thought it involved me ... and you let me into the caliph’s palace, albeit declawed. And perhaps there was another hand pointing my way, working on that timing you all seem so proud of ...’ I wondered, had Fexler played me, pushed me here and there across his board with the most gentle of nudges and the occasional flash of red light glimpsed through a steel ring? Had he delayed Marco, or sped his way, so that we found Port Albus together? Had I been Fexler’s agent in some contest with Michael ... with the whole of his faction?

‘Explain to me,’ Ibn Fayed said, ‘why this assassin would risk so much just to let me know his mind before we all died? If my archers had not both contrived to miss his heart, he could have died without igniting ...’ His gaze returned to the windows.

‘That.’

‘I don’t think there was any danger of him failing,’ I said.

‘But he died just moments after completing his mission,’ Ibn Fayed said, sharp eyes beneath grey and bushy brows.

‘Oh, Marco’s not dead,’ I said. ‘Are you, Marco?’

The modern’s head snapped up. The speed of it shocking, like a length of flexed metal flicking straight, murder in his eyes.

‘I’m far from sure he was ever alive.’ I stepped back, not drawing my sword in case over-zealous archers threaded bolts through my chest as well.

Marco got to his feet in a quick series of jerky motions. He pulled the bolts from his body and dropped them to the floor, blood-smeared but not dripping. The imperial guard drew their swords again.

'You just wanted to hear how you were tricked, didn't you, Marco? Before you found a good moment to finish at least part of the job.'

He ignored me and leapt at the caliph, careless of the guardsmen blocking his way. Bright blades flickered in motion, feet scrabbled on the sandy floor, blood sprayed, gobbets of flesh flew and Marco surged to within a yard of Ibn Fayed before the weight of men took him to the ground. He fought with the same frightening speed demonstrated when he raised his head, fingers rending muscle and fat, throwing grown men away as if they were less than children. The swords that fell on him sliced his blacks to tatters but beneath the red butchery of his flesh metal gleamed, copper and silver-steel. Whirs and clicks accompanied his movements, audible through the screams, the clash of steel, and the leopard's spitting howl. The noise of teeth-through-ratchets as fingers closed on necks with the inexorable strength of the vice.

Men died. Marco found his feet again. Ibn Fayed and his Voice moved to shelter behind the throne as Marco climbed the third step, blood running down the stone in red trickles. Injured guardsmen clung to both legs, others hewed at him as though he were a tree. Before the throne the leopard and its handler hesitated. The cat had been straining at its chain, ready to attack. Now it sat back, ears flat to its skull. Sensible beast.

More guardsmen were running in from the great doors, and more behind them, but like all things it was a matter of timing. Marco had enough of it for his purpose and they had insufficient for theirs. He would kill the caliph before they stopped him.

I mounted the three steps, careful of my footing in the gore, pulled the gun from beneath my robes. With the barrel set to the back of his pale skull I put four bullets through the metal casing and into whatever clockwork served him for a brain.

He fell twitching amongst the dead and wounded as the echoes of the last shot died away.

I held the gun up. 'Old technology.' I pointed it at Marco. 'New technology. You might want to rework those seals, Qalasaki.' I spun the gun around my finger and caught it flat in my palm, displaying it to Ibn Fayed, 'And this, Caliph, is what I have in my hand.'

## *Five years earlier*

Ibn Fayed had them set a throne of silver one step down from the summit of his dais and when I returned to court, clean and refreshed, dressed in silks and a heavy chain of gold, he bade me sit there.

'These are sorry times when the ghosts of our ancestors reach out to take our lives.' He spoke to me direct now, slow with his words as if fishing them from the dust of memory.

'They are not agreed, those ghosts. A war, of sorts, rages among them, deep in their machines. But few if any of the Builders have good intentions for us. Even our saviours would make us slaves,' I told him.

'Then you will join me? Dig out and destroy what can be found of them? Start a new era free from the ghosts of the past?' Ibn Fayed sounded curious rather than eager.

'A wise man told me that history will not stop us repeating our mistakes, but will at least make us ashamed of doing so.' I remembered Lundist's smile when he said it, as much of sadness in it as amusement. 'Will you argue your case at Congression, Ibn Fayed?'

'It would seem foolish to attend. What better place for the ghosts to destroy us? Can we trust the Gilden Guard to keep all agents such as the banker from coming within several miles of the Gilden Gates?'

I steepled my fingers before my mouth to hide the laugh rising there. 'Caliph, I would bet my life that the last emperor, all his fathers before him, and every Congression since the stewardship has sat above a device more powerful than the one Marco carried toward Hamada. The Builder-ghosts would want to know they could end the empire any time they chose. The fact that they have not done so just tells us that Michael's faction do not yet hold command amongst their brothers nor have unfettered access to whatever controls such weapons.

If the ghosts ever unite to a degree sufficient to destroy Vyene then nowhere will be safe. Marco only failed here by poor



luck and by the intervention of other ghosts.' I felt sure now that Fexler had aimed me at the modern, or clockwork soldier, or whatever the hell Marco really was.

'And when you go to Congression, Jorg, how will you cast your vote?' Ibn Fayed asked, affording me the courtesy that one lone vote might matter.

'For myself of course.' I grinned, creasing the stiffness of scar tissue. 'And you, Caliph?'

'Orrin of Arrow is a good man,' he said. 'It might be time for such a man.'

'Wouldn't an emperor grate on you? Don't you prefer to rule the desert with a free hand?'

Ibn Fayed shook his head, croaking a dry laugh. 'I live on the very edge of the Holy Empire. To the south, as far away as Vyene, is another emperor, a Cerani emperor, and his domain reaches to my borders, as vast as our broken empire ever was at its heights. Soon enough, maybe not in my lifetime but surely before my grandson takes this chair, the Cerani and their allied tribes will come out of the desert and swallow Liba whole. That is unless someone is crowned at Vyene to remake our strength.'

I passed a month in the desert city. I learned what I could of their ways. For some weeks I studied in the mathema, even pieced together a little of their door. Qalasadi returned the view-ring to my keeping, on the understanding that it must never enter the palace and must leave Liba with me.

I sat one evening in the mathema tower, closeted alone in a windowless chamber on the floor behind the door marked 'epsilon'. A simple earthenware oil lamp lit the book before me, equations and more equations. I have the head for mathematics but no love for it. I've seen a formula bring tears to Kalal's eyes with its elegance and the sheer beauty of its symmetries. I grasped the formula, or thought I did, but it didn't move me. Whatever poetry such things hold I am deaf to it.

On the table beside the book, the view-ring, a shiny and inert lump since the explosion, or since Qalasadi's intervention, although he said they did nothing to it. I yawned and slammed the book hard enough to make the flame jerk and shudder, and to set the ring dancing like a spun coin at the very last of its rotations. But unlike a coin the ring kept its oscillations going. I watched it, hypnotized.

'Jorg?' and Fexler's image rose above the ring, painted in whites as always, not quite opaque. If the Builders had set themselves the task of recreating ghosts from the stories told to children they could have done the job no better.

'Who's asking?'

He focused on me as I spoke, his image growing sharper. 'Can't

you see me?'

'I can see you.'

'Then you recognize me. Fexler Brews.'

I laid my hand flat across the book. 'It says here that a prediction will diverge from the truth. The further the prediction is carried, the larger the discrepancy. Wraps it all up in statistics and bounds of course. But the message is clear enough. You're a prediction. I doubt you're anything like the man I saw die any more.'

'Untrue,' Fexler said. 'I have the original data. I don't need to rely on fading memories. Fexler Brews is alive in me as true and clear as ever.'

I shook my head and watched him. The shadows danced everywhere but across him. On me, on the walls, the ceiling, only Fexler constant, lit by his own light.

'You can't grow if you're constantly defined by this collection of frozen moments that you keep returning to. And if you can't grow, you're not alive. So either you're Fexler, and like him you're dead. Or you're alive, but you're someone else. Something else.'

'Are you sure it's me we're talking about?' Fexler raised a brow - very human.

'Ah ...' It closed on me like steel jaws. The worst traps are the ones we lay for ourselves. All these years and it took a nothing, a web of numbers, to show me to myself. I could count on one hand the brief and personal passion plays that nailed me to my past. The carriage and the thorns. The hammer and Justice burning. The bishop. Father's knife jutting from my chest. And at my hip, in a copper box, perhaps one more. 'I liked you better before, Fexler. Why are you here?'

'I came to learn your plans,' he said.

'You don't watch me enough to know them?'

'I have been ... busy, elsewhere.'

'Vyene is calling me,' I said. 'I mean to take ship to Mazeno and travel by road to the Gilden Gates. It will probably be a quicker return journey than the one that brought me here. And besides, I have a memory from a fever dream, a memory of you asking me to go there, something about the throne, and my view-ring, only you were calling it a different name. Control ring? Is that a true memory?'

'It is a true memory, but I won't speak of it now. It is probable others are listening. Go to Vyene: it will be a good education.'

I sat back, ran my eye across the books ranked along shelves from floor to ceiling, all that knowledge. 'These mathmagicians, they're the champions of that effort to recivilize us aren't they, Fexler? The start of a new understanding, so we can repair what the Builders built.'

'One of several such starts.' He nodded.

'I've looked at the scraps left from your time. Almost nothing was ever written down ...'

'It was written into machines, into memory. You just lack the means to read it.' Fexler looked around at the books too, as if he needed to use his eyes to see them. One of many deceptions, no doubt.

'I've looked at those scraps and nowhere does it speak of heaven and hell, of a life beyond death, of church or mosque or any place of worship.'

Fexler looked down at me, floating as he was a foot above the desk, his head near touching the ceiling. 'Few among us concerned ourselves with religion. We had answers that didn't require faith.'

'But I've spoken with an angel.' I frowned. 'At least I think I have. And for damn sure I've reached into the deadlands chasing after pieces of men's souls. How can you—'

'For a clever boy you can be very stupid, Jorg.' Something in his voice carried a faint echo of that angel, timeless, tolerant.

'What?' Spoken too loud. My anger is never more than a moment away. It makes a fool of me more times than I can say.

'Our greatest work was to change the role of the observer. We put power into the hands of men, directly into their hands. Too much power as it turned out. If the raw strength of one man's will, the right man's will, can bring fire from nothing, part the waters, pulverize stone, command winds. What then of the unfocused desire and expectation of millions?'

'You—'

'Your afterlife is what you expect it to be, what the thousands, the millions around you expect, what legend builds, told, retold, refined, evolving. In this place, amongst the sands, they fashion themselves a different paradise and different paths to it, some dark, some light. All of it is fabrication, constructed over the reality my people lived in. Whatever waited for a man after his death in those times, it was not mentioned in our calculations. Our priests, when they could find anyone to listen, described something more subtle, more profound, and more wonderful than the mishmash of medieval superstition your kind have built upon.'

'We made it?' It didn't seem possible. 'We built heaven and hell?'

'Oh yes. If your priests ever discover what power lies at their fingertips with the will of their flock behind them ... well pray that they do not, or every word of fire and brimstone, of last judgments and devils with pitchforks, will become the gospel truth, rising up on all sides. Why do you think we have worked so hard to reinforce the church's hatred of "magic" and its practice?'

The worst of it was that I believed him. It sounded like truth. Without pause, I took the book of calculus and set it down on the view-ring, hard. Fexler's image vanished like a spot of light when you put your hand over the hole that casts it. There's only so much truth I can listen to in one go.

Qalasadi and Yusuf came to the edge of Hamada to see me off into the desert. I had made my farewells to Ibn Fayed in the coolness of his throne room, accepting gifts of gold, diamonds, amber, and of clove-spice for the journey. 'There is always pain,' the caliph told me, closing my hand around the spice.

Omal waited with the camels, ten altogether, three tall, white ones - gifts to me from the caliph - good breeders and from fine bloodlines by all accounts. To me they were as ill-tempered, ungainly, and foul-smelling as the rest of them. Along with Omal we had three more drovers and a guard of five Ha'tari.

'Safe journey, King Jorg.' Qalasadi bowed, one hand folded across his stomach.

'I've yet to have one of those, but let's hope this will be it.' I grinned and inclined my head a fraction.

'Next time you will come to my house, meet my wife, see what I have to suffer,' Yusuf said, a smile on him, eyes bright.

'Next time I will.' I turned to go, but paused. 'And the Prince of Arrow? Don't your predictions tell you to erase me so that he might have a clear run?' For a cold moment I wondered if the nine men accompanying me had orders to bury my corpse in a dune.

Yusuf's grin became a little fixed and he shot an embarrassed glance at Qalasadi. The older man laced his fingers and brought both hands to his chin.

'Our projections show no significant probability of you impeding the Prince of Arrow, King Jorg. As such we are rescued from having to wrestle with the problems of the one over the many and the many over the one.'

'If he comes to Renar, Jorg, don't get in his way.' An edge of pleading in Yusuf's voice. 'It would not be wise.'

'Well.' The revelation left me a little nonplussed despite saving me from conflict with the mathmagicians. 'That's good then.' And I went to mount my camel.



## Chella's Story

Keres had left a brittle feeling in her wake. The carriage creaked like an old man's joints and every place she had touched lay rough, discoloured, dry enough to suck the moisture from skin.

'She'll find her way back to the Dead King.' Chella turned away from the road, Kai kept close at her shoulder.

The lichkin would follow fractures and fault-lines, places where the veils hung threadbare between the world and death's dry dominion. She would travel in coffins, shadow the sick, drift with plague spores, and in time she would enter the Dead King's court, wrapped again in unquiet spirits, snatched up on her journey.

'We should be moving, delegate.' Captain Axtis of the Gilden Guard had marshalled his troops a mile down the road whilst the necromancers tended to Keres' needs. Although the guard remained ignorant of the lichkin its presence unsettled them, sapping morale. Axtis seemed keen to move on, to leave Gottering to the dead.

'Let us do that.' Chella hauled herself back into the carriage. 'Be as quick as you like, driver.'

They lurched into motion even before Kai shut the door behind him. He caught the side of the bench to stop the fall carrying him into Chella's lap, and held himself for a moment, twelve inches separating their swaying bodies. Her pulse beat fierce in the veins of her wrists.

Swift hands. For a moment Chella savoured the thought of such entanglement. Kai found his balance and his seat at the same time she pushed him away – a mutual decision. She closed her hands, nails sharp in her palms, and put her head back against the rest. What would I want with a pretty blond thing like him in any case? Unseasoned meat.

'We will be in Honth soon?' Kai asked.

'Yes.' He knew that. The living just liked to chatter – they would

spend long enough silent in the grave. The same need twisted her lips, wanting her to add more. She pressed them tight.

‘Then along the Danoob,’ Kai said. ‘Have you ever seen it, Chella?’

‘No.’

‘They say if you’re in love the waters look blue.’

Before Jorg she had never travelled, never strayed from Gelleth, just that short journey from Jonholt to the mountain. A scant few miles in three lifetimes, but oh the things she had seen on that trip.

The span of three lives spent digging into death, unravelling mysteries, stepping away from life in all its mess and clutter and squabbles. And here she sat, rattling her way toward the heart of empire, sick with being alive, stomach roiling at the jolting motion and at the thought of what lay ahead. Not until the Dead King announced her as his representative and pressed five voting seals into her hands had she ever doubted his genius. Now she knew it for insanity.

At the town of Wendmere Captain Axtis halted the column for lunch. The guard set their five times fifty warhorses, their pack animals, and the steeds of the column-followers to grazing in the meadows, careless of who farmed them or what need the grass was set against. The ragged tail of followers still straggled in as Kai and Chella seated themselves beside the hearth in Wendmere’s finest inn. Chella noted the armourers’ wagons rolling by, the carts of the farriers, the troop’s leather workers, the seamstresses’ tiny wagon. Kai paid more attention to the whores, an ever-changing population trailing the guard, girls on mules, girls in open buggies and gigs, more in Onsa’s wheel-house. Each band with some cut-faced rogue to guard and guide and chivvy and negotiate. Chella could almost see the chains of hunger and misery that towed them behind the golden men of Vyene.

Guards brought in goblets and platters in their velvet-lined cases from the goods train, each piece set with the imperial eagle. Only the Gilden Guard themselves could be trusted to serve their wards, to serve the Hundred or their representatives. Chella found herself wondering if these gleaming warriors could handle their swords as well as they handled the silver cutlery being set before her.

‘What do you think of the empire’s elite, Kai? You served in an army, did you not?’

Kai lowered his goblet from wine-darkened lips. He frowned at the

man standing to attention ready to refill it. 'Who says the guard are "elite"? Every petty noble's third son who's too dumb to make it in the clergy gets shipped off to Vyene where each grows fat on bribes as an over-valued "watchman", and each fourth year they get to go on a little trip to collect the Hundred. Pretty armour doesn't make a warrior.'

To their credit, the men around them hid their offence well.

'I guess the truth lies somewhere between,' Chella said. 'I hear they train hard, these men of Vyene. They are, perhaps, as well-forged as a weapon can be without fire.'

She looked out, through the distortion of the small and puddle-paned windows, across the rooftops, to distant smoke. Their true protection stalked out there somewhere, Thantos, more cautious than his sister and more deadly.

Keres had been skinned, though! A chill crept over Chella, despite the fire, despite the wine. If the lichkin could have told them what happened – her mind would be at better ease. A trouble named is a trouble tamed.

Captain Axtis came in, stamping against the cold and brushing rain off the shoulders of his cloak.

'Tell me, Captain,' Chella said. 'When were the guard last called on to defend the Gilden Gates, when did they last take to the battlefield?'

'Sixtieth year of the Interregnum, Madam Delegate.' Without hesitation. 'The battle of Crassis Plains, against the Holy Roman army of the false emperor Manzal.'

A generation ago. 'Were you even born then, Axtis?'

'I was two years of age, Madam Delegate.'

And showing grey hairs under that helm today. Chella wondered how they would stand against the dead of her master's army, the quick and the slow, with the ghouls and the lichkin.

'I came to say we should be moving on if you're set upon a full escort the whole way to Vyene.'

'Oh we are, Captain.' Chella set down her goblet and stood. It would serve Axtis very well to put her and Kai upon one of those golden barges. To let the Danoob carry his problems away, to discharge his responsibilities to the river, and if the barge should sink with all hands, a small price to pay to keep Congression beyond the Dead King's reach for another four years.



The carriage rolled on amidst the guard column, past woods and fields, town and cottage. Chella found herself watching the scenery, enjoying the warmth of rare sunshine between the rains, breathing in the scents of the countryside, the stink of farms. When the cry of 'Honth' shook her from her thoughts she bit her tongue to let the pain sharpen her. Life casts more spells than any necromancer and they can be twice as deadly in their softness.

'How far?' she called out to the driver.

'A mile, two maybe.'

They creaked on for a few more minutes before rolling to a halt.

'We can't be there yet.' Kai opened the door. Hedgerows, cattle lowing beyond. A surge of horse and gold-armoured bodies, and Axtis dismounted before them.

'Lady Chella, another delegate—'

'Get out of the way.' A louder voice overriding the captain's. 'You can't stop me – I'm on a peace mission.'

Axtis slammed the carriage door in Kai's face.

'You have no authority here, sir!' Axtis used the shout he reserved for his men. 'I suggest you return to the forward column.'

The sound of someone jumping from their horse. 'I'm on a diplomatic visit, Captain. Your job is to facilitate such intercourse. If we delegates come to blows you may intervene.'

The carriage door rattled, a hand on the handle. Kai blocked the grille, staring down at the scene outside.

'This has to be the representatives from the Drowned Isles, no? Who else would be following from the west?' A loud sniff. 'Doesn't smell like the Dead King – who've you got in here, Captain?'

Kai opened the door. And backed away, half-pushed, half of his own accord, as Jorg Ancrath, clad in the blacks and reds of a road tunic, clambered in.

'Chella!' The boy turned one of his dangerous smiles on her, ignoring Kai.

'Jorg.'

He sat on the bench opposite them, legs stretched out, boots muddy on the floor, at perfect ease. He flicked the long black tangles of his hair back across his shoulders, watching her with dark eyes,

amusement touching the sharp angles of his face, the ugly burn a reminder of his extremes.

‘Two of you?’ Again that sharp grin. ‘Is that all the living that can be mustered from the Drowned Isles? And Chella, you’re no Brettan. I would have heard it in your voice.’

‘The Jorg?’ Kai turned her way.

‘A Jorg, certainly.’ Jorg leaned in, elbows on his knees. Outside, the guard clustered. ‘And it does seem I’m the object of unhealthy fascination in certain quarters. Isn’t that so, Chella?’ He let his hand fall to rest on the black skirts over her thigh. ‘I am of course married now, dear heart, so you must put romance from your mind.’

‘The Dead King—’ Kai began.

‘The Dead King loves me too, I think,’ Jorg said, fingers closing on her flesh. ‘He has watched me for years. Sent his minions to raid my brother’s tomb.’ He turned to face Kai, very quick. ‘Do you know why?’

‘I—’

Jorg turned back, fixing Chella with his stare. ‘He doesn’t know. Do you?’

‘No.’

‘How frustrating for you.’ Jorg released her and leaned back on the bench. Her leg burned where his fingers had been. ‘Shall we carry on? My column is just ahead waiting to cross the Rhyme at the Honth bridge.’

Kai stamped for the carriage to proceed. ‘From what I’ve heard, I am surprised that you would choose to ride in the Lady Chella’s company, King Jorg.’

‘She’s been telling tales, has she?’ Jorg leaned forward again, with the air of a conspirator. ‘Truth be told— Wait, I don’t even know your name. I know you’re a man of the Isles, I have one of your country men in my carriage, a Merassy man, Gomst they call him. I’m pleased to see the Dead King has sent at least as many Brettans to Congression as I have. But your name?’

‘He’s Kai Summerson,’ Chella said, anxious to gain some control. ‘So why are you riding with us, Jorg?’

‘Can’t I just enjoy your company? Might I not be pining for my lady of the mire?’ Jorg cast a lascivious eye along the length of her. Despite herself Chella felt the blood rise in her cheeks. Ancrath

noticed immediately and grinned all the wider. 'You look ... different, Chella. Older?'

She kept her lips sealed. They jolted another hundred yards before he spoke.

'In truth? I could think of no easy way to kill you all. And so to keep my son safe from you I need to watch you. Closely. If that should prove impossible I would of course have to resort to killing you the hard way.'

'Son?' Chella found it hard to imagine, and imagination was something that had returned in strength when the necromancy faded from her. 'You have a son?'

Jorg nodded. 'Even so. Another William, to make his grandfather proud. Though I don't know if Olidan of Ancrath lived long enough to be a grandfather?'

'If he's dead I know nothing of it.' Time was she felt each death as ripples in a pond, and the King of Ancrath would have made quite a splash – now though, she might have new eyes for the living world, but she lay deaf to the deadlands. Jorg's fault, of course. She said it to herself again, hoping to believe it. Jorg's fault.

Jorg frowned, just for a moment, replacing it with the smile he wore in place of armour. 'No matter.'

'I've no designs on your son, Jorg,' Chella said. It surprised her to find that she didn't.

'And you, Kai Summerson? Are you a child killer?' Jorg asked.

'No.' A sharp reply, the offence written on his face. It seemed laughable that a necromancer should rail against such a suggestion, but then she remembered Kai had killed no one since she took him. When you learn the dark arts amid the corpse-hordes of the Isles murder is no longer a pre-requisite.

'Me, I have taken the lives of children, Kai. Baby boy, small girl, it means little. The lives of men even less. Do not cross me.' Careless words scattered like broken glass for the Brettan to pick a path through. Chella came to Kai's aid before he cut himself.

'Does your son make you happy, Jorg?' The question felt important. Jorg Ancrath with a baby boy. Chella tried to picture him with the infant in his arms.

Jorg flashed a dark look her way. He bowed his head, shielded by

the hair that swept about his face, and for the longest time she thought he would not reply.

‘There are no happy endings for such as us, Chella. No redemption. Not with our sins. Any joy is borrowed – laughter shared on the road, and left behind.’ He turned to Kai. ‘I have killed children, Kai Summerson. In such company you will too.’ Something familiar lay in his voice, in the framing of his words. She could almost taste it.

Returning his gaze to Chella Jorg watched her face awhile, sorrow in his own. ‘We have both walked black paths, lady. Don’t think that mine leads back into the light. Of all those that tried to guide me, of my father, of the whispers from the thorn bush, of Corion’s evil council, the darkest voice was ever mine.’

And in a moment of recognition Chella knew who the Dead King was.

*When Makin reported the Isles' contingent catching up our own golden host I had known Chella would be amongst their number. Known it blood to bone, without evidence or reason. And I left our carriage, my wife, my child, my tantalizing aunt, with more swiftness than was seemly, and with less trepidation than when I went to my father's carriage, though this one might hold the Dead King himself. I closed the door on them all, on all my weaknesses. Despite my tempering of years some foolish part of me still reached for the happiness of family, the redemption love might bring. Broken hopes that would not serve me. I closed the door on them and rode toward what I knew best – toward the damned. My past lay black, the future burned, and in the thin slice between, the world expected me to be a father, to hold a son, to save him, save them all? Too much to ask of a man so dark with sin. Too much to ask of any man perhaps.*

The Dead King's carriage, whilst not so grand as Lord Holland's, had nothing funereal about it. Even the presence of two necromancers hadn't tainted the atmosphere. In fact I didn't know for sure if Kai Summerson practised the arts of reanimation: he seemed too young, too full of life. And Chella herself had changed. Beyond a doubt. In past encounters she had burned with an unholy joy, so fierce that its light became an after-image on the memory, obscuring truth. In the swamps and caverns an ambiguity of the flesh made her all things to all men, or at least to this one, ripe with the darkest juice. Now it seemed that a stranger sat opposite me, more old, more pale, still with a beauty to her, hair very black, high and delicate angles to her face, an elegance not seen before, her eyes dark with secrets and in unguarded moments becoming wounds.

'I still mean to kill you,' I said, in part to pass the time as we rumbled through the streets of Honth.

She shrugged, less easy in her indifference than of old. 'The Nuban

forgave me. You should too.'

That made me start. 'He did not!' But he probably did. The Nuban never held grudges – said he had enough to carry and a long way to go.

'So, tell me about the Dead King.' I asked Kai and he shuddered at the words. Just for a moment, quickly suppressed.

The Brettan looked out of the window before he answered, as if seeking the reassurance of daylight, comfort in the passing of narrow homes in plaster and thatch, each stuffed with lives, mother, father, squalling brats, toothless elders, bristling with argument and laughter, every flea hopping.

'The Dead King is the future, King Jorg. He closed his hand around the Drowned Isles and soon he'll reach out for the world. He rules in the deadlands, and we all will spend longer dead than we do living.'

'But who is he, Chella? What is he? Why the interest in Ancrath?' She knew something. Perhaps she would tell me in the hope it would make me suffer.

'Ancrath is the gateway to the continent, Jorg. You're a clever boy, you should know that.'

'Why me?' I asked.

'You make a lot of people take notice. Destroying mountains, holding huge armies at your gates. All very grand. And of course the Dead King knows you have your eye on Ancrath. It's bad enough that your father proves so stubborn in his resistance, to have the son there in his place would be worse still, maybe?'

'Hmmm.' It sounded plausible, but I didn't believe her. 'And surely this Dead King can't think to win friends at Congression? He expects diplomacy? Negotiations with dead things crawled from slime and dust?'

Chella smiled to herself, a gentle thing that made her pretty. 'There are worse monsters at the emperor's court, Jorg. The Queen of Red is on the road to Congression. The Silent Sister with her, to advise, and Luntar out of Thar with them. You've met Luntar I understand?'

'Just once.' I had no memory of him, but we had met. He had given me that copper box, and filled it. 'They might be monsters, perhaps worse than me, but they are born of women, they live, they will die. Tell me, where has this Dead King come from? Don't the dry-lands slope ever down? Don't they reach hell? Has he escaped Lucifer and climbed from the abyss?'

'He's no demon.' Chella made a slow shake of her head, as if it might have been better to have a risen demon among us. 'And what happens here, in the

mud and dirt of this world, matters very much to him. Heaven, hell, and earth, three that are one – there can be no change above or below that isn't mirrored here. This world, where our lives are spent, is both a lock and a lever. That is what the Dead King says.'

'And doesn't the Devil object to this vagrant camping on his very doorstep? Stealing what is his?' It seemed absurd to be debating the politics of hell, but I had reached into the dead-lands with my own hands, tasted the air, and I knew them to be a path to Lucifer's door.

'The Dead King plans to break open the gates of heaven,' Kai said. 'You think that he cares what else may come?'

'Everything is changing, Jorg.' Chella bowed her head. 'Everything.'

'You still haven't told me where he came from, this messiah of yours. Why don't the ancients speak of him? In what books is he recorded?' I asked, still hoping for grains of truth in her lies and madness. 'How old is he?'

'Young, Jorg. Very young. Younger than you.'





## Chella's Story

The bridge at Tyrol spanned the Danoob in seventeen arches, a broad carriageway riding across stone pillars. The great bridge back at Honth had leaped the Rhyme in one breath-taking arc, but Chella liked the Tyrol bridge better. She could imagine it being built, see in her mind's eye the men who laboured here.

'How does the river look to you, Chella?' Jorg watched close for her answer.

'Brown and churning.' She reported it faithfully. 'What do you see, Kai?'

Kai half stood, peering through the window grille, swaying with the motion of the carriage. 'Brown.'

'Are there no lovers amongst us?' Jorg asked. 'The legend that the waters look blue to those in love is older than this bridge.'

'The river is brown. Shit brown. It's a matter of silt and drainage and the sewers of Tyrol, not of the sick-making fantasies that people want to wrap their fucking in.' Chella saw no reason to keep the sourness to herself.

'Not so,' Jorg said. 'If the right man loved the right woman he could make that river run blue.'

'Water-sworn.' Kai sat back into the shadows, nodding.

'Meh.' Jorg shook his head. 'All this swearing. All these narrow paths. A man can reach into anything and turn it to his cause. It's not want, or desire, just certainty. Only be assured that whatever you reach into will reach into you in turn.'

He set his boots across the gap between seats, resting between Kai and Chella. 'Did you ever love, Kai? Was there a girl that would turn the waters blue for you?'

Kai opened his mouth then bit back on the answer. He started forward, then slumped. 'No.'

‘Love.’ Jorg smiled. ‘Now there’s something that will reach back into you.’

The carriage rumbled from the bridge down onto the north bank where the roads lay better tended.

‘Perhaps you should go back to your own carriage, Jorg, to your queen, and see if you like the view from there any better.’ Chella found herself not wanting him to leave, but tormenting him was all she knew. For a moment she saw the needle she had used to stick Kai, and felt it sliding into flesh again.

He pulled in his feet and leaned in toward her, close, hand resting once more upon her thigh. ‘What is it you’re hoping to achieve at Congression, Chella? The Dead King can’t think to win any converts, surely? I’m not even certain that Master Summerson here is a proper convert. So what is the point?’

‘The point is that we have a right to attend and that the Dead King wishes us to. Either should be enough for you, Jorg of Ancrath.’ Chella winced at the grip on her leg. Life and pain walked hand in hand, neither to her liking.

He narrowed his eyes – how many had seen that look and then nothing else ever again? – and moved closer, his breath tickling across her cheek. ‘You’re here to show us the human face of the dead-tide? To put Congression at its ease? Flatter old kings, a pretty boy to flirt with their queens and princesses?’

‘No.’ Anger bubbled up in her, hot under the coolness of his breath – her hands made claws. ‘We’re here with trickery and treachery and deceit and murder, just like you, Jorg of Ancrath, what else can broken things like us bring to the world?’

‘Renar.’

‘What?’ Her thigh burned, again, where he touched her, again.

‘Jorg of Renar.’

‘Doesn’t it gall you to take his name, the one who murdered little William? Sweet mother Rowan?’

‘Better than to take my father’s name.’

‘Instead you wear his brother’s name? A man you keep in dark torment? Don’t snarl so, I hear the guard speak of it, of how you murdered Harran, and another good man to get to the son.’

He leaned in close. ‘Maybe I keep the name to remind me of the

colour of my soul.' His breath out, her breath in. She tasted cinnamon.

'Was that all I needed to seduce you, Jorg? To just be a touch less damned?'

He turned from her, staring at Kai in his shadowed corner. 'Get out.' And he did, a quick unwelcome flash of daylight, cold and drear, and Kai was gone.

'I'm still going to kill you,' Jorg said, very close.

Chella closed his mouth with hers.

She ran her fingers across his shoulders, plunged her hands down then up under the pleating of his road-tunic, across the heat and hardness of muscle laid over his back, stippled by old scars, the slice of a heavy blade, nicks and cuts, a hundred thorn wounds. He moved over her, tall, heavy, the dark wave of his hair falling about them, the scrape of his burned face as his mouth found the hollow of her neck.

Something hot and wet and vital ran through her, a sudden flood that took her breath and lifted her. The life-force she'd been resisting, rejecting, washed away all resistance, implacable as spring. She tore at him, angry, fierce, wanting. He lifted her, without pause or effort, slamming her back against the padded wall. Some small fragment of her worried that the driver might think it the sign to stop, and the guard would gather round. Jorg surged against her and all other voices quieted. His desire woke an answer in her, the need bled from every line of him, spoke in the ragged breaths he drew.

Their bodies came together in a savage recognition of flesh, her limbs strained under the weight of him, hand splayed one second, clenched the next, cushions shredded. Outside, the uneasy snort of horses, the whickering of mares, the stamp of stallions reacting to stray energies, to the scent of their lust. Jorg slammed her against the wall once more, harder, and the carriage lurched forward, the team breaking into a trot despite the driver's cries. Black skirts gathered around her hips.

Jorg entered her, brutal, quick, wanted – an ungentle coupling, both of them torn by rough need. Chella rose to meet him, all her strength locked against him, riding and ridden, no comfort offered or given. They coupled like wild cats, instinctual aggression kept at bay, a truce imposed by some deeper, older, imperative, but unable to stop the violence bubbling over, ready to part squalling at the moment of

release.

'Enough!' Jorg threw her off him and lurched backward onto the opposite bench, beyond the reach of her nails, panting, blood at the corner of his mouth.

'I— I'll say when it's enough, King of Renar.' She spat the words between her gasps. She wanted more, but it might kill her. Every inch of her tingled, burned with a fire of new-woken life. Jorg had been the key to turn the lock. Perhaps any man might have served, but it seemed right that it had been him.

Jorg pushed back sweat-plastered hair and tied up his trews, the belt too broken to hold. 'I'm far from sure you can even stand, madam.' The flash of a grin, full of mischief. He looked very young in that moment.

'So that's how diplomacy is conducted at Congression?' she asked, heart still thumping, lying back in warmth and wetness.

'When we get there we'll see.' Jorg scooped some stray buttons from the floor and set a hand to the door. 'And when I'm crowned we'll have our last kiss.'

As if she'd ever bend the knee and kiss his hand. The arrogance of it made her snarl.

'Back to your lady love now, Jorg?' Chella set a smile on her lips but it didn't fit well.

'She's too good for the likes of me, Chella. I'm soiled goods, past repair. I belong with our kind.' He flashed that smile again and pushed out the door. 'Come near my son and I'll kill you, Chella.' And he was gone.

I kept Brath to a gentle trot, passing the guard of the Drowned Isles delegation and drawing ever closer to the golden army surrounding the delegations of Ancrath and Renar. Katherine with Father's two votes, me with my seven.

Katherine would know. Somehow she would know, even if she didn't trespass in my dreams she'd smell Chella on me. Miana would just shake her head in that way that makes her look like someone's mother rather than the child she is. 'Never tell me, never let me be told.' That's all she ever asked of me. And I've held to it as far as I know. Clearly, she deserved better, but it would require a better man to give it.

I found a foolish smile on my lips and wiped it away. My tongue ached and I had lines of fire across my back. Nail wounds always hurt more than the shallow cut of a blade. Taking Chella had been ill advised, but my whole life has been a series of dangerous choices wrestled around to better outcomes. Not that it had been a choice, not truly. There are times when we realize we're just passengers, all our intellect and pontification, carried around in meat and bones that knows what it wants. When flesh meets fire it wants to pull back and does so whatever you might have to say about it. There can be times, when man meets woman, that the same forces work in reverse.

Makin rode with me from the rear of our column to Holland's carriage.

'You're leaving them alone to plot now?' He had a suspicious look on him, as though he knew I'd been up to something.

'A judgment call,' I said. 'I don't judge they'll be calling on us. And if they do ...'

'Missing our company, were you?' Makin pulled alongside, shoulder to shoulder, putting the faint scent of clove-spice in the air. It worried me he took so much, blunting the true Makin, but I could hardly counsel sense. Red Kent joined us as we moved further up the column. 'Missing us?' he echoed

Makin.

‘Missing you? You remember Chella from the leucrota halls, from the swamp. How long would you like to ride in her carriage?’

Both men rode in silence for a minute, staring out across the fields. Which part of those encounters they might have been visualizing I couldn’t say. Holland’s carriage came into view as we rounded a long bend.

‘Just long enough,’ Makin said, answering my forgotten question. ‘I’d ride with her long enough.’

Kent reached out and tugged up the collar of my road-tunic, not something he’d done since I was ten, and certainly not since I was king. ‘Mosquito bite,’ he rasped in that burned voice of his, and touched his neck. ‘Big one from the looks of it, like what we had us back in the Cantanlona marsh.’

I climbed to the carriage footplate from Brath’s saddle without having the driver stop.

‘Did you miss me, Father Gomst?’ I slammed the door behind and threw myself between Katherine and Miana, one scrambling to get her book out of the way, the other hauling my son clear.

‘Did Orrin ever tell you about the day we met on the road, Katherine?’ I didn’t give the good bishop a chance to reply.

She closed her book, some small and battered tome in red leather. ‘No.’

‘Hmm. And there was me thinking I’d made an impression.’

‘But Egan did, several times. And Egan was a man of few words,’ she said. Behind me, William started to fuss for the breast.

‘He said Orrin was a fool for toying with you, for letting you live, said he would have killed you in three heartbeats.’

‘Well I was only fourteen,’ I said. ‘In the end I bested *him* in less than three heartbeats. In any case, I had a friend with me that day who would have roasted Orrin in his armour by way of a victory prize. So once again, even with hindsight, Orrin was the wisest man there.’

As the carriage rumbled on I took the view-ring out and used it with practised ease to zero in on the Tall Castle. Years of such watching had revealed little about my father’s plans save to tell me they hadn’t been written in letters six foot tall and left upon the roof. Now, I saw palls of smoke trailing down across the city. Even from heaven’s heights the black work of the fires could be seen, stamped across the Tall Castle, across the streets of Crath. It seemed the Dead King was burning my past just as the Builders

planned to burn our future. If his dark flood turned into a tide the Builders would end us all before such magics tore the world open.

Closer study found black sails on the Sane, columns marching along both shores. I followed their progress. The Dead King's legions had reached through Gelleth already. Forcing their pace night and day there existed a possibility that they might catch us before the gates of Vyene. Estimating the size of the horde proved difficult, strung out and loose along the banks as it was, tens of thousands perhaps. More might join with it along the way. Even so. Dead men against heavy horse and city walls? It seemed a rash move.

'What do you see?' Gomst asked as I made my count.

'Trouble.'

The thought of the dead things marching, despoiling the garden lands of Ancrath – it put a thin blade between my ribs and let it twist. I wondered if even the graves at Perechaise had yielded their dead. I might not have stood to keep the Dead King's horde from the Tall Castle but in a different time, beside the girl-who-waits-for-spring and the grave in which I buried Justice, I would have made such a stand.

I leaned back, my eye aching after two hours and more of staring through the ring. Miana slept, our child on her chest. I thought of my father, seated in his throne, iron diadem upon his head. The old bastard was dead? I didn't know what to do with that. It didn't fit, no matter how I turned it. He had been mine to kill, mine to end. Fate had been drawing me to that moment all these years ... I rubbed my sore eye, slumped forward, elbows on knees, chin on knuckles. Father couldn't be dead. I set the matter aside, to chew upon when it seemed more palatable.

Across the carriage Bishop Gomst dozed, grey hair straying, mouth ajar. Osser Gant watched me though, silent and with a bright eye. Makin's chancellor, brought for his advice, yet holding his tongue.

I thought then of Coddin, my chancellor rotting back in the Haunt, of Fexler Brews lost in his machines, both of them with their talk of setting the world to rights, Coddin wanting me to break the power of the hidden hands, Fexler's ambition grander still, to turn some non-existent wheel and return us to how things were meant to be, to make the world once more as it was given to us.

Two Ancraths, the wise had said, two to undo all the magic, to turn Fexler's wheel! A sour smile quirked my lips. They'd better pray, both of them, Coddin and Fexler, the dying man and the ghost, pray that prophecy

meant nothing, for there would be just the one Ancrath in Vyene and he'd brought with him no clue as to how to repair a broken empire, let alone a broken reality.

More rode on this matter than the power and influence of a few sorcerers, more than the enchantments of Sageous's peers, men like Corion and Luntar who played their games with lives. Fexler's third way rested upon the restoration of what had been normality. Michael and his brotherhood saw flesh as a disease that could be burned out, thereby ceasing the rotation of that wheel, stopping the world from cracking open. Fexler alone had entertained larger thoughts: he alone had believed we might turn back what had been done and spare mankind from a second coming of the fire that he had once brought down upon us.

In truth I took my firstborn to the place where the Builders would start their fire. If Fexler proved as deluded as Michael had suggested – if he couldn't change the nature of existence – Vyene would burn and new suns would rise on man's last day.

We narrowed the distance to Vyene and the weather closed around us, late autumn chill, river fog refusing the sun, persistent rain, cold and sapping the spirits, making mud of the land. The countryside grew more dour with each mile that passed beneath our hooves. We found whole villages abandoned, reviving memories of Gottering and filling every treeline with threat. The guard discovered fresh graves disinterred, late crops flattened in the field, apples rotting on the bough.

Riders passed us, their horses blown and ragged, the men not much better. All of them bore tales of the Dead King's forces, of their strike through Ancrath, their advance into Gelleth, and now the threat to Attar, cutting a dark wedge through empire along the path we had taken only days before.

It might be said that destruction and disaster have always dogged my heels, but never before had that curse been so manifest. I travelled to Vyene and hell followed in my wake.

We stopped that night in the town of Allenhaure and ate at table within a great beer hall that could hold close on three hundred of the Gilden Guard. In Allenhaure at least, on the very doorstep of the empire's heartland, neither winter nor the Dead King's blight had yet sunk their teeth. The locals brought huge haunches of roast meat on wooden platters, lamb in a crust of garlic, herb, and hazelnut, beef unadorned and bleeding. Beer too, blonde with a



thick white head, in tankards built like barrels of wooden staves bound by hoops, and in glass steins for the high table. They seemed genuinely pleased to see us, a festival atmosphere throughout. I wondered though if it were merely that if they feted us the guard might choose to restock provisions at the next town.

The beer had a clean taste, sharp, and I drank too much of it, perhaps to dim the images from Chella's carriage, playing again and again through my mind, making me feel at once both sullied and hungry for more. Late on in the evening I leaned across Miana and took our son from the crib at her side.

'Don't wake him, Jorg!'

'Oh shush, I'm taking him for a walk. He'll like it.' To his credit William, still looking only half-human as new babies are wont to look, lay limp in sleep while I manhandled him to my chest, and seemed impervious to disturbance of any kind. A cold tremor ran through me as I remembered Degran lying in my hands, lifeless, a ragdoll. I bit down on the memory, refusing to let it cripple me each time I held my boy. The death burned out of my touch the day I broke the siege at the Haunt.

'At least wrap him up warm, take the—'

'Shush, woman.' For such a tiny thing she held an endless supply of nagging. 'Be thankful I'm not leaving him on a hillside like the Spartans.'

I carried him between rank upon rank of the Gilden Guard, all bent over their meat and beer, voices lifted in half a dozen songs. By the main doors, open to vent the stink and heat of the road-ripe hundreds within, I caught sight of Gorgoth, unmistakable, just outside at the edge of the torchlight. I went out, William clutched to my chest.

'Gorgoth.' A name that feels good in the mouth.

'King Jorg.' He turned his cat's eyes on me, his great head turning slowly on a tree-trunk neck. He had a gravitas about him, did Gorgoth, something leonine.

'Of all the people I know.' I moved to stand beside him and followed his gaze out into the night. 'Of all of them, since the Nuban died – it's your friendship, your respect, I wanted. And you're the one not to give it. I didn't want it because you didn't give it – but I do want it.' Perhaps the beer spoke for me, but it spoke true.

'You're drunk,' he said. 'You shouldn't be holding a baby.'

'Answer the question.'

'It wasn't a question.'

‘Answer it anyway,’ I said.

‘We can never be friends, Jorg. You have crimes on your soul, blood on your hands, that only God can forgive.’ His voice rolled away from us, deeper and darker than the night.

‘I know it.’ I lifted William closer to my face and breathed him in. ‘You and I know it. The rest of them, they somehow forget, convince themselves it can be swept away, misremembered. Only you and Katherine see the truth. And Makin, though it’s Makin he can’t forgive, not me.’

I passed William to Gorgoth, pressing him forward until the leucrota lifted one massive three-fingered hand to receive him. He stood very still, eyes wider than wide, staring at my son, almost lost in the width of his palm.

‘Men shun me – I have never held a baby,’ he said. ‘They think what corrupted me will pass to their children if I touch them.’

‘And will it?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘Well then.’

We stood, watching the rise and fall of a tiny chest.

‘You’re right not to be a friend to me,’ I said. ‘But will you be a friend to William, as you once were to Gog?’ The boy would need friends. Better men than me.

The slowest nod of that great head. ‘You taught me that. Somehow you taught me what Gog was worth.’ He lifted William close to his face. ‘I will protect him, Jorg of Ancrath. As if he were my own.’



## Chella's Story

'There's no room at the inn.' Kai twisted a grin at her. Allenhaure is full. He climbed back into the carriage, slipping off muddy boots.

'Full of?'

'King Jorg's escort,' Kai said.

'So have Axtis press on to the next town,' Chella said.

'It's a long haul to Gauss and the guard are always treated well here. Rumbles of discontent I'm hearing, as if there's real men under all that gilding and those stern expressions.'

'Not my concern. Let's be moving.' Though as she spoke the words it seemed that perhaps it was her concern. She tasted it at first, a wrongness in the air. 'Wait.'

Kai paused, a boot half-returned to his foot. 'What?'

By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes ... 'Just wait.' She held up a hand.

Wrongness. A dry sharp sense of wrong, like grit behind her eyeballs. The temperature fell, or perhaps her body just thought it did for her breath didn't steam.

'Lichkin.' Kai felt it too.

'Hiding himself,' she said. 'Thantos.'

'What does he want?' Kai's poise fell away when lichkin drew near. Keres had terrified him. Thantos was worse.

'It's a reminder,' Chella said. Some part of her had been hoping the plan forgotten or changed, a large part, and growing larger as life reclaimed her. She cursed Jorg Ancrath and steeled herself to this new task.

'Go into town, get a cart and have it loaded with ale casks. We'll camp in the fields toward the river. The guard can have their revels.'

Kai sniffed. 'Looks like rain.'

'Have them build fires. They won't notice the rain after long.'

‘Ale will do that for you.’ Kai nodded. He couldn’t manage a grin though, not with death stalking so close, scraping every nerve raw.

Chella reached into the purse on her dress-belt. ‘Take this.’ She spilled four heavy pieces of gold into his hand, Brettan bars.

‘What—’ He nudged the small vial of black glass lying amongst the gold in his palm. From the change in his face she could tell he understood.

‘Styx water. One drop per cask.’

\* \* \*

‘What a thing it would be.’ Chella held the goblet before her, making a slow swirl of the ale, the foam all but gone, just islands in a dark and moonlit sea. ‘To fly.’

‘Yes.’ Kai stared into his own dark sea, his own foam scattered islands. Perhaps it reminded him of his drowned land.

A long silence. The soft rain made no sound. Far, in the distance, a muted cheer from Allenhaure, some celebration amongst Jorg’s guard.

‘I almost did.’ Kai set his silver goblet on the table between them. ‘Once.’

‘How can you almost fly?’ Chella shook her head.

‘How can you almost love?’ He looked up at the sky, starless and bible-black. ‘I stood on a lip of rock, held out over the Channel Sea, where the waves pound on white cliffs. And the wind there, it blows so cold and sure, takes the heat from you, wraps your bones. I leaned out into it, nothing but the wind to hold me, and those dark waves slapping and pounding way, way below. And it filled me, like I was made of glass, or ice, or air, and the only thing in my mind was the voice of that east wind, the voice of forever calling me.’

‘But?’

‘But I couldn’t let go. If I had flown I would have flown away from everything I knew. From me.’ He shook his head.

‘And what wouldn’t we give to fly away from being us right now?’ Chella flicked her goblet over and stood as the liquid spilled over the table. All across the field men of the guard lay sprawled as if in sleep, lying, some of them in their gold armour, in the muddy grass. Captain

Axtis had ended on his back, half-out of his pavilion, sword in hand, eyes staring at the sky and full of rain. Out of nearly three hundred men only eleven hadn't at least sipped the Allenhaure ale. The lichkin had found those men in the dark and played his games, first making them silent with the wet tearing of flesh.

'Will Thantos be needing the others too?' Kai pushed away the white arm of a camp-girl, sodden dress, hair dark with rain, face-down in the dirt. He levered himself from his chair and stepped over her to join Chella.

She nodded. 'They'll go to the woods and join the Dead King's force when he arrives.'

Kai drew his cloak tight. A mist lay ankle-deep around them, rising out of nowhere as if it bled from the ground, white as milk.

'It's starting.'

The sense of wrongness that had scratched at her all evening, twisting likes worms beneath the skin, now crystallized into horror. When the dead return there's a feeling of everything flowing the wrong way, as if hell itself were vomiting them out.

Axtis sat up first, before his men, before the dead whores, the boys with their serving plates and polish rags. He didn't blink. The water ran from his eyes, but he didn't blink. Wrong.

All around them men stood in their golden armour. The Styx water had left no mark upon them, save for the few who tumbled into the open fires of course. Styx water does its work without hurry, dulling senses, bringing sleep, paralysing the voice first, then the larger muscle groups. At the last the death it offers is an agony of tortured muscles fighting and failing. Chella had enough necromancy in her fingertips to know that they had not died easy. Their pain echoed in her.

'I still don't understand,' Kai said. 'It won't take long before someone discovers something is wrong with them. And then all that talk of diplomacy is just noise. We'll be fortunate to escape without being beheaded then burned. That's what they do to our sort you know? That's if you're lucky. If not, it's burning first, then behead what's left.'

'The Dead King has his reasons,' Chella said.

'All this to spread terror? It seems extravagant.'

Chella shrugged. Better Kai not know the Dead King's reasons.

She'd rather not know them herself. 'We ride from here. In the saddle.'

'What? Why?' The rain fell faster, harder, just to over-score his point.

'Well you can stay in the carriage if you want.' Chella wiped the water from her face and spat. 'But Thantos will be in there, and lichkin aren't the best of travelling companions.'

Vyene is the greatest city on earth. I could be wrong of course. It might be that in the vastness of Ling, or beyond the Sahar at the heart of Cerana, or somewhere in the dusts of the Indus there lies a more fabulous work of men. But I doubt it. The wealth of an empire has been spent in Vyene, year upon year, century upon century, exchanged for stone and skill.

‘Incredible.’ Makin took off his helm as though it might somehow hinder his ability to absorb the glories on every side. Rike and Kent said nothing, struck dumb. Marten kept close at my side, every bit the farmer once again, as if six years of war, of leading armies to victory, had slid from him, scared away by the majesty of our surroundings.

‘Lord Holland would be a peasant here,’ Makin said.

Few of the cities I had taken in the year following my conquest of Arrow held a single building to compare with the grand structures lining our approach to the palace. Here nobles of the old empire had built their summer homes, in all shapes and sizes, from confections in rose-marble to edifices in granite that scraped the clouds, all competing to impress the emperor, his court, and each other. My great grandfather had been such a noble, Duke of Ancrath, holding the lands in the name of the empire and at the steward’s pleasure. When the steward died and the empire fell into its pieces, Grandfather made his own crown, claimed Ancrath for himself, and called himself king.

Even in Vyene though, a nervousness ran through the streets. More than the excitement of Congression. The place held a tension, a drawn breath waiting release. Bonfires burned in alleyways and distant squares, corpses given to the flame in fear that something worse might take them. The crowds that watched our procession had a restlessness to them. A guardsman on a skittish horse lost his helm and laughter went up among the locals, but it rang too shrill, edged with hysteria.

The roads to the palace, and there are four, each lie broad enough that a



man couldn't throw a spear from the gates of the residences on one side to those on the other. Our column rode at the centre, fifteen abreast and thirty deep with the carriages in the midst and the wagons to the rear. The followers and hangers-on, including Onsa's wheel-house packed with negotiable affection, had melted away in the outer reaches of the city. Captain Devers had sent out word to the effect that no undesirables should approach the Gilden Gate. I had to grin at that. I'm sure a wheel-house full of prostitutes would carry less sin through those gates than the Hundred on their best day.

I rode on, my mood growing more grim. I came to swap one crown for a different one, to exchange my throne for a less comfortable chair. Perhaps I would find Fexler Brews' third way and paper over the cracks that ran through the world. I didn't know. But I knew the Jorg who wore that new crown, who might sit upon the all-throne, would be no different. No better. No more able to tear free of his past and the hooks that sunk too deep.

The emperor's palace sits amid a square so vast that the grand houses on the far side appear tiny. The four roads converge upon the palace dome, passing through an acreage of flagstones devoid of statue, fountain, or monument. On normal days the wealthy citizens might flock in this space, spending coin at stalls and stands able to cater to their excess. Around Congression the autumn winds sweep through unhindered.

'God's whore!' Makin broke into my musings. He stood in his stirrups.

Sir Kent had himself a frown at that. Not so keen on the blaspheming since his conversion.

'Such language!' I tsked at Lord Makin. 'What pray tell is amiss.'

'You could see for yourself if you weren't riding on your dignity,' he said, half-smiling but still blinking in disbelief.

I sighed and stood too. In the distance, halfway to the palace, a thin line of black-cloaked soldiers stood across the breadth of West Street. Something familiar about the red-crested helms, the way the gleaming plate armour gave way to ridiculous pantaloons striped in blue and yellow.

'Well fuck me, it's the Pope.' I sat back down.

'The Pope?' Rike asked, as if unfamiliar with the word.

'Yes, Brother Rike.' The column began to slow. 'Fat old woman, interesting hat, infallible.'

We closed the distance, hooves clattering on the cobbled road. The papal guard waited, impassive, polearms with their butts to the flagstones, pennants fluttering, blades to the sky. Captain Devers brought his men to a standstill

before the line. Behind the Pope's men a sedan chair rested, a huge and ornate construction closed in on all sides against the weather and prying eyes. The ten bearers stood at attention beside the carrying poles.

'Her holiness will speak with King Jorg.' The centremost of the guardsmen called out the demand, perhaps the leader of the squad but marked no differently from any other.

'This will be interesting.' I swung out of my saddle and walked toward the front of our column.

Miana opened the door as I passed Holland's carriage. 'Make this right, Jorg,' she told me. 'Next time Marten might not be there to save the day.'

I turned, took her hand and made a smile for her. 'It cost me forty thousand in gold to get this meeting, I'm not going to waste it, my queen. I may be foolish on occasion, but I'm not an idiot.'

'Jorg.' A warning tone as her hand slipped mine.

The front ranks parted and I approached the papal guard. The man who summoned me forward now looked pointedly at Gog, scabbarded at my hip.

'Well, show me to her holiness, then. Can't wait all day, I've got business to attend to.' I nodded to the great dome of the palace rising behind him.

A pause, and he turned to lead me through the line. We came to the carriage-box and three of the bearers hastened forward with chairs, two hefting a broad purple-cushioned stool, one with a simple ebony ladder-back for me.

Another bearer joined them and they stood two to either side of the door to the carriage-box. A very wide door, I noted. A fifth man scurried around to the rear and I heard the opposite door click open. I guessed he might be tasked with pushing.

The closer door opened and an acreage of purple silk, strained across wobbling flesh, began to emerge. The bearers reached in and retrieved short arms, pudgy hands overburdened with gemmed rings. They pulled. The fifth man pushed. The mountain grunted and a head appeared, bowed forward, sweat making straggles of thin dark hair across a crimson scalp. A crucifix of gold hung below the wattles and folds of her neck, a hefty thing half an inch thick, a foot in length, a ruby at the crossing point for the blood of Christ. It must have weighed more than a baby.

And out she came, the supreme pontiff, shepherdess of many sheep, a slug teased from her nest. The flowered reek of perfumes and oils couldn't hide the rankness that emerged with her.

They sat her on the stool, overflowing. The guard from the line stayed at my side. He had the look to him, pale eyes, watchful, scarred hands. I didn't let the pantaloons distract me. Watchful men are to be watched.

'Your holiness.' Pius XXV if I were to call her by name.

'King Jorg. I thought you would look older.' She couldn't be shy of seventy but hadn't a wrinkle on her, all stretched away by her bulk.

'All alone,' I asked. 'No cardinals, no bishops dancing attendance? Not so much as a priest to carry your bible?'

'My retinue are the guests of Lord Congrieve at his country estate, investigating reports of irregularities at the Sisters of Mercy, a nunnery with a chequered history.' She deployed a purple kerchief to wipe spittle from the corner of her mouth. 'I will rejoin them in due course, but I felt a private meeting between us would be more ... conducive. The words we exchange here will appear on no records.' She smiled. 'Even for a Pope, speaking for God himself, it is no simple matter to thwart the will of the Vatican archivists. To them there are few sins greater than allowing a Pope's utterances to be lost.' Another smile and the folding of many chins.

I pursed my lips. 'So, to what do I owe this pleasure?'

'Shall I have Tobias bring wine? You look thirsty, Jorg.'

'No.'

She paused for the pleasantries or explanation. I offered none.

'You're building a cathedral in Hodd Town.' Dark eyes watched me, currants sunk in the pale pudding of her face.

'News travels fast.'

'You're not the only one that speaks to *Deus in machina*, Jorg.'

The Builder-ghosts spoke to her – Fexler had told me as much. He'd told me that they steered the church against magic in all its flavours, as much to blind the priests to their own potential for wielding the power of the masses as to have them quell its use by others. Any kind of faith stacked up behind a creed or title could amplify the will of the relevant figurehead to a frightening degree. It pleased me to see her hamstrung by what she thought of as secret and sacred knowledge.

'Why build the cathedral now?' she asked.

'The cathedral has been under construction for twenty years and more,' I said. 'My entire life.'

'But soon it will be finished, and people will expect me to come to bless it before the first mass.' She shifted her bulk on the stool. 'I heard this news on

my tour of Scorrion, and came here to speak with you. You must know why.'

'You feel safer here,' I said.

'I am the Vicar of Christ, I walk in safety anywhere in Christendom!'

Anger in her tone now, but more bluster than true indignation.

'Walk?'

She let that pass, cold eyes on me. 'I will hear your confession, Jorg. And offer forgiveness to the penitent.'

'I will confess to *you*?' I rolled my head, vertebrae popping in my neck. 'Me to you?'

Her guardsman took half a step closer. I wondered what other roles he held. Executioner? Assassin? Perhaps he trained with the white-skinned dream-smith who visited the Haunt on Vatican business.

'You sent an assassin after my wife and unborn child.' In some inner darkness cold winds stirred and the ember of an old rage glowed once more.

'We walk in a vale of tears, Jorg, the only matter of consequence is how we place our steps.'

'What does that mean?' Was I supposed to nod wisely? To assume her wisdom surpassed the need for meaning?

'Your father's funeral will be held soon, no doubt. To have the Pope herself usher him into paradise at the ceremony would do your standing at Congression untold good. Not to mention the small matter of papal sanction on the inheritance.'

'He's truly dead?' I saw his face, without emotion gazing over his court. He would look no different, laid in the tomb. No less human.

'You didn't know?' She raised a heavy brow.

'I knew.' I saw him at the battlement on the highest tower, sunset lighting him in crimson and shadow, hair streaming in the wind. I saw him with Mother, laughing, too far away to hear.

'Four days. That's how long Ancrath's defences held without him. The Dead King's creatures are on the march now.' She watched me for some reaction. 'Hard upon your heels.'

'And how will you stop them, Holiness?' The dead wouldn't seek out and lay siege to castles, they wouldn't claim lands, levy taxes. The Dead King wouldn't rule, only ruin.

'We will pray.' She shifted her bulk. 'These are the end of days, my son. All we can do is pray.'

'Your son?' I tilted my head, seeing the pale-eyed killer beside me without

looking. Road-eyes that's called. Seeing without looking. I drew the deepest breath and that hidden ember grew white-hot.

Tobias moved his right foot, just a fraction. He knew. Pius would depend only on the best. She thought her guards a mere formality. Like so many before her, despite the evidence writ plain in the trail of bodies behind me, she thought to bind me with nothing more than convention. Tobias, though, he knew my heart, shared my instinct.

'You're not my mother, old woman.'

Fat people are hard to kill with your bare hands. They carry their own padded armour. I tried to throttle Fat Burlow a time or two, even Rike found that a challenge. Tobias would let his polearm fall in the moment he moved to act, a prop, nothing more, another piece of papal foolishness, convention. He would go for his knife, hidden somewhere. And I for mine, no time for swords. And for all of Brother Grumlow's teachings, I would be in a chair with my back to him, he would be standing, and I'd die before the fat bitch got her squeal out, before I so much as scratched her.

'Play nice, boy.' She didn't stir to anger. You don't win the cardinals over with roaring. The thickest skin, patience, time, inexorable pressure, these will move even the most weighty backside into the papal throne if the owner is sufficiently shrewd.

I blinked. 'Did they not tell you about me? Was Murillo not enough of a hint?' Quick hands, that's what a knife fight is all about. But quick hands are wasted if you're hunting your weapon while the other man's fingers are wrapped around his. Don't waste your speed at the start of the first move. All that does is advertise that it *is* a move. 'You sent an assassin to kill—'

'A king rules by the will of his people.' Just a hint of irritation now. 'The people look to Roma for their eternal salvation. You're old enough to know where your interests lie. And those of your son. The cathedral—'

I leaned forward in my seat, unhurried, the intent listener, then reached out, slow enough, but sure: hesitation is the killer. Then fast. Ripping the crucifix from about her neck. I threw it, hard as hard, tearing it through a flat arc and releasing it to fly straight and true. Tobias caught it. A neat catch between the eyes, one soft, heavy arm of the cross punching through his forehead so that the whole thing hung there as he toppled. Now my knife. *To everything there is a season, a time to every purpose under heaven.* Memories of Bishop Murillo's priests sprang up as I dragged the blade through the folds of fat about Pius's neck. 'A time to die.'

Pius hit the ground first, then Tobias, then the polearm. Then for the longest time those of us not on the ground dying just stood there looking at each other.

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‘Captain Devers, I believe I’m about to be attacked on your watch!’ I hollered it at him, thinking it best to pre-empt the matter rather than bring it up as forty or more papal guards started trying to perforate me.

I saw motion among the gold helms back by our carriage. It would take a moment or three for Devers to come to grips with the situation.

‘Oh come on, I just killed the fecking Pope. You *are* going to attack me, aren’t you?’ I drew Gog and smiled invitingly at the nearest guards. Pantaloons or not, they would prove deadly enough. Multiple polearms against a single sword in open space is not a contest. I started to back around the sedan chair. The bearers scattered. Not pious men it seemed.

Still half-dazed the five guards closest to me levelled their weapons. All along the line the polearms fell in a wave, aiming at me.

‘That man is under my protection!’ Devers found his voice and urged his stallion forward.

Somehow that galvanized the Pope’s men and they surged forward, screaming incoherent rage. Even the bearers thought to join in, reaching for me with over-long, over-muscled arms, though you’d have thought they’d be grateful not to have to carry her any more.

The Gilden Guard rushed in from behind, and I played ‘find the Jorg’, skipping in and out of the sedan chair, threading my way through the bearers, whilst we had ourselves a good old-fashioned slaughter.

It ended too soon. Polearms outreach swords, but if they’re pointed the wrong way the fight will be a short one. They’d been pointed at me. They should have watched the guard.

Gog caught in a man’s spine and had to be hauled out with both hands on the hilt and a foot to the fellow’s chest. Fortunately he was the last of the bearers. I got the blade free, turning just in time for Makin to grab me by the breastplate and slam me into the Pope’s chair.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

Devers came up beside him, sword dripping. ‘You killed the Pope!’ As if I hadn’t noticed.

‘She killed herself when she went after my son.’ I lay back against the sedan’s wooden wall, relaxing in Makin’s grip.

‘You killed the Pope,’ Devers said again, staring down at the blood-soaked mess of her, an armless bearer sprawled across her holy legs.

‘What you need to do, Captain Devers, is have your men load her carcass into this handy box behind me. And whilst they’re doing that, and carting all the other bodies away, you need to get the Lord Commander of the Guard out here.

‘I suspect that when Lord Commander Hemmet considers the fire that will spread from the flame I set burning here, he will wish that it never happened. He will wish that the Gilden Guard had not slaughtered the Pope’s personal detachment of papal soldiers. And he will be very interested to hear that there are no surviving witnesses from Rome. Anything that happens without witnesses never really happened at all.

‘In three days I expect to be crowned emperor and those who have failed to support me will live to regret their lack of discernment. But not for very long.

‘If it turns out that I am not crowned then I’ll be too busy to let it worry me overmuch – I’ll be raising a nine-nation army to march on Roma so that I can burn that den of corruption to the ground. So all in all, if your Lord Commander wants to avoid rivers of blood and making a personal enemy of the next emperor, for the sake of a *Pope* ... he will say that Pius and her guards fell foul of a lichkin. Ship her remains back to Vatican City and be done with it. I can even suggest a replacement ...’

Makin let go, allowing me to slide a couple of inches down the wall of the sedan chair, from tiptoes to heel and toe. I hadn’t realized I was nearly off the ground. ‘It will never work. You can’t hush up something like this.’

‘Look around you, Makin.’ I swept an arm. ‘It’s a wasteland. Anyone who counts is in the palace, and none of them will be looking out, I can tell you that for fact. And their servants will be hard at work way over there.’ I waved to the distant mansions. ‘And the good folk of Vyene are hiding in their homes. To some degree because they’re not invited to the party. But mostly because the Gilden Guard are deployed to escort duties leaving no one to protect them, and the dead are on the move.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Someone will know. Someone will talk. There’ll be rumours—’



‘Rumours are fine. Rumours just put an edge on things – add some weight to what I have to say. Accusations ... not so good. Charges? Then it’s time to march on Roma. And don’t forget, your average Gilden Guard affords the church far less respect than they do the women in Onsa’s wheel-house.’

That gave him pause. The guard really did despise anything that smacked of Roma’s influence in the empire’s business. To have the Pope herself in Vyene itself, waylaying members of the Hundred under guard escort, must have burned them no end.

‘It can’t work.’ Makin shook his head.

‘Either way, the bitch is dead.’ I shrugged him off. ‘Devers!’ I clicked my fingers in front of his face. ‘Wake up, man! Can you remember what I’ve said? The Lord Commander – cover-up or bloodbath. Yes? Sort it out or so help me I’ll ride to Roma with her head on my spear.’

Captain Devers gave the nod of a man not convinced he isn’t dreaming. I walked past him, stepping around the corpses. It’s never a good idea to step over a fallen man. You might get a knife between the legs.

‘I’ll be in the palace if I’m wanted.’

Rike and Marten stood cleaning their swords. Kent’s axe hung loose in his grip, still crimson. He looked lost.

‘If God talks to anyone, Kent, it’s not that evil old woman back there. That faith you’ve found – you didn’t find it in church, now did you? You found it in pain and blood. Whatever reached out to touch you, it wasn’t a priest in robes.’

‘The holy spirit found me, Jorg. Christ Jesu, risen, led me out of darkness and cooled my burns.’ No ‘king’ today, no ‘sire’.

I don’t respect many men and Kent was never sharp enough of wit, never wise enough, never virtuous enough to inspire me. And his new credo, since the fire, seemed borrowed, other men’s dogma worn as a shield. But I respected his instincts as a killer and I liked the honesty of the man. And who was I to judge? I’d fucked a necromancer and killed a Pope within the space of a week.

‘I need to trust you, Kent.’ I spread my arms. ‘I need some of that faith. So listen to that spirit. Listen hard. And if I need to die for my crimes – be the one to strike me down.’

The cold wind blew between us. And I discovered I meant every word. I dared him, as I dared the storm long ago. Strike me down. I saw Gretcha slide from my blade, faint surprise in her eyes, and crumple to a small heap, bones

and skin in a little girl's clothes.

'If someone had done this for me when I was a child it would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.' I'd said it to her. I said it to the storm on a wild night atop the Tall Castle. I said it to Red Kent, his hands white on that Norse axe of his. 'Do it!'

Kent dropped the axe. Shook his head. 'We're in this to the end, Jorg.'

I came back to the carriage. Miana, with babe in arms, Katherine, Gomst, and Osser were all outside, huddled in furs and cloaks against the wind's icy fingers. They watched my approach through the guard as if the stench of my misdeed had already reached them, a cold mix of horror and disgust upon those pale faces.

'Jorg? We heard fighting ... there's blood on you.' Miana stepped toward me.

'I made it right, my lady. As you asked me to.'

'You killed her.' Katherine spoke the words not in accusation but to hear them out loud, to see if they could be true.

'She died. The how of it is a matter for discussion, for theological debate. And what of it? Has the hand of Roma supported the people of this empire or choked them? And hasn't that grip grown tighter over the years that Pius spent spreading across the papal throne? The time has come for fresh blood, I say, for someone who actually believes in God to wear the silliest hat in Christendom.'

I looped an arm around Bishop Gomst's shoulders. 'Time for someone who doesn't want to be pope to be pope. What do you say, Father?'

He looked up at me. I hadn't realized how short he was, bent prematurely under years and cares, or perhaps how tall I'd grown. 'You really killed her?'

I made a smile though it tasted bitter and said, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.'

And old Gomsty, though he was stiff from the carriage, and sore in heart, bowed his head to hear my confession.

*Five years earlier*

'Vyene is the greatest city on earth.' The guardsman sniffed again and wrinkled his nose. I probably did stink. It had been a long journey from the coast of Liba. 'We don't let just anyone in.'

The greatness or otherwise of the city was still up for debate. So far I'd ridden through a sprawl of industry and town houses, taverns and markets, strung out for miles along the Danoob. None of it particularly great or grand, but certainly well-to-do. The real Vyene lay hidden behind the high walls that had once enclosed the whole city. And the guard before me had his doubts about whether such a road-stained youth had any right seeing it.

'I expect you let travellers in if they have coin to spend.' I opened my hand to reveal five battered coppers from as many nations. A tilt of my palm had them slipping, and he caught them as they fell.

'Don't break any laws, or expect to get broken yourself.' And he stepped aside.

I led my horse on through. Ten or more guards were performing the same sort of quality control on other hopefuls, most of the exchanges punctuated with loud and prolonged haggling.

'Get along.' I tugged on the reins. The mare - Hosana the seller had called her - ambled along. It's not until you've ridden a camel, then a sway-backed mare, that you start to realize how very much you miss your own horse. Brath had always been a temporary replacement for Gerrod, but now I found myself hoping Yusuf lived up to his promise and had arranged for him to be taken back to Castle Morrow.

A heavy shower began to rattle down around me as I set off into the old city of Vyene, water vomiting in torrents from high gutters. Summer had started to head south. In the cold bays of the jarls winter would be honing his weapons, putting an edge on the north wind and preparing his advance.

Hosana and I found shelter from the downpour in the stables of

the first inn we reached. That at least saved the bother of selecting a place to stay. I passed her reins to a lad with straw in his hair, and set off into the ale-room to secure a bed upstairs and a tub to wash off some of the road. 'She'll be dry before she reaches the stalls or I'll want to know why.' I flicked him a coin.

The ale-room stank of hops and sweat. A dozen travellers dotted among the tables and chairs, perhaps a few day-drinkers among them. I caught the inn-keep's arm as he passed with a plate of steaming meat and gravy. I couldn't tell you what meat, gristle in the main, and sinews, but it made my stomach growl.

'I'll have a room. Send up a plate of that if you can find any more dogs. An ale too.'

He nodded. 'Take Seven. End of the hall. Throw Elbert out, he don't pay no-how.'

And so I ended up in Seven on straw pallet, crawling no doubt, with the patter and drip of the rain outside and Elbert's moaning from the other side of the door as he picked up whatever came loose when he hit the wall. Eat, drink, shit, sleep. In the morning I'd clean up and spend a little gold to dress something closer to my part. It would take more than velvets and suede to get me into the palace though. Nobody there would believe King Jorg of Renar had come alone to the Gilden Gates, without herald or retinue.

The cut on my cheekbone still ached. A careless moment in Mazeno Port, drunken sailor with a knife. With my head down on the straw I could hear the bloodsuckers moving, tiny dry feet tickling over the bedding. The ceiling boards held my attention, eyes searching the patterns for meaning, until sleep took me.

The comfort of shaving with your knife is in the knowing that it is honed to perfection. Aside from that it's a chore and leaves you scratchy however sharp the blade. I went down to break fast with a brick of the local dark bread and a flagon of small beer. Outside, the street lay bright but the sunshine lied and the air carried the scent of frost.

I walked on further into the great city, leaving Hosana stabled at the inn. The Olidan Arms to give it its full title - I'd not noted it in the downpour that drove me there. Named not for Father of course but for one of the more famous stewards who kept Vyene in the name of Emperor Callin in the years he spent on campaign to expand our borders east.

Beggar children followed me, though I hardly looked moneyed. Even here in the richest of cities. Little blond children, remote descendants of past emperors' by-blows quite possibly, starving in the streets.

I pressed on into more exclusive neighbourhoods where town-

laws chased away the urchins and gave me looks that said they'd do as much for me if I were a touch less scary. By two turns and a bridge, past ever more impressive homes, I came to one of the four great roads that lead into the heart of Vyene: West Street. Here, still a mile from the palace, trading houses lined the margins. Not market stalls, or merchant shacks, but grand houses of stone, slate-tiled, opening to the road with wares set out for display and rooms within for negotiating the sale.

I came to one such house, a tailor's, with the proprietor's name laid out upon a board fully ten yards long between the first and second storey windows. 'Jameous of the House Revel', no allusion to his trade, not even a pair of cloth shears marked out. Except for a man going toward the rear door with two bolts of taffeta over his shoulders, and another coming out the front with a fancy house-cloak on some kind of hanger, I wouldn't have known what business occurred there. Unlike the leatherworkers next door, and the silversmiths further along, Jameous had his shutters folded against the chill, or perhaps just against curious eyes. There is, after all, nothing like a sense of exclusivity to draw in foolish money. And yes, I too was drawn in, though I would claim it was my need that drew me. The need to adopt the same plumage as the local strutting cocks so I might start to play the role of king once more.

The door, a heavy oak affair, had closed behind the man leaving with his cloak, or rather with his master's cloak since he wore servant garb, albeit of finer cut and better repair than my own garments. I walked up and gave a rap.

The door opened a hand's breadth. 'This is the House of Revel.' The creature addressing me appeared to straddle both genders, doe-eyed, fine-boned, and soft-voiced, but with close-cropped hair and flat in the chest. A hand moved to close the door, as if simply identifying the place should be enough to see me on my way.

I put my foot in the door. 'I know that. It's written in letters larger than your head just above us.'

'Oh,' said the woman. I'd decided on woman. 'Who told you that?'

I gave the door a shove and walked on in.

A well-appointed room, stuffed chairs that you could drown in, a single soft, thick rug covering the floor from wall to wall, crystal lanterns burning smokeless oils. A large man, balding, tending to fat, stood with his arms raised whilst a second man moved around him wielding a measure tape. A third fellow stood with a ledger, noting vital statistics. All of them looked my way.

The measuring man straightened up. 'And who might this be, Kevin?'

Kevin picked himself off the rug. 'Sir, I'm sorry, sir - this

... gentleman—'

'I forced an entry, shall we say?' I shone them my most winning smile. 'I need some suitable clothing, and in a hurry.'

'Suitable for what? Labouring?' the big man scoffed. Kevin covered his mouth to hide a smirk. 'Get on with it, Jameous, throw him out and let's have this finished. I'm to be at Lord Kellermin's within the hour.'

I resolved to be at least half-civilized. I was after all in the empire's capital city, a place where one's deeds are apt to resonate, where one's words can spread. I fished out a gold coin and played it from finger to finger over the back of each knuckle. 'There's no need or possibility of throwing me out. I merely require clothing. Perhaps something Lord Kellermin might approve of.'

'Get him out. The villain's mad, crawling, and Lord knows who he's just robbed to get that coin.' Red patches appeared high on the beefy fellow's cheeks.

'Of course, Councilman Hetmon.' A quick bow to the councilman and Jameous clapped his hands, a summoning if ever I saw one. He turned back to me. 'We're very choosy about our clientele, young man, and I can assure you that a full set of clothes suitable for Lord Kellermin's receptions would cost rather more than a ducet in any event.'

The coin flickered, gold across knuckles. In Hodd town I could empty a tailor's with a single uncut ducet.

A pair of men emerged from the back of the shop, journeymen tailors by the looks of them, in neat black tunics. One held crimping shears, the other a yard rule. I took a deep breath, the kind we pretend will calm us down. Quality costs. Manners cost nothing.

'Will this suffice?' I drew out a handful of gold: ten, maybe fifteen coins. There's a weight to that many gold pieces that lets you know what you're holding is worth something.

'Call the town-law on this one, he's clearly murdered someone of consequence, or left them bleeding in an alley.' Councilman Hetmon took half a step my way before realizing there was no one ready to hold him back.

Calm.

I took another of those deep breaths. The two tailors, with the shears and the rule, advanced, each trying to be the slower one, neither keen to arrive first.

Since Hetmon's half-step did little to close the gap between us I closed it myself. Be calm, I told myself. Four quick strides and I had him by belt and shoulder. A hefty man but I managed to propel him with enough speed that he put a Hetmon-shaped hole through the shutters. I turned to find the shorter of the two journeymen swinging his rule my way. I let it break across the breastplate beneath my cloak. Behind me the remainder of the

shuttering came free and fell with a crash. It turns out I don't listen to good advice even when I'm the one offering it.

'The choosing of good clientele is of course a priority,' I told Jameous. 'But since you appear to have no other calls on your time, perhaps you can schedule me in for an immediate fitting?'

The master tailor backed away, glancing at the hanging fragments of shutter. The journeyman with the shears promptly dropped them; the other seemed fixated by the splintered end of his broken rule.

'Clothes!' I clapped to summon a little attention, but Jameous kept glancing to the road.

I took a look myself, wondering if the town-law had turned up to lend the councilman a hand and try my patience. In place of the padded armour and iron-banded clubs of the town-law rank upon rank of bearded Norsemen marched past, the weak sun glinting on ring-mail, garish colours on their wide, round shields, helms set with ceremonial horns to either side. I made it to the window in time to see the centre of the parade approaching. Four figures on horseback, the warriors ahead of them encircled by the coils of serpent horns.

'Damn me!' I stepped out through the splintered wood. Councilman Hetmon crawled away at a good lick, but I'd lost interest in him, and indeed in all my sartorial ambitions. 'Sindri!' Riding high on that white gelding of his, a robe of white fur, hair now unbraided and confined instead by a gold band, but Sindri even so.

'SINDRI!' I bellowed it at him. Just in time as the two warriors marching before his horse winded their serpents and drowned out all other noise.

For a moment it seemed he hadn't heard, and then he turned his horse, shouldering through the ranks, setting the marchers in disarray.

'-ell are you *doing* here?' His words reached me as the howl of the serpent horns died away.

'I've come to see my throne.' My cheeks ached with a smile that hadn't needed me to put it there. It felt good to see a familiar face.

'You look like hell.' He swung down from the saddle, furs swishing, some kind of arctic fox by the look of them. 'I took you for a Saracen at first. A sell-sword, and not one finding much luck.'

I glanced down at myself. 'Heh. Well I guess I picked up a few things in Afrique. A pretty good tan for one.' I set my dark wrist to his pale one.

'Afrigue? Are you never still?' He glanced back at the column halted in the street. 'Anyhow, you must come with us. You can ride beside Elin. You remember my sister Elin?'

Oh I did. Visit us in winter, she had said. 'My horse is back at the inn,' I told him. 'And where are you bound? And for what? Has it grown too cold in the north?'

'Getting married.' He grinned. 'Walk with me, if it's not beneath a king's dignity.'

'Dignity?' I matched his grin and flicked a splinter from my shoulder.

Sindri rejoined his column on foot and I took the place of the warrior beside him. 'My lady.' I nodded up at Elin, pale in black velvets, white-blond hair cascading behind her.

'You've not met my uncle Thorgard, and Norv the Raw, our bannerman from Hake Vale?' Sindri indicated the other riders, older men, grim, helmed, scarred.

I smacked a fist to my breastplate and inclined my head, remembering the low opinion such men held of the courtesies traded in Vyene. 'And your father?'

'His duties keep him in Maladon. Dead things rising from the barrowlands. Also his health is—'

'A chill, nothing more.' Duke Maladon's brother leaned across his nephew.

The column restarted with a blast of serpent horns. We marched on into the silence left in their wake. 'Married?' I asked. 'To a southerner?'

'A lass from the Hagenfast, good Viking stock. One of Father's alliances, but she's a pretty thing. A hellcat in the furs.'

Elin snorted on the other side of him.

'So you've all trooped down to Vyene ... ?'

Sindri reached up and flicked one of the bull's horns on his helm. 'We're traditionalists. Frozen in our ways. We've barely let go of the old gods three thousand years after the Christ came. In the north any marriage of great consequence must be witnessed by the emperor, and that means coming to court. Even if there's no emperor. Or steward. So here we are.'

'Well it's good to see you.' And I meant it.



## *Five years earlier*

I came to the Gilden Gate dressed in Sindri's spare cloak and tunic, with boots from one or other of his warriors, my rank recognized by the Gilden Guard on Sindri's vouching. The Gate lay deep inside the palace, not an entrance but a rite of passage. I had always imagined the Gate would tower, stand wide enough for a coach and horses, require ten men to open.

'That's it?'

'Yes.' Hemmet, Lord Commander of the Gilden Guard, didn't elaborate. He must have met this reaction dozens of times.

We stood, Sindri, his inner party, Hemmet and I, in an antechamber the size of Father's throne room and appointed with more grandeur and more taste than anything most of the Hundred could aspire to. And in the expanse of the west wall, set with the busts of emperors past, each in white marble deep in its niche to watch the ages, stood the Gilden Gate. A modest entrance in which an ancient wooden archway stood unsupported. Oak perhaps, black with age, any carving smoothed away by the passage of years.

'Why?' I asked.

Hemmet turned his gaze on me, very blue, crinkles at the corners. He scratched at the white stubble on his chin. 'Go through.' He gestured with his staff of office, a rod of steel and gold, ending in a strange crest of red velvet tongues.

I shrugged and walked toward the arch, no taller than nine foot or so, a little narrower. Nothing until the last two steps. One more and the raw agony of my burn woke again in old scar tissue all across the left side of my face. At the same time the sharp and critical pain of Father's knife thrust pierced my chest once more, spreading through my veins like acid. And the thorn-patterned box at my hip grew so heavy it made me stagger, dragging me down. I managed to reel back, a hand clasped over my burn scar, cursing and spitting.

'Nothing tainted may pass,' Hemmet said. He tucked the rod of office into his belt. 'When the Hundred meet no magics can be

taken within, no mind-sworn can enter to sway men's loyalties, none tainted with ungodly powers can enter to threaten their fellow rulers with more than men should possess. Any influences exerted on a person will be wiped away should they be able to pass through the gate.'

I straightened, the pain fading as quickly as it had come. 'You might have warned me.' I wiped spittle and blood from the corner of my mouth.

Hemmet shrugged. 'I didn't know you were tainted.' A big man, solid in his years. The golden half-plate he wore hardly weighed on him. A stunning piece of work, lobstered over the shoulders and around the back of his neck where it rose to a helm that bore more than the suggestion of a crown.

'You try it,' I told him.

He walked on in, turned and spread his hands. You could see he cared little for the Hundred, whether they call themselves king, or duke, or lord. There were many of the hundred, more names than most men could summon to mind, and but a single Lord Commander of the Gilden Guard. Hemmet.

'So I'm to be left out here?' I tried not to make it sound like whining.

'Captain Kosson will show you in through one of the side passages.' Hemmet smiled. 'It's only at Congression that you will be excluded, or should you seek to petition the Emperor when the throne is occupied again.'

And so I took the longer route into the emperor's throne room. Whilst Sindri, Elin, and the other untainted nobles were led in through the Gilden Gate, poor Jorgy had to slink in around the back like a servant. Kosson led me through long dark corridors holding a lantern to light the way.

'Most palaces can afford better lighting.' It seemed a far cry from Ibn Fayed's grand home.

'Most palaces are inhabited by royals,' Kosson replied without looking back. 'Nobody lives here save a few servants to keep the dust stirred up. The guard come in and out during the years between Congressions, but we're soldiers, we don't need oil lamps in every niche. Shadows don't scare the guard.'

I was about to say that perhaps they should, but something took the words away. 'There aren't any niches.' No place for lamp, lantern, or even torch, nowhere to display statuary, baubles, or any form of wealth as nobles are wont to show.

Kosson stopped and looked up. His gaze led me to a small glass circle set flush with the white stone of the ceiling. 'A Builder light,' he said.

I saw them now, every few yards.

'They don't work though.' A shrug and he carried on walking, swinging shadows around us.

'This is a Builder hall? But—' It hardly seemed possible.

'It's so ... graceful. The dome, the archways and antechambers ...'

'Not everything they made was ugly. This was a place of power. Some kind of legislature. They built it grand.'

'I learn something new every day,' I said. 'You think they might have had souls after all then, these Builders?' I only half-joked.

'If it's learning you're after, I'll show you something most visitors don't get to see.' Kosson made a sharp left into a smaller corridor and then another left.

'That is ... unusual.' I came to a halt at his shoulder.

A man stood with his back to us. He looked to be running but hadn't a twitch of motion in him, as if someone had taken the trouble to dress a very well-executed statue in a one-piece beige tunic and treads, belted at the waist. In one hand a long rod, almost like a broom but topped with a mass of red strips, oddly familiar, in the other a strange cup, extremely thin-walled, half-crushed in his grip, a dark liquid spilling from it, going nowhere. It set me in mind of blood droplets exploding from a broken skull, hanging in the air forever. It put me in mind of Fexler.

'So you've got yourself a Builder in stasis.' I looked around for some kind of projector like the one that had frozen time around Fexler. The section of corridor looked identical to the rest.

Kosson threw me a hurt look, for a moment a child with his enthusiasm dashed. 'Yes, but see *who* we have here!'

We edged around the invisible glass surrounding the man. That was how it felt. Slick glass, cold to touch, the edge of time where hours and minutes die to nothing.

'See?' Kosson pointed to a white rectangle attached to the man's chest, to the left. It looked to be a piece of plasteeek and bore the legend 'CUSTODIAN' in black. 'That means he's the guardian, the protector. The guard archivists have books that tell the meanings of ancient words.'

'He looks soft to me.' Weak, white, fear in his eyes.

'The strength of the Builders was never in their arms. That's what the Lord Commander says. I agree with you myself, he's no warrior. The Lord Commander tracks his ancestry back to the first custodian. This man. He's the family's patron saint.'

And in that moment I understood why the man's broom-thing seemed familiar. 'That staff of office Hemmet's got. It's copied from this, isn't it? Shorter, prettier, but this?'

Kosson nodded.

'Patron saint, you say?' I sucked my teeth trying to figure that one through. 'You're telling me Roma canonized a Builder?'

'You'll have to ask the Lord Commander that one.' Kosson shook his head. 'Come on.' And he led back the way we'd come.

We were reunited before the throne, a plain wooden chair, high-backed and sturdy, ancient work, crudely fashioned. Here and there gleaming bolt heads drew the eye, on the armrests, the front legs, the sides, smoothed flat to the wood. Legend had it that kings among the Builders had sat in this same seat and the same secret fire that ran through their machines had run through their veins. It had been shipped in across a great ocean long ago.

'Will you have me keep my distance? Stand over here? Unclean as I am.' I paused some yards back.

Sindri grinned and waved me forward. Elin intercepted me as I approached, lifting her fingers to touch my scarring. 'The North knows how you came by your wounds, King Jorg, and they are no taint.'

The throne stood on a dais of two high steps. The throne hall itself reached to the great dome covering the whole palace complex, and lay in a great circle surrounded by many chambers.

'The wedding ceremony will be conducted here before the throne with an honour watch of one hundred and fifty guard, the troops assigned to escorting each of your fathers to Congression,' Lord Commander Hemmet told Sindri.

'A priest of Roma speaking the words within the Gilden Gate,' I said. 'That must grate, Lord Commander?' Whatever the disrespect the guard showed to the Hundred it paled next to that reserved for the Pope and her underlings, be it cardinal or choirboy.

'Never that, Jorg. The emperors maintained a personal priest swearing no allegiance to Roma. Such clerics are still available from a church within the palace. The Pope holds no sway within these walls, her corruption of the faith doesn't touch the guard, we keep to older ways. I doubt me that the Gate would allow any priest with Roma's stink to pass.'

'Well and good,' I said. 'I hold to older ways myself.' And I stepped closer to Elin. She smelled good, of woman and of horse, neck slender, eyes wicked. I nodded for Hemmet to continue his show and tell. Not that he was waiting for my permission.

'At Congression the Hundred break into their bickering groups and secret themselves in the preparation halls.' Lord Commander Hemmet swung an arm to encompass all the side chambers. 'Lord Sindri and Lady Freya may take a chamber each to house their respective wedding parties.'

'Can they choose which?' I asked.

'Your pardon, King Jorg?' He had a way of speaking that made 'king' seem a very small word.

'Can they have any of the chambers they wish? There must be thirty or more.'

'Twenty-seven, and yes, they can have any of them.' He nodded.

'Well let's go exploring then,' Elin said, and took my hand, leading me off toward a distant archway.

I heard Sindri snort behind me. 'Come Uncle, Norv.'

'And I'm supposed to know what to look for?' I heard the uncle growl behind us. 'It's just a damn room.'

We had a fair walk to the first chamber. The emperor's throne room would fit within Ibn Fayed's but with not much space to spare, and I judged it more ancient, turned to this purpose at a time when the empire was still in bud.

We halted before double oak doors inlaid with ironwood, the marquetry depicting two battling eagles facing off across the dividing line. Elin's hand felt cool in mine. She nearly matched me in height, the whiteness of her making something alien yet intriguing. She pushed a door and led me in.

The room beyond lay cavernous and dark, lit in patches by light from small windows in the ceiling, glazed using lost skills or stolen glass.

'There's nothing to see,' I said. 'And besides, it's just a room, what's to choose?'

'And there's me thinking this was your idea in the first place,' Elin said, moving by me, pulling me into the shadows. Something in the way she brushed past lit a fire.

I had been thinking to send Sindri and his party off questing after a suitable room to claim, hopefully with the Lord Commander in tow, leaving me to poke around the empire throne in a moment of privacy. Instead we'd left Hemmet back by the throne and I was wasting my time with—

'We won't have long.' Elin snaked her arms around me, strong and slender fingers kneading into the muscles along my spine.

'I don't want Sindri to—' I started.

She kissed me, challenging, hungry. Then, pulling away, 'Oh shush, he knows me.' She shrugged off her velvet cloak.

'I need to get to the—'

'I know what you need, my king.' She drew her tunic overhead, black as moleskin, a fluid motion leaving her naked save for skirts. Skin like milk, showing only the faintest pink at the tips of full and heavy breasts.

It was true. She did know what I needed.

*Five years earlier*

'Who the hell are you?' I pushed myself from Elin and left her leaning back against the wall, still patting down her skirts.

'A man who sees the future.' The intruder, a priest by the look of his robes, watched us with milky eyes. For the sake of Elin's honour I hoped he saw as little as the cataracts suggested.

'So you already know I'm just about to repeat my question?' I said.

'I am Father Merrin, priest of the Free Church of Adam.'

'You're to marry my brother to his Hagenfast wife,' Elin said, pulling on her top, remarkably unashamed of herself, rather pleased if anything.

'Yes,' Father Merrin said.

Something niggled at me, something familiar about a man looking into the years to come. I scratched my head as if that would aid matters. It didn't.

'Can we help you?' I kept an eye out for Sindri and his uncle appearing at the door. They'd kept busy touring the other rooms. Elin said Sindri knew her mind. I'd hoped he approved - she had said he would. I did stop Ferrakind stirring their volcanoes up, after all. 'Is there something you need?' I asked.

'I don't think so,' Father Merrin said. The lamplight from the main hall glistened off his baldness and made something comic of his ears, too big, like those of all old men. 'I came to help you instead, King Jorg.'

'How so?' Something about the man tickled at me. I doubted that he would be walking through the Gilden Gate to conduct the ceremony. He'd choose a different entrance. It seemed unlikely the Gate would let him through any more than it would admit me.

'You're wanting to search beneath the throne, Jorg. Something to do with a ring you're carrying. But you can't see how to do it. Hemmet isn't going to allow you on the dais. You've thought about distractions you could make. Each plan more wild and less promising than the last. You even thought of causing some scandal

with my lady here and trying to achieve your goal in the uproar.'

'All true,' I said. Elin punched me in the shoulder. Hard. 'And why do you want to help me do that? What's going to happen when I use the ring?'

Father Merrin shrugged. It made him look young, just a boy wearing all those creases. 'I don't see so much with these blind eyes, only a glimpse or two. All I know is that somehow it will make the Lord Commander owe you a favour.'

'And why is that good for you?' I asked.

'That too is dim and far away,' he said. 'But Lord Commander Hemmet's support, the surety that his favour builds, will tip you in some decision made years from now. And that decision will help the Free Church, and what helps the Free Church weakens Roma and helps the people.'

'Helps the people?' I drew the view-ring from inside the jerkin Sindri had gifted me and spun it before Elin's eyes. 'Oh well. If I really must.'

I motioned for the priest to lead on. 'Lead on,' I said, remembering he was blind.

Sindri, his uncle and bannerman, had rejoined the Lord Commander and Captain Kosson before the throne.

Sindri called out to us as we approached. 'Did you find us a good room, Jorg?'

'Well, I liked it.' We both grinned, naughty boys in the schoolroom. Neither of us married quite yet - growing up could wait a while.

'Lord Commander,' Father Merrin said, his voice carrying the sing-song of prayer. 'It is necessary that the throne be set aside for a short while.'

Hemmet scowled, as if the thought of it being touched, let alone moved, distressed him. 'You're sure, Father? Is it one of your visions?'

Father Merrin nodded. Bald-headed, skinny in his robes, big ears like handles, I found it hard to take him seriously, but he held sway with the Lord Commander. Hemmet clapped his hands and four guards came trotting in from a distant entrance.

'Move the throne ... there.' He watched them take hold of it. 'Be careful. Show respect.'

'And the rug,' Father Merrin said.

The Lord Commander raised his brows still further at that, but waved his men on. Two of them rolled back the heavy weave, a work of intricate patterns picked in silk, thick, and glistening with iridescence like a butterfly wing.

A copper plate, round, a hand span across, lay set into the floor at the point where the throne sat. I stepped forward to climb the dais. All about me the guards straightened, stiffened, ready to intervene.

'Allow this, Hemmet,' Father Merrin said without heat.

The Lord Commander drew a great breath and sighed it out. He waved me on with a dismissive gesture as Merrin had known he would. The future-sworn must be hell to live with.

I kept the view-ring hidden in my hand and knelt beside the metal plate. No handle or hinge, no keyhole. I recalled the door at the mathema tower and just held the ring against the copper, dead centre under my palm. A moment of warmth and a Builder-ghost sprang up above me. I snatched my hand back. Drawn in pale shades as all the others, this ghost seemed familiar. Not Fexler, or Michael, but ...

'Custodian!' Lord Commander Hemmet fell to his knees. The guards around him followed his lead.

The Custodian stood wordless for a moment. He flickered, frowned, slid back a foot from the copper disk, maybe two. A faint buzz of vibration from the ring and there stood Fexler. The ghosts locked eyes, furrowed brows in concentration or fury, locked hands ... and vanished.

'Extraordinary!' Lord Commander Hemmet pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. 'What happened? There were two saints? Were they fight—'

All the lights came on. Every Builder light woke at the same moment so that the dome above our head sparkled like starry heavens. The light dazzled so that you had squint against it, and made the flames of the oil lamps invisible as if we stood outside in high summer.

'The lights ...' said Norv the Raw, as if we might not have noticed.

Before any further statements of the obvious could be made doors of gleaming steel started to slide down from recesses above every entrance save the Gilden Gate. The action accompanied by a squealing noise that set my teeth on edge, the sound of nails down Lundist's chalkboard.

'The doors ...' said Norv. I resisted the temptation to beat him around the head.

It took maybe a count of ten for the doors to seal themselves, metal to stone, and without pause they began to retreat at the same rate. Guards came pouring through as the doors lifted, summoned by the squeal of the mechanism. For some minutes men of the guard rushed this way and that, set on diverse missions by the Lord Commander to establish that no attack was taking place, to see what other changes may have been wrought, to calm the servants, to set at ease the minds of other guard units, and the like.

All that frenzy came to a dead halt when they brought the Custodian in, the real man whose data-ghost we'd seen in the moment before Fexler wrestled him away again. He came in escorted by four men of the guard, with more crowding behind, discipline lost, curious children trailing a stranger in the market. Fexler



had broken the Custodian's stasis.

'Well there's a thing,' I said. To Sindri's party the Builder was a stranger in strange clothes carrying a stick crested with a mass of short red ribbons. They would have to be sharp to recognize him from the brief look at his ghost on the dais. To the guards, however, a legend walked among them. To Lord Commander Hemmet a saint approached, his revered ancestor and a part of the foundation of his authority. Hemmet raised a hand and the chatter died. 'Welcome, Custodian! Welcome!' A broad grin on his face.

The Custodian looked bewildered and perhaps fearful, but he had been asleep for a thousand years I supposed, so I allowed him that.

A pause, and then he spoke. But what language I couldn't say. A harsh tongue, guttural, it seemed to sit on the edge of understanding. I caught one word that sounded like 'alert': he said it more than once.

'Perhaps he speaks another language,' I said. 'I read that there were many tongues among the Builders, almost as many across the empire as there are kingdoms. And even if he speaks the empire tongue it may be that it has changed over the course of centuries. Things move on, nothing stands still, words least of all.'

Hemmet scowled at me but the anger didn't last, a cloud across the sun. 'You did this, you woke him up, brought the light back to the palace. And I won't forget it, King Jorg.' He set a hand to the Builder's shoulder, then moved beside him, the arm around him, protective. 'I will speak with the Custodian in private. Captain Kosson, afford our guests all possible courtesy and escort them from the palace when their needs have been met.'

And Hemmet left us, taking his saint with him.

I bent and scooped up the view-ring. 'Well Father Merrin, you were right. Hemmet loves me now.' I frowned. 'I thought someone once told me ... I thought I heard that you couldn't tell a man his future because telling him changes it.'

Merrin smiled and turned those milky eyes on me. 'It depends on the future, Jorg, and how much you tell them. My own visions are so hazy that there's little detail to relate.'

'So what else can you tell me about my future, Father?' I stepped closer so what sight remained to him might capture me.

'You don't want to know, Jorg,' he said. 'The future is a dark place. We all die there.'

'Tell me anyway.'

And, perhaps because he knew I would wear him down - *that* future being plain to both of us - he answered, 'You will kill and kill again, do the darkest deeds, betray those you should love, destroy your brother, and lead ruin to us all.'

'So, no real change then?' I ignored the look on Elin's face,

on Sindri's. Disappointment put an edge on my tongue. I had thought I might grow, might be better, might be more. 'Tell me, Father.' And here I used 'Father' as though I meant it. 'Why doesn't every man of consequence find himself a future-sworn seer and plan a path to glory?'

A stillness came over the man. The type of regret that cannot be manufactured. He spoke with a gentle, self-deprecating humour but I knew he spoke true. 'To look into what will be isn't unlike self-abuse. To watch yourself march through possibilities, to follow the truth through all those twists and turns. Just a little might stunt your growth.' I thought of Jane, tiny and older than Gorgoth. 'Or make you go blind.' His cataracts seemed opalescent in the Builder light. 'And if you look too far, if you look to see what waits for us all at the end ...'

'Tell me.'

Father Merrin shook his head. 'It burns.'

And for an instant I glimpsed a skinless hand holding a copper box.

With the Pope's corpse lying out amid the slaughter, we advanced on the emperor's palace, a vast dome fashioned from thousands of huge sandstone blocks, fitted one to another without mortar and only gravity to hold them in place. A hundred guards from my retinue remained to stand watch over the dead whilst Captain Devers pondered his options.

'It's big.' Makin's eloquence, vanished at the city gates, had yet to return.

'What it would be to have ridden here at the head of an army. To have a hundred thousand spears at my back. To just take it rather than to seek approval.'

None of them answered: there was only the cold tugging of the wind and the clatter of hooves on stone.

On that long slow ride across Vyene's great square my father's death at last caught up with me. It had been given out in dribs and drabs. A ghost displayed by the lichkin, a dream of the Tall Castle invaded, the commiserations of a cleric. Nothing as solid or as sudden as seeing him fall, looking down upon his corpse. Nothing so final or so damning as striking the blow to end him, wiping at the blood on my hands as if it might never come off.

I felt ... hollow. His death had struck me as a hammer strikes a bell, and I rang with it, a broken tone speaking of broken days.

'Nothing can be made right, Brother Makin.'

Makin looked across. Said nothing. The wisest words.

I could have fixed my hands around that old man's throat. Choked and watched the light die from his eyes. Shouted my complaints, railed against old injustice. And it would have rung me just as hollow. Nothing would be right of it.

I ran a fingertip across the hand that held the reins, down to the scars across my wrist. 'I could take the all-throne. The priests would write my name for the ages. But what the thorns wrote here – that's my story – what

was taken, what can't be changed.'

Makin frowned, and still he had no answer. What answer is there?

My name for the ages? *What ages?* Marco Onstantos Evenaline of the House Gold had been a test, not the start, not the beginning. A test to learn from. For years Michael and those of his order had been positioning their weapons. The fires of the Builders, the poisons and the plagues. And here we were, the new men, born from ashes and cracking the world open as we played with our magic, with the toys Fexler's kind had left us. Crack it but a little further and it would tip Michael's hand: the ghosts of our past would rise again, bearing a final solution to all problems. And what followed me? What dogged my heels? An army of the dead, a wedge of necromancy driven after me and aimed at Vyene. A wedge big enough to split us all open. No wonder Father Merrin was blind. Our future was too bright for him. Rain fell, a cold autumn drizzle, lacking challenge. It filled my eyes. I had let the thorns hold me, taken what they offered, and lost the first of my brothers. Flesh of my flesh, his care the first duty I had set upon myself. I betrayed him and left him to die alone. And though there was no price I'd not pay to undo that wrong, even an emperor hadn't the coin to set it right.

The palace dome, once so distant, engulfed us in its shadow. I shook off those memories, left mother, father, brother behind me in the rain.

Around the dome's perimeter a dozen and more low entrances, slots high enough for a man on horseback, wide enough for thirty. The guards stationed themselves there as each of the Hundred arrived, their escorts breaking off to occupy the halls behind those slots. If any enemy threatened – me perhaps with my hundred thousand spears – they would sally forth to defend Congression.

Marten tapped my shoulder and pointed off west. A column of smoke rose, slanting with the wind, black smoke.

'There are a lot of chimneys in Vyene,' I said.

Marten swung his arm to a second column, further off, rising to join the louring cloud. I wondered if there were dead gathering at the city gates already, fresh-woken perhaps ahead of the Dead King's advance. Even the swiftest of his main force must be a day or more away. And yet an uncommon pall of smoke hung above those distant roofs. Were the outer parts of the city aflame?

'Maybe somebody has beaten me to it and come with an army,' I said.

The guard stations around the palace are filled in order, the furthest from the grand entrance first. Our hundreds filed into the closest to the royal gates. It might be that the Drowned Isles delegation behind us would be the last of all the Hundred to arrive. Some have it that to be first through the Gilden Gate at Congression is to win the favour of dead emperors. The more practical suggest that it gives additional days in which to sway your fellow rulers and strengthen your faction. I say it just gives them time to grow heartily sick of the sight of you. On my previous attendance I had had to wait outside the throne room, too tainted to be admitted, and the only glimpse the Hundred had of me was of the occasional dire looks I slotted in at them through the Gilden Gate.

We dismounted. Osser Gant emerged from the carriage, then Gomst and Katherine climbed down, and Miana with William wrapped in furs against the wind. Dwarfed by the cavernous mouth of the Royal Gate we marched inside, just an honour guard of ten men in gold to guide us through. Captain Allan led them, Devers having remained outside to keep the Pope's carcass under consideration.

The ceremonial gates stood open, monstrous things of age-blackened timbers bound with brass. It would take a hundred men to close them – if the hinges had been kept oiled. We passed through and walked the Hall of Emperors where each man stood remembered in stone, fathers, sons and grandfathers, usurpers, bastards-reclaimed-to-greatness, murderers and warlords, peace-makers, empire-builders, scientists, scholars, madmen and degenerates, all rendered as heroes, armoured, clutching the symbols of their rule. Builder-lights, a hundred bright spots on the ceiling, leading into the distance, made each statue an island in its own pool of illumination.

'And you want to stand at the end of this line?' Katherine spoke at my side. I hadn't heard her draw close.

'Orrin of Arrow wanted to,' I said. 'Is my ambition less worthy?'

She didn't need to answer that.

'Perhaps the empire requires me. Maybe I'm the only man who can save it from drowning in horror, or from burning on the bonfire of its past. Did you ever think of that? Set a thief to catch a thief, I said that to you once. Now I say set a murderer to stop black murder. Fight a fire with fire.'

'That's not your reason,' she said.

'No.'

And we came to the end of the statues, past Emperor Adam the Third, past

Honourous in his steward's chair, serious, watching infinity. Up ahead an antechamber with more guards and, by the look of it, other travellers.

'Your weapons will be taken from you and stored in safe keeping with the utmost respect.' Captain Allan's glance fell to Gog at my side then made a nervous flicker toward Rike. 'You will be subject to various searches, necessary for entry into the throne room during Congression. If you don't return through the Gilden Gate before the final vote then the searches will not need to be repeated. You will of course appreciate that these precautions ensure your safety as well as the safety of the other delegates.'

'Would you feel safe, unarmed, next to Rike here?' I nodded Allan in Rike's direction.

'Y-your weapons will—'

'Yes, we understand.' I stared past him. 'By God, is that? Is that? Taproot! Get over here, you old trickster!'

And breaking away from the party ahead came Dr Taproot, his quick, erratic walk unmistakable, arms flying up, broad grin on a narrow face. 'Watch me! If it isn't King Jorg himself! Lord of nine nations! My condolences on your father, dear boy.'

'Your condo—'

'I assumed you would have wanted to kill him yourself, but time has its own way with us, we burn in time's fire. Look at me.' Hands flitted to his temples. 'Going grey. Ashes, I tell you. Burning in time's fire. Watch me.'

'I am watching you, old man.'

'Old? I'll show you old! I'll—'

'And why is it that you're here, good doctor?' I asked.

'Is the circus in town?' Rike loomed over us, huge and hopeful. We both ignored him.

'It's Congression, Jorg. Every fourth year a man who knows things finds himself in great demand. Yes he does. Lucrative demand. Watch me! I'm paid to whisper. Whisper this duke likes boys, that lord has a sister married there, this king thinks his line sprung from Adam the First. Little golden whispers for eager ears. Watch me! If only it could be that way each year, all year.'

'You'd grow bored without your circus, Taproot. Bored men wither and die. Fuel for the fire.'

'Still, it's nice to be wanted, even now and again. Nice to be in the know.' His hands shaped abstracts, as if he could sketch his knowledge in the air.

I reached out, quick – you have to be quick with Taproot – and caught his shoulder. ‘Let’s see just how much you know, shall we?’

Taproot met my gaze, still for once, not a tremble in him.

‘Be my advisor. One of father’s delegates had an accident. You can replace him.’

A fat man in slashed velvets, black with crimson lining, approached us, his gold chain swinging to match his hurry. ‘Taproot! What’s the meaning of this?’

‘This man wishes to acquire my services, Duke Bonne.’ Taproot didn’t look away. Quick, dark eyes he had, as if they were too busy for colour, drinking in the world.

‘He may wish all he likes.’ Duke Bonne cradled his stomach. A short man but shrewd if looks could be believed. ‘What’s his name, what’s your advice? Earn your keep, man. Let him see what he’s missed out on.’

Makin and Marten came to stand at my shoulder now. Rike off to one side. The rest of my party watching beside the steward’s statue.

‘His name is King Honourous Jorg Renar, King of Ancrath, King of Gelleth, King of the Highlands, of Kennick, Arrow, Belpan, Conaught, Normardy, and Orlanth. You should know that he is not a good man, but neither is he a man that can be turned, and should all hell wash against these walls, as I believe it might very well do, and sooner than any of us desire, King Jorg will stand against that tide.

‘My advice to you, Duke Bonne, is to put yourself in his service as I am about to do. If any man is capable of releasing the lion of empire to roar once more, it is the man you see before you.’

I grinned at the ‘lion of empire’. Taproot hadn’t forgotten his tawny bag of bones and fleas that I let loose from its cage.

And so we let our blades be taken. They took the view-ring too, my daggers, a bodkin in my hair, a garrotte in my sleeve. Miana’s iron-wood rod they tried to take but I clicked my fingers and Father Gomst – Bishop Gomst – came forward with the heavy tome I had entrusted to him in Holland’s carriage. We perused *Ecthelion’s record of Court Judgments, Adam II and Artur IV, Year of Empire 340-346* together, Gate Captain Helstrom and I, with Dr Taproot all eyes at my shoulder. And after a modicum of sharp debate I won the day – I could, as Lord of Orlanth, carry my rod of office (wooden) wheresoever I damn well pleased! By imperial order.

The Duke of Bonne harrumphed and snorted and favoured me with dark

looks, but he waited for our party so I sent Makin his way with a nod and a wink, knowing there aren't many who won't fall to his charms.

And within the hour we were once again before the Gilden Gate, the ancient frame of wood that had kept me from my rightful place at the last Congression. My taint of course was burned out of me at the breaking of the siege at the Haunt. Even so, I didn't relish approaching that gateway. A hand that's been scorched won't want to return to the iron, even when every sense but memory is telling you the heat has gone from it.

'After you, my dear.' And I ushered Miana through with the baby. It turned out that another ruling, recorded by the dutiful Ecthelion in YE 345, provided that although children were not permitted to be designated as advisors they may be brought to Congression if accompanied by both parents. Handy things, books. And by-laws. If applied selectively.

'I'd advise against it, advisor,' I said as Katherine moved to follow my wife.

'And when did I start taking your advice, Jorg?' Katherine turned those eyes on me, and that foolish notion I might be a better man, that I could change, swept over me once again.

'The gate will reject you, lady. And its rejections are not gentle.' No rejection is gentle.

She frowned. 'Why?'

'My father didn't know you as well as I do, as well as the gate will know you should you try to pass. You're dream-sworn. Tainted. It will reject you and it will hurt.' I tapped my temples.

'I— I should try.' She believed me. I don't think I'd ever lied to her.

'Don't,' I said.

And she moved away, shaking her head in confusion.

'Rike,' I said, and one after the other the brothers entered Congression. Marten, Sir Kent, Osser, and Gomst followed. Lord Makin with Duke Bonne.

Katherine sat on a marble bench, hands folded in her dark skirts, watching the last of us, Gorgoth, Taproot, and me.

'I don't know what will happen,' I told the leucrota. 'The gate might reject you, it might not. If it does, then you'll be in good company.' I nodded toward Katherine.

Gorgoth flexed his massive shoulders, muscle heaped beneath red hide. He bowed his head and moved forward. As he reached the gate arch he slowed, as if stepping into the teeth of a gale. He moved one step at a time, gathering



himself before each. The effort trembled across him. I thought he must fail but he kept on. The strain drew a groan from him, very deep. He moved into the arch. I could imagine the set of his face from the taut line of his shoulders. And as he stepped through the Gilden Gate it creaked and flexed, resisting him but in the end admitting his right. He slumped when he crossed into the throne hall, almost falling.

‘I should try.’ Katherine stood, uncertain.

‘Gorgoth has dipped his toes in the river. You swim in it.’ I shook my head.

Over her shoulder I saw three figures entering the far end of the antechamber, preceded by a pair of guards. They drew the eye, this trio. Three more different delegates it would be hard to imagine. I kept my gaze on them and let it turn Katherine.

‘The Queen of Red, Luntar of Thar, and the Silent Sister.’ Taproot whispered it from behind me, using my body to shield himself from their view. Katherine drew a sharp breath.

Luntar and the sister flanked the Queen of Red, a tall woman, raw-boned but handsome once. She had maybe fifty years on her, more perhaps. Time had scorched rather than withered, her skin tight across sharp cheeks, hair of the darkest red scraped back beneath diamond clasps.

‘King Jorg!’ she hailed me still twenty yards away, a fierce grin on her. The black swirl of her skirts flashed gem-light as she strode toward us, her collar rose behind her, whalebone spars fanning out a crimson crest that spread above her head.

I waited without comment. Luntar I had met but held no recollection of. He boxed my memories in the cinders of Thar. Next to the queen’s splendour he looked dour in a grey tunic and white cloak, but few would remark on his clothing: his burns demanded the eye. I imagined that Leesha might have looked this way before the hurts done to her in the Iberico Hills closed over with ugly scar. Luntar’s wounds lay wet. Thin burn-skins parted with each movement to reveal the rawness beneath.

‘The Silent Sister is the one,’ Taproot hissed. ‘Watch her! She slips the mind.’

And true enough, I had forgotten her already, as if it had been just the two of them, Luntar and his queen, approaching. With an effort, the kind you use when confronting an unpleasant duty, I forced myself to see her. An old woman, truly old, like the wood of the Gilden Gate, a grey cloak rippling

around her, almost fog, the cowl hiding most of her face: just wrinkles and a gleam of eyes, one pearly blind.

‘King Jorg,’ the Queen of Red said once more as she stood before me, my equal in height. She rolled my name on her tongue – unsettling. ‘And a princess I’m thinking. A Teuton from the look of her.’ She glanced at the Silent Sister, the briefest flicker. ‘But her name can’t be taken. Mind-sworn? A dream-smith perhaps.’

‘Katherine Ap Scorrón,’ Katherine said. ‘My father is Isen Ap Scorrón, Lord of the Eisenschloß.’

‘And Dr Taproot. Why are you cowering back there, Elias? Is that any way to greet an old friend?’

‘Elias?’ I stepped aside to expose Taproot.

‘Alica.’ Taproot made a deep bow.

‘Had you been hoping to slip through the gate without seeing me, Elias?’ The queen smiled at his discomfort.

‘Why no, I ...’ Taproot lost for words. That was a new one.

‘And you’ll be staying outside with us, Katherine dear.’ The queen left Taproot searching for his reply. ‘With the “tainted” as the Lord Commander likes to call us.’

I caught myself thinking ‘us’ was the two of them, slipping into the conviction then jerking back as you do when sleep is trying to snare you. Focusing on the Silent Sister was hard, but I fixed my eyes on her and set a wall about my thoughts, remembering Corion and the power of his will.

‘I’ve heard of you, Sister,’ I told her. ‘Sageous spoke of you. Corion and Chella knew of you. Jane too. All of them wondering when you would show your hand. Are you showing it now perhaps?’

No reply, just a small, tight smile on those dry old lips.

‘I guess the clue is in the name?’

Again the smile. Those eyes had a draw on them, like a rip-tide. ‘Keep at it old woman and I’ll let you pull me in – then we’ll see what happens, won’t we?’

She didn’t like that. Looked away sharpish, smile gone.

‘And Luntar. I don’t remember you. And that seems to me to be your fault, no? Perhaps you did me a favour with your little box, perhaps you didn’t. I’m not decided yet.’

His face cracked as he opened his mouth to speak, clear fluid leaking over burn-skin. The echoes of old agony rang in my cheek, just as the Gilden Gate

had woken them years ago when I first tried it. The fire still scared me, no two ways about that.

‘Would you like to remember me, Jorg?’ Luntar asked.

I really didn’t want to. Would I like to burn again? ‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Take my hand.’ He held it out, wet and weeping.

I had to bite down, to swallow back bile, but I met his grip, closed my fingers around the hurt of his, felt the broken skin shift.

And there it was, a glittering string of recollection, the madness, the long journey tied to Brath’s saddle, raving whilst Makin led us south into the scarred land they call Thar.

*Schnick. I’m staring at a box, a copper box, thorn-patterned. It has just closed and the hand that closed it is burned.*

*‘What?’ I say. Not the most intelligent query but it seems to cover all bases.*

*‘My name is Luntar. You’ve been sick.’ A smack of lips after each word.*

*I lift my head from the box, my hair falls to either side and I see him, a horror of a man, a mass of open sores so dense that it is one sore.*

*‘How do you stand the pain?’ I ask.*

*‘It’s just pain.’ He shrugs. His white cloak, smeared with dust, sticks to him as though he is wet beneath it.*

*‘Who are you?’ I ask, although he has said his name.*

*‘A man who sees the future.’*

*‘I knew a girl like that once,’ I say, glancing around for my brothers. There’s only dust and sand.*

*‘Jane,’ he says. ‘She didn’t see far. Her own light blinded her. To see in the dark you need to be dark.’*

*‘And how far can you see?’ I ask.*

*‘All the way,’ he says. ‘Until we meet again. Years off. That’s all that ever stops me. When I see myself on the path ahead.’*

*‘What’s in the box?’ Something about that box makes it seem more important than all the years ahead.*

*‘A bad deed you did,’ he says.*

*‘I’ve done lots of bad things.’*

*‘This one is worse,’ he says. ‘At least in your eyes. And it’s mixed with Sageous’s venom. It needs to ferment in there a while, lose a little of its sting, before it’s safe to come out.’*

*'Safe?'*

*'Safer,' he says.*

*'So tell me about the future,' I say.*

*'Well here's the thing.' He smacks those burned lips, strings of melted flesh between them. 'Telling someone about their future can change their future.'*

*'Can?'*

*'Choose a number between one and ten,' he says.*

*'You know what I'll choose?'*

*'Yes,' he says.*

*'But you can't prove it.'*

*'Today I can, but not always. You're going to choose three. Go on, choose.'*

*'Three,' I say, and smile.*

*I take the box from him. It's much heavier than I thought it would be.*

*'You put my memory in here?'*

*'Yes,' he says. Patient. Like Tutor Lundist.*

*'And you see my future all the way until we meet again in many years time?'*

*'Six years.'*

*'But if you tell me then it won't be my future any more, and if you tell me that new future, that too will change?' I ask.*

*'Yes.'*

*'So tell me anyway. Then take that memory too. And when we meet, give it back. And then I'll know that the man who stands before me truly can see across the years.'*

*'An interesting suggestion, Jorg,' he says.*

*'You knew I was going to suggest it, didn't you?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'But if you'd told me then I might not have.'*

*'Yes.'*

*'And what did you see yourself saying to the suggestion?'*

*'Yes.'*

*So I nod. And he tells me. Everything that would happen. All of it.*

*'Jorg?' Katherine pulled at my shoulder. 'Jorg!'*

*I looked down at my empty hand, wet, pieces of burned skin adhering to*

mine. Lifting my gaze I met Luntar's stare. 'You were right,' I said. 'About all of it.' Even Chella. I had laughed at that and cursed him for a liar.

'So now you know a man who sees the future,' he said.

‘So now you know a man who sees the future,’ Luntar said.

‘A man who looked too far and got burned,’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘And how do we stop that future in which we all burn?’ I asked.

‘It’s unlikely that we can,’ Luntar said. ‘But if it can be done, then this is the best chance we have.’ He handed me a folded piece of parchment, stained by the wetness of his fingers. ‘Four words. Don’t read them until the right moment.’

‘And how will I know what the right moment is?’

‘You just will.’

‘Because you’ve seen it,’ I said.

‘Even so.’

‘And does it work?’ I asked.

A quick shake. ‘Try anyway,’ he said. ‘Not every ending can be seen.’

The Queen of Red watched on, with Katherine and the Silent Sister, all three of them studying me as if I were some puzzle that might be solved. Luntar cocked his head at the trio. ‘What do you think, Jorg. Have we the crone, mother, and maiden? The triple-goddess of old walking amongst us?’

And for a moment it did seem that they could be three generations of the same woman. Katherine had the queen’s strength in her face, the sister’s knowing in her eyes.

‘Best be about it, boy,’ the queen said. ‘Time’s a-wasting.’

And so I stepped in to kiss Katherine, bold as men are when the sands are running out. And she stopped me with her hand upon my chest. ‘Do it right, Jorg,’ she said. And I walked for the first time through the Gilden Gate.

The emperor’s throne room, whilst not crowded, was certainly occupied. Close on a hundred and fifty lords of empire and their diverse advisors circulated around the throne dais. The throne seemed to float above them, a

gaunt thing of bare wood, waiting for a victim.

I stood for a moment, watching. Parties broke off to occupy side chambers, others emerged in agreement or further entrenched in opposition, guards looked on from their stations about the hall's edge, and around it all the hubbub of talking and more talking.

'You there!' A tall man little older than me broke from his gathering just a few paces from the Gilden Gate. He had been holding forth to a group of a dozen or so, waving his arms as he spoke, glittering in gem-sewn velvet.

'What?' I answered him in kind, and for a moment he gaped, taken aback. He'd clearly marked me for a copper-crown, wandering in unaccompanied with my single vote. I hadn't the years to be mistaken for an advisor.

'How do you stand on the Mortrain question?' He had red and beefy cheeks, reminding me of Cousin Marclos.

'It's not something I've given any thought to.' The men behind him had enough similarity in style and colouring that they might all hail from the same region. Somewhere east, to look at them. Somewhere where the Mortrain question might be significant politics.

'Well, you need to give it some thought.' He jabbed his finger at my chest.

Before it stubbed against the polished steel of my breastplate I took hold of it. 'Why would you do that?' I asked as he gasped. 'Why would you hand me a lever to your pain?' I walked forward, bending the finger down, and he backed before me, into the crowd of his supporters, crying out, bowing low to lessen the sharp angle at which I held the digit.

Amid the group of eastern nobles, men from the steppes in their conical crowns or brightly-embroidered hats, I applied more pressure and set the man on his knees. 'Your name?' I asked.

'Moljon, of Honeere.' He hissed it through his teeth.

'Jorg, of the west.' I had too many kingdoms to rattle off for his benefit. 'And you made two mistakes, Moljon. Firstly you gave me your finger. Worse than that, though. When it was taken you let it be used against you, let it be used to separate you from your pride. Don't compound your errors, man. The finger was lost from the moment I took it. You should have surged forward and let it break, a small sacrifice to regain the upper hand and knock me on my arse.' I looked around the gathered kings of the east. 'It would be a mistake to put your faith in this one. He hasn't the strength that's needed.'

I broke Moljon's finger. A sharp crack. And set off to find my party.

‘I see you’ve met Czar Moljon. Recently inherited, riding his father’s reputation.’ Dr Taproot moved beside me and guided me to Makin and the rest.

‘Jorg!’ Makin clapped a hand on my shoulder. ‘I was just telling Duke Bonne that you’d be the man to intercede on his behalf with his neighbours to the north. Cousins of our good friend Duke Alaric.’

I nodded and smiled, aware that in my scarred face my wolf’s grin might seem more fierce than friendly.

‘And where’s Miana?’ I asked. ‘And my son?’

‘She’s set off to find her father, sire. Sir Kent went with her. Gorgoth too, though he went sniffing for trolls,’ Marten said.

‘Trolls?’ I turned to Taproot.

‘It is reported that the last emperor had an elite guard, a guard within the guard if you like. The description I have read of them is “not men”.’ He put the matter aside with a shrug, a gesture as eloquent as the rest of his body language.

‘Tell me how we stand, Taproot,’ I said.

‘Watch me!’ And he laid it out for me in charcoal upon a scrap of parchment. ‘You have nine votes. Duke Alaric has two, and is like to swing two more, along with Gothman of the Hagenfast – his wife carries some influence there, I believe.’

‘Elin.’ I smiled, softer now.

‘Your grandfather carries two votes, Miana’s father another, and between them Earl Hansa and the Lord of Wennith are like to draw three more behind them. Watch me!’

‘I was just—’

‘Ibn Fayed commands five votes. And that makes our tally—’

‘Twenty-five,’ I said. ‘Not half of what I need.’

‘Twenty-six if Makin works his magic with Duke Bonne.’ Taproot marked Bonne down beside the caliph’s votes. ‘It speaks volumes for you that your support hails from the raw north to the deserts of Afrique. A man who can sway such disparate votes clearly has something to offer. The Hundred look at men like Moljon with a tight bloc of neighbouring states to back his play and all they see is special interest – a threat. When they look at a man who calls on favour from caliphs out of the hot sands and Norse dukes in their mead halls – they might start to think they see an emperor.’ Taproot sketched the crown above my head. ‘And consider, you need fifty-one votes only if all



votes are cast.'

'Interesting,' I said. 'Get yourself and Makin amongst the Hundred and see who might be swayed, who our enemies are, and who heads any factions that might compete with ours. When a faction is broken it's often the case that the pieces may be swept up easily.' A bit of wisdom from the road. Kill the head and the body is yours. 'Set Miana and Osser to it as well. And Gomst. Use Gomst on the pious ones.'

Taproot nodded. He started to go but I caught his wrist. 'Oh and Doctor, there may be a rumour circulating to the effect that the Pope has been killed. Be sure to say I had nothing to do with it. And if there isn't such a rumour – start one.'

Taproot raised both brows at that, but nodded again and went on his way.

'Jorg!' Lord Commander Hemmet surged through the Hundred as if they were sheep and he the shepherd. 'Jorg Ancrath!' Behind him the Custodian hurried in his wake, lips scarred and pressed tight. The story had it that he had emerged tongue-less from his centuries' sleep. My guess is that when the Lord Commander finally unpicked the tangle of old-speech he found himself not liking what the Custodian had to say.

'Lord Commander,' I said. He had a face like thunder, suppressed energies sparking off him.

'Jorg!' He clasped both hands to my shoulders. Once upon a time he would have got a face full of my forehead for such a move, but life at court had taken that edge off. 'Jorg!' he repeated my name again as if somehow not believing it, and drew me close, so our bowed heads all but met, voice lowered. 'You killed the Pope? You really did it?'

'I damn well hope so,' I said. 'If she lived through that she's made of sterner stuff than I am.'

A gale of laughter broke from him, drawing stares all across the hall. Then forcing himself to whisper, 'You really did it? You really did it! Damn me. Damn me but that took some stones.'

I shrugged. 'Killing old women is easy. But if I don't walk out of Congression as emperor then I may only live a short while in which to regret the decision. There were, however, no witnesses other than my people and the Gilden Guard, and these are dangerous times. Even a Pope may meet a terrible end on the road these days.' When you need something covered up in Vyene it's good to have the Lord Commander's favour.

Hemmet grinned, a fierce thing. 'Yes.' Then a frown. 'More dangerous than ever I had thought. The dead are at our gates. Through them, even.' He let me go. 'It's not a matter to trouble Congression though. Their numbers are too few to reach the palace. We'll be riding them down within the hour.'

And with that he was gone, the Custodian trailing after him like a whipped cur.



## Chella's Story

The towns and villages along the Danoob grew close together as Chella's column approached Vyene. Soon they would join into one unbroken sprawl, washing up against the walls of the imperial city.

'Stop!'

It irked that she had to shout her commands but the necromancy still festering in her had retreated too far for the dead to respond directly to her desire.

The cavalry came to an untidy halt. The horses didn't take well to dead riders, even if they were the same riders they had carried on the previous night and for weeks before that. Some had refused, screaming and bucking when their dead owners tried to reclaim them. Chella had thought to cut their throats, but Kai convinced her to turn the animals free and send the spare riders back to join the Dead King's advance.

'Why have we stopped?' Kai leaned in toward her, guiding his horse with both knees.

'I need to ask Thantos a question,' she said.

There's a slope down toward evil, a gentle gradient that can be ignored at each step, unfelt. It's not until you look back, see the distant heights where you once lived, that you understand your journey. Chella looked up from her depths in sudden epiphany. Such moments had punctuated her life, her half-life, drawn out over a hundred years and more. Not once had they given her more than brief pause. Not once had she stepped back.

'Come,' she told him, a touch of tenderness in her voice. It should have been enough to set him running.

They went together. Kai not wanting to, but pushing down his fear.

Chella set her hand to the carriage door. The metal handle made her skin dry, made it old. She pulled it open.

'Now?' she asked, speaking into the empty horror of the carriage.

And by way of answer a grey contagion flowed out. Kai screamed as it wrapped him. For an instant Chella glimpsed the lichkin, its slim bones insinuating themselves into Kai's flesh, through clothing, past armour. It took a while. Too long. Ages. Kai's choking screams drowned out all other sounds, his flesh writhing to accommodate its new occupant, until finally his jaw snapped shut and left her ears ringing.

Thantos turned Kai's head to look at Chella, bones grating. He didn't speak. The lichkin stood beyond words. Nothing that interested them could fit within such mean packages.

'He'll last. He's strong,' Chella said.

Thantos climbed back into the carriage. Even drugged, the team drawing the carriage were skittish. Two had died and been replaced. There was no possibility that a horse would bear him to the palace, not even now he was clothed in flesh.

'Can you hear me in there, Kai?' Something in the eyes said he might be listening now that his screams were silent screams. 'Did you never wonder that we came with five votes but only two delegates? Could not the Dead King spare three more necromancers, or cleaner men bound to his cause? We came in a pair. One host, and one to guard the host, ready to move against him if he should anticipate his fate.' Secrets are best kept behind a single pair of lips.

Thantos reached out and closed the door, an awkward motion within his stolen flesh.

'But you never did anticipate.' Chella spoke the words to the closed door and shook her head. 'You should have learned to fly,' she spat. To fault him made it easier.

Above the outlying spread of Vyenese houses, neat little homes with wooden shingles and log piles stacked to the eaves against the coming of winter, came the stink of burning. In many places hearth-smoke rose white from stone chimneys, but in others the smoke lifted in black and angry clouds. Horror stalked the streets, rose earth-covered from family graves, crept in from field and forest. The Dead King's tide swept in from the west, true enough, from the Drowned Isles, through Ancrath and Gelleth, through Attar, Charland and the

Reichs, but it also rose from the very ground, as if a dark ocean waited below the soil, fathoms deep, and now swelled from the depths at the Dead King's call, lifting the fallen from their tombs.

At Vyene's gates guard units in their golds thundered past in both directions. News came from west to east. Reinforcements, regular army units from Conquence in the main, made the march east to west. More Gilden Guard manned the gate than would be necessary even at Congression. Additional troops lined the walls, archers with an even mix of longbow and crossbow. They'd clearly had little experience if they thought arrows would stop the dead.

'Hurry through, madam, you're the last and we're to seal the gates.' The gate captain waved the column on, with no concern for any report from the captains of the escort, no demand that they explain their thinned number or ragged formation. Not even the lack of followers sparked his interest: perhaps he thought they had sought shelter along the way or hurried to arrive ahead of the guard.

Thantos's carriage rumbled through without remark, though the men closest to it paled, despair soaking into them through their skins.

On through the broad streets of Vyene, onto the wideness of West Street beneath the Western Arch. The grandeur on all sides worked its own magic on Chella. For all her long life she had seen nothing close. Hers were the graveyards and the mire, the bones of forgotten men and the tombs erected to their memory. In the face of such works of men as these she knew herself dirty and small, a bone-picker, a thing of nightmare and of the dark.

'The Dead King will make a necropolis here.' It made her feel better to speak the words. Not that she wanted to live always amongst the returned – with life pulsing through her the thought made her stomach roil – but the sheer wonder of Vyene insulted her existence in ways beyond explanation and she would rather see it dust than endure the judgment of its empty windows.

Another contingent of guards passed them as they neared the end of West Street where it opened onto a vast square. Several hundred men, a thousand maybe, riding hard, with the Lord Commander at their head. The Dead King had mentioned Lord Commander Hemmet, spoken of the cloak and staff that would mark him out. A man to watch.

Riding to the palace it seemed that the dome would never grow closer, that its size went from incredible to impossible as they advanced. At one point, perhaps halfway between the distant mansions and the greatness of the palace, the flagstones lay stained with blood. Some effort had been taken to clean the area but the smell of slaughter is hard to disguise. A pulse of dark joy broke from the carriage, brief and then gone, but enough to set the horses pitching and jumping in fear. These deaths pleased the lichkin. A potential foe erased. The wind still carried fortune with it from the west.

Chella's troop closed on their station, the last to be filled, just to the left of the Empire Gate. They turned from their allotted path only at the final moment, and rode at a walk into the grand entrance before the gate. The thin gold line of duty-guards fell into disarray, confused at their comrades from the road dismounting in the grand entrance. Before they had much to say about it the lichkin stepped from his carriage and all the men's attention became drawn to him as a man will stare at the bloody stump where his thumb was before he cut it off.

## 50

‘This has to be fast.’

‘It’s been a hundred and twenty-eight years so far, King Jorg,’ Taproot said. ‘And we’ve not come close to selecting an emperor. Whatever this Congression throws up, fast is the one thing you can count on it not being.’

‘We’ve no time. Can’t you feel it?’ It beat in me like a drum, the threat, the danger, drawing closer.

Taproot offered only wide eyes and blank incomprehension. ‘The guard surround us ...’

‘It has to be done fast.’ I ran my eye over the throng, the high and the mighty. ‘Who leads the biggest faction?’

‘I would say you do,’ Taproot said. ‘Watch me.’ An afterthought.

‘Well that’s good. And then?’

‘Czar Moljon, the Queen of Red, and Costos of the Port Kingdoms. Your father also commanded considerable support.’

I spotted my grandfather amongst the crowd, Miana at his side. ‘Moljon is broken – his followers will be looking for new alliances. The queen is outside ... Costos it is then. Point him out for me.’

For some reason I had expected a peacock but Costos stood taller than me, with a warrior’s build, clad neck to toe in burnished steel mail, enamelled across the breastplate with a sunburst behind a black ship, the detail exquisite.

‘Are there laws about approaching the throne?’ I asked.

‘What? Yes – no, I don’t think so. Any fool knows not to.’ Taproot’s unease lived in his fingertips, pulling at hair, buttons, ties.

I walked over to the dais, slow enough, with Taproot flustering behind. Up the steps in two skips and I stood before the throne. ‘I hope you can hear me, Fexler. I want to know if you can work the doors and the lights for me. If you can’t, well I’ve no idea what the point of my last visit was.’ I spoke in a low voice that might be mistaken for a prayer.



For a moment the illumination grew around me, just a fraction and just for a heartbeat, as if far above me the ceiling lights aimed at the throne shone a little brighter. It called to mind the time beneath my grandfather's castle when Fexler had moved me along his path with failing glow-bulbs. I'm sure Fexler had more important reasons four years before for needing to be brought here, physically, rather than swimming through his hidden ocean. Maybe I helped him past walls I couldn't see. And perhaps we owed the fact that Vyene was not yet poisoned dust to his residence – but whatever his motivation it was lights and doors that mattered to me most in this moment.

'And will you hear me wherever I speak?' Again the glow.

'You, boy!' Costos striding my way, bristling, indignant, and gleaming.

'Boy?' I had hoped it would be him. It fell to Costos to rebuke me now. The pecking order among royals is as strict as that among chickens.

'This boy has twenty-six votes behind him, Costos Portico. Perhaps you would do better to call me King Jorg and see what inducements might persuade me to make you emperor.'

That made Costos look again, and hard. Outrage at my trampling of convention warred with his lust for those twenty-six votes. He approached the foot of the dais. I knew what picture that put in the minds of the Hundred. Costos at my feet. A suppliant.

'We should speak, King Jorg.' He lowered his voice to a deep whisper. 'But not where idle ears might hear us. The Roman room should afford us some privacy. Come with whichever of your bannermen will show their hands.'

I nodded, liege to subject, and waited for him to move away before stepping down from the dais.

'A tricky one is Costos, watch me!' Taproot at my shoulder once again. 'Violent temper, won the Port Kingdom tourney three years in a row when he was young. He was a third son and not expecting to inherit. Watch his second, King Peren of Ugal, a shrewd negotiator and cold as ice. The short man with the scar, there! See him?'

Costos moved around the hall, touching a man here, a man there, assembling his entourage. Too slow for my liking. Beyond him, Gorgoth towered above the crowd, ignoring everyone, head cocked as if listening.

'Which is the Roman room?' Taproot nodded to one of the doorways, suppressing a smile. It was the chamber Elin once showed me. She might well be in there now, showing it to her husband. Was there nothing the good

doctor didn't know?

I counted fifteen men into the Roman room, Costos the last to enter.

'I should gather your supporters,' Taproot prompted. It would take more than his word to bring my disparate collection of nobles before Costos.

'I'll go alone.' I left him standing.

The Hundred watched me go, some puzzled, some curious, some with the name 'Pius' on their lips.

I halted in the doorway. Costos's supporters stood before me in a loose arc, confident, knowing exactly how these matters worked.

'You've come alone?' Costos made his displeasure clear and loud.

'I felt it best,' I said. 'Close the door.' And a hand span behind me the steel door slid down without a sound.

It took several seconds for any of them to find their voice. 'What's the meaning of this?' King Peren of Ugal recovered first, shock still muting the others.

'You wanted privacy? No?' I walked toward them. Several backed away, without knowing why – the instinct that removes the sheep from the wolf's path.

'But how ... ?' Costos waved a meaty fist at the sheet of steel behind me.

I let the Orlanth rod of office slide from my sleeve, catching it around the end before it escaped me. In the same motion I swung at Costos. To say his head exploded would be no exaggeration. I have seen close up, frozen in time, the damage that a bullet does in passing through a man's skull. In the bright arc of blood behind the sweep of my rod the same pieces glistened. I had killed King Peren before the first drop of Costos's blood hit the floor.

Two more men went down with cracked heads before the others scattered out of reach. Old men both, and slow. I had started with Costos as the greatest danger, but others amongst the eleven remaining had their health about them, and many of the Hundred have taken what they hold by strength of arm.

'This is madness!'

'He's crazed.'

'Pull together. He's trapped in here with us.' This from Onnal, one of Costos's advisors and a warrior born.

So much in life is a matter of perspective. 'I rather think you're trapped in here with me,' I told them.

Tutor Lundist taught me to fight with a stick. He had several good arguments for pursuing the study. Firstly there are many times when you may find yourself without a sword, but a good stick is rarely hard to find. Secondly he proved to be extraordinarily good at it. I don't normally ascribe the old man base motives, but everyone likes to show off, and how many people who've known me a while wouldn't relish giving me a good beating with a piece of timber?

'The last and main reason,' he had said, 'is to instil discipline. Your sword lessons may come to that in time, but for now I see few signs. To be a Ling stick-fighter requires a harmony of mind and body.'

I lay back at the side of the Lectern Courtyard, finding my breath and nursing my bruises. 'Who taught you, Tutor? How did you get to be so good?'

'Again!' And he advanced, his ash rod a blur in the air.

I rolled one way then the other, failing to avoid either blow. 'Ow!' Tried to block and got my fingers mashed. 'Ouch!' Tried to rise and found the blunt end of his stick below my Adam's apple.

'I learned from masters in Ling, in the court where my father tutored princelings. My brother Luntar and I trained together for many years. These are the teachings of Lee, saved from before the Thousand Suns in vaults beneath Pekin City.'

I took the stance, folded the iron-wood rod beneath my elbow, and beckoned Onnal forward, just a flexing of the fingers, as Lundist had beckoned me so many times.



## Chella's Story

Thantos walked Kai's body away from the newly-dead guards between the empire gates. It seemed foolishness to Chella to have built such gates and to have them stand open. If they were not closed now when were they ever closed?

The corpses began to stand, awkward, jerky, drawn by invisible strings, occupied now by only the basest instincts of the men who owned them, housing only their sins. The lichkin spent his power with reckless disregard, but the Dead King had commanded it and so it would be.

'Hold the gate,' Chella said, her voice soft.

Thantos turned to stare, his gaze like the touch of sudden grief, of inconsolable, intolerable loss. The creature made her feel that she had lost her child just by looking at her. What would it be to have it riding within your flesh?

Kai collapsed as Thantos flowed out, released in a single breath, red-tinged. Within an instant the lichkin was everywhere, insinuated into the shadows of the grand entrance, haunting the empty spaces. It would take the bravest of men to walk in from the failing light of day outside. It would take more than bravery for them to walk out again. At least alive.

Chella removed the thong from around her neck. The black vial depending from it had hung above her heart half the journey, nestled spider-like through long hours on the road, bounced there when Jorg of Ancrath had her. She hurried to Kai's side and dribbled the contents into his mouth while he retched and stared unseeing. The vial held ichor from a lead-lined tomb. An agent of the Dead King had ridden hard to bring it to her on the road catching up with the column somewhere close to Tyrol. Three horses died under the man between Crath City and Tyrol. He didn't tell her which tomb had been

desecrated. But Chella knew.

'You should have learned to fly. You could have taken that pretty nothing with you, Kai.' She spat the words and tried to hate him.

The Dead King's brew worked fast. Kai stopped choking. Knowing came back into his eyes. The thing that had last looked at Chella out of Artur Elgin now watched her from inside Kai. Though he might seize almost any corpse, the Dead King could not exercise his full might through them. It took time for him to settle into a dead man and strengthen him sufficiently to be a conduit for the terrors at his command. A necromancer, however, suitably prepared, provided a more robust host. And the contents of the vial accelerated the process beyond measure.

'This is the palace?' He sat up.

When you're among lichkin you can imagine nothing worse. The Dead King is worse. Chella tried to speak but words wouldn't come from her dry mouth.

The Dead King ignored her silence. Instead he flexed Kai's limbs, clenched his fingers into fists, and drew his face into a death's head grin. 'This is good. Very good.' He got to his feet. 'I'm here in my power. Death in life.' Again the smile, a sudden and unholy joy behind it. 'More! More than my power!' His voice hardly raised but it hurt her ears even so. 'I am remade. I have my foundation once again. I am more.'

All around her the dead quickened. The guards' still hearts beat with swift corruption, no longer the shambling things they had been when first returned but darker, stronger makings like the quick dead of the Cantanlona swamp. Her work of months there accomplished here in seconds by her master's will.

For a moment the Dead King's exultation rang through her. The power bleeding off him thrilled and terrified. But the joy ran from him quicker than it came, leaving only grim purpose.

'Lead on.' The Dead King stood. 'They're all inside I take it?'

Chella nodded. The horror hung around him, a sense of hurt and loss, betrayal of all things precious. She had never seen him commit an atrocity, never heard of any deed more wicked than the destruction of those who opposed him, and yet she knew without question he was the worst of them.

'Now.' The word hurt her. She obeyed without hesitation this time, leading through the vast and open gates, the Dead King behind her, and over two hundred dead men in their golden armour, bright-eyed and quick with the Dead King's hunger.

'It's time,' the Dead King said through Kai's mouth. 'To visit Congression. Kill the head and the body is ours. Mine.'

‘Open the door.’

I stepped through quick as quick. ‘Close it.’ And the steel slammed down behind me.

The rulers of many nations crowded around me. I had found a replacement for my blooded cloak, cleaned the iron-wood rod and hidden it up the length of my sleeve, wrist to shoulder. I stood ready to answer their questions.

‘Where is Costos Portico?’

‘What happened in there?’

‘How are the doors working?’

Dozens more, all together, in shades from angry through indignant and down into fearful.

‘Lights on me.’ And high above us the constellation of Builder-lights grew dim, save for a tight and brilliant grouping that lit the space about me.

That shut them up.

I walked toward the middle of the chamber and the light followed me, the point of illumination moving across ceiling and floor. In the shadows before the dais Gorgoth crouched, fingers to the stone flagstones. Two quick bounds took me up the dais steps and I sat upon the throne, letting the rod of office slip free and setting it across my lap.

It was the sitting down that broke the spell. An angry clamour rose among them. These were, after all, rulers of nations.

‘Costos is dead,’ I said and the Hundred fell silent to hear me. ‘His vote passes to his advisors. His advisors are dead. His bannermen also.’

‘Murderer!’ Czar Moljon, still clutching his broken finger.

‘Many times over,’ I agreed. ‘But the events in the Roman room are a mystery that none of you observed, that passed unseen by the guard. There will of course be an inquiry, I may be charged, an imperial court may be convened. These however are matters for another day. This is Congression, gentlemen, and we have matters of state to decide.’



‘How dare you sit in Adam’s chair?’ A white-haired king from the east.

‘No law denies me,’ I said. ‘And I was tired. In any event it was Honourous’s chair last and if any wish to dispute my occupancy they may approach to discuss the matter.’ I set one hand upon the iron-wood rod. ‘Seating arrangements do not make emperors, gentlemen. That’s what we’re here to vote upon.’

I beckoned Taproot to me and leaned back in the throne, as uncomfortable a chair as I’d ever sat upon. Taproot climbed the steps quick enough, coming from the shadows into the light. I motioned him closer still.

‘You’ve found out who my friends are and who my enemies are?’ I asked.

‘Jorg! You’ve given me no time. I’ve hardly started to mingle. I—’ The silk of his doublet flapped around him.

‘But you have, haven’t you? You knew already.’

‘I know some of them, watch me!’ He nodded, a sharp grin, quick then gone. No one is immune to flattery.

‘Then get out there and have Makin, Marten, Kent, and Rike stand close to four of them who wish me ill. Gorgoth too, if he will. Tell him everyone is going to die if I don’t get to be emperor. Those words.’

‘Everyone? The whole of Congression? Jorg! Excess is no—’

‘Everyone everywhere,’ I said. ‘Just tell him.’

‘Everywhere?’ His hands fell still for a moment.

‘The lights will go off in a short while. Tell my brothers to be ready. When the light returns those men need to be dead. Have another set of names ready and then another. If I have to I will vote myself emperor.’

And Taproot left the dais faster than he came.

‘You’re listening to me aren’t you, Fexler?’

No reply.

‘The Dead King is coming.’ I didn’t know how I knew, but I knew. ‘And he’ll bring the world to ruin. Starting here.’ I turned the rod over in my hands. Over and over. ‘And to stop him – that would take such a force, such an act of magic, of will, that it would spin that wheel of yours and set the world cracking apart ... and if that happens ... Michael gets his way and you machines burn us all.’

A faint pulse in the light.

‘I would be right to guess that somewhere beneath me is an enormous bomb, would I?’

Again, the quiver in the light.

I leaned back into my uncomfortable throne and twirled the iron-wood like a baton. Likely I would be the shortest-reigning emperor in history. Out amongst the Hundred, Miana watched me. The man beside her, portly with grey sideburns and my son in his arms, was my father-in-law, Lord of Wennith. He didn't seem to be the man he was six years ago, but then who among us is?

A lord of middling years in brown suede and gold chains had been trying to catch my eye at the foot of the dais, and now moved on through coughing to raising his hand.

'Yes, Lord ... ?'

'Antas of Andaluth.' His realm bordered Orlanth to the south. 'I have matters to discuss, King Jorg. The rights to the River Parl ...'

'Would that secure your support, Lord Antas?'

'Well, I hesitate to put it so bluntly ...'

'The rights to the Cathun River purchased absolution for the death of my mother, and of my brother William. Did you know that, Lord Antas?'

'Why, no ...'

'Do you not think some things are beyond purchase, Antas? Vote for me if you believe the empire needs me on the throne. The fate of a hundred nations shouldn't tip on river rights, horse trading, and back scratching.'

He frowned at that. Red Kent stood behind him and just a little to the left. I guessed that Antas's support had never been going to be mine however many rivers we agreed over.

'Lights out,' I said, and the throne room plunged into darkness.

I made a slow count to ten beneath the uproar. 'Lights on!'

Antas sprawled at the base of the dais, neck broken. Kent had already moved on.

I stood up from the throne and the lights shone more brightly so I felt their heat upon me. It had to be now.

'Men of empire!' I raised my voice to reach the edges of the great hall, so even the Silent Sister, the Queen of the Red and Katherine could hear beyond the Gilden Gate.

All of them stopped to watch me, even with the murdered lying at their feet.

'Men of empire. A better man than I would have won your support with the goodness of his deeds, the clarity of his vision, the truth of his words. But that better man is not here. That better man would fail before the dark tide

that rushes toward us. Orrin of Arrow was the better man and yet he didn't survive even to ask your support.

'Dark times call for dark choices. Choose me.'

I walked the perimeter of the dais in measured steps, staring out across the shadowed heads of state. 'There is an enemy at our gates. Even now. As we spend our words here, the Lord Commander spends the blood of better men to hold his city. This holy city at the heart of our broken empire. This holy city is the heart of our empire. And if you men, you servants of that empire, do not remake the ancient pact, if you do not set upon this throne a single man to carry the responsibility for all our peoples, then that heart will be cut out.

'You can feel it, can you not, my lords? It doesn't take the taint that the Gilden Gate keeps out for you to sense what approaches. It has festered in your kingdoms. The dead rising, the old laws being undone, magics spilling and spreading like contagion. Certainty has left us: the days smell of wrong.

'Do this now. Do it as one. For the man upon this throne will have to face what comes. And if there is no emperor there will be no one to stand against the tide. And tell me, in your heart of hearts, do you truly want to be that man?'

'Melodrama! How can you listen to this?' Czar Moljon, perhaps emboldened by his pain. 'Besides, no vote will be cast for two days yet.'

'Taproot.' I waved him forward.

'The Congression must vote on its final day in a private ballot, but any candidate may force an early and open vote at any time, on the understanding that failure to win such a vote disbars them from future office.' Taproot's hands made as to close a weighty tome, though he spoke from memory.

'Vote!' I said and the lights came up.

'The vote of Morrow for my grandson.' My grandfather's voice rang out clear.

'And the holdings of Alba.' My uncle beside him.

The women at the Gilden Gate drew away, a hurried motion.

'I stand with Jorg of Renar.' Ibn Fayed raised his fist and the four Moorish warriors beside him followed his motion.

'Wennith for Jorg.' Miana's father.

'And the north!' Sindri, somewhere behind me. 'Maladon, Charland, Hagenfast.'

'We stand with the burned king.' White-haired twins, jarls from the ice-

wastes in black furs and steel.

Gilden Guard appeared at the gate, a crowd of them. They advanced, and as each man passed through he collapsed, boneless. The clatter made the Hundred turn.

Perhaps half a dozen guards lay motionless on our side of the gate having made it no more than a yard or so within. Scores more stood almost as still, filling the antechamber beyond.

We all felt *him* approach. How could you not?

‘Conaught for Jorg.’

‘Kennick for Jorg.’

My advisors cast their allotted votes, from Arrow to Orlanth. Others followed, a sense of urgency on them now, as if we each heard *his* footsteps beneath the announcing.

And there he stood, framed in the Gilden Gate, a creature that wore Kai Summerson’s skin and bones. I hoped Katherine had run and run fast.

‘Hello.’ He smiled. Both the word and the smile unnatural things, dragged from somewhere a man would never want to look.

The Dead King approached the Gilden Gate, hands raised, palms out. It seemed he encountered a sheet of glass, for he stopped, fingers flat against the obstruction. He craned Kai’s neck to one side, peering at us all as though we were rats in a trap.

‘A clever gate,’ he said. ‘But it’s only made of wood.’

He stepped back and his dead guards approached with poleaxes to destroy the frame of the gate within the arch.

‘Red March for Jorg.’ A stout grey woman bearing the vote for the Queen of Red’s hereditary seat.

‘The Thurtans for Jorg.’ The man buried in a horsehair robe, an iron crown on his brow.

And more, and still more.

‘How do we stand, Taproot?’ I asked.

‘Thirty-seven out of the forty required.’

Pieces of the Gilden Gate fell splintered to the ground. The Dead King’s presence reached in and men fell to their knees in despair. Even now more than half the votes held back, bound by years of prejudice and wrangling, Congression was a marketplace, to actually put an emperor on the throne, to end their own supremacy in those hundred kingdoms ... many would rather die. But there are good deaths and there are bad deaths. The Dead King

offered only the worse kind.

‘Attar for Jorg.’

‘Conquence for Jorg.’ Hemmet’s brother, giving away the Lord Commander’s supremacy in Vyene.

The remains of the gate fell in.

‘Scorron for Jorg.’ A stern old man, watching me with dislike.

I returned to the throne.

‘Men of empire does Congression find me worthy?’

The ‘aye’ that rang around the hall held more of desperation than enthusiasm, but it was sufficient. I sat emperor in Vyene, Lord of the Hundred – the Broken Empire remade.

Taproot came to my side, bowing close as the Dead King entered through the Gilden Arch, his troops behind him.

‘Well done,’ I said to Taproot. ‘I didn’t think we were anywhere near thirty-seven when I asked.’

‘Numbers never lie, my emperor.’ Taproot shook his head. ‘Only men.’

The Hundred fell back before the Dead King, no man prepared to hold his ground.

‘It does seem to have been a hollow victory, my emperor. Was it so important that you be confirmed to the throne before we all die?’

‘We’ll find out, shall we?’ I stood once more, glad to be out of that seat. ‘I don’t suppose you can seal the arch, Fexler?’

No response, just the continued flow of dead men into the throne room. The archway had always had the look of a later addition, something cut by masons with more poetry in their fingers.

The Dead King approached the dais, somehow a dark figure despite the sky-blue of Summerson’s cloak. Behind him a golden wedge of the emperor’s guard. My guard – Chella in their midst. And I stood my ground, upon the dais, before the throne, with the Hundred aligned behind me in their own wedge. Gorgoth joined me on the dais at my left shoulder, Makin at my right, Kent behind him, Marten behind Gorgoth, not a weapon between them. Sindri mounted the first step, Uncle Robert taking the same place on the far side. The guard who had watched over our Congression, a dozen men in total, stood with the Hundred, all save one who’d contrived to break his neck in the confusion and donate his sword to Rike.

I spared a glance for the men at my shoulders. I’d called them brothers on the road many a time, stood with them in the face of danger, shared meat and

mead. A brotherhood of the road, sure enough, but a mean thing, men to die with rather than for. But in this place, before this enemy, who brought with him the certainty and song of death, who breathed a fear far worse than any I had felt upon the lichway when the ghosts came many years before, in this place it seemed that the men who stood with me were true brothers.

‘Hello Jorg.’ The Dead King looked up at me from the base of the dais.

His regard remained the same no matter whose eyes he watched me from. Somehow familiar, overburdened with accusation, a cold inspection that woke in me every sorrow I had known.

‘Why are you here?’ I asked.

‘The same reason as you.’ He never looked away. ‘Because others said that I may not.’

‘I say that you may not,’ I told him.

‘Will you stop me? Brother Jorg?’ His tone light but with the most bitter undercurrent, as if the ‘brother’ burned his tongue.

‘Yes.’ Just the nearness of him took the strength from my arms. He carried death, bled it from every pore, his existence an insult to all things living.

‘And how will you do that, Jorg?’ He climbed the first step of the dais.

I swung at him by way of an answer, iron-wood blurring through the air. Stick met flesh with a wet thump. The Dead King closed Kai’s hand about it, twisted the rod from my hand and smashed it into splinters on the edge of the second step.

‘How will you stop me, Brother?’ He climbed the second step. ‘You’ve no power. Nothing. An empty vessel. What little magic you ever held has long gone.’

We stood face to face, close enough to reach out for each other’s necks, though I knew how that would end.

‘And what magic do you bring, I wonder?’

For he carried something more complex than necromancy, more than horror and the crude animation of dead flesh. The despair, the longing, and the loss that threatened to drown us all, that made the kings of nations cower and pale, that wasn’t a weapon, not something made for us, but just an echo of what rang through him.

‘Only truth, Brother Jorg,’ he said.

And with those words the bitter play of my life rose around me, mother’s music wrapping it but played too loud, a jarring discord of sour notes. I saw the moments strung out across years, cruelty, cowardice, vicious pride, a

failure at every turn to be the man I could have been, a path through days littered with the wreckage of lives I lacked the courage to protect or repair.

‘I’ve been a bad man?’ I struggled to keep the weakness from my voice. ‘The king of dead things has waded through blood to tell me I have fallen short of sainthood? I thought you came here for battle? Put a sword in my hand and dance with me? Do—’

‘You’ve been a coward, you failed at every turn to protect those you love.’ All his words fell like judgments, the weight of them crushing, though I sought to shrug them off with denial.

‘You came for the empire throne, so why this obsession with my failings? If you think me weak, if you want the throne ... try to take it.’

‘I came for you, Brother Jorg,’ he said. ‘For your family.’

‘Try.’ The word burned my throat, forced past a snarl. The bond to your child can form in an instant or grow by stealth, hook by hook, until you could no more stand aside than let go your skin. In that moment I knew I loved my son. That my father’s strength had passed me by, and that I not only lacked the singularity of will to hold the empire throne but that I would die in the useless defence of a squalling infant too young to know I existed, rather than run to father more another day.

Without command, without battle cry, almost without sound the dead guard advanced, quick and open-handed, tearing the helms from their heads so that we could see the hunger in them.

Of the men at my shoulder only Gorgoth dropped back, retreating from the dais. If pressed to pick the man to run it would have been Makin or Kent. They had seen the quick dead in the Cantanlona Marsh and knew the horror of them, the awful strength, the way they fought on though cut almost to offal.

‘Run,’ the Dead King said. ‘I’ll let you go. Just leave the child to me. Leave this little Wennith whore of yours.’

The dead surged and Makin, Kent and Marten went to meet them passing to either side of the Dead King and me. Just moments left to us and I held nothing. Lights and doors. Empty hands. A few guards, finding their courage, sallied from the side entrances to attack their dead comrades. The first of the living fell to the dead with dismaying swiftness.

Something exploded from the floor around the dais. Somethings. In half a dozen places the flagstones shattered into sharp chunks and red blurs tore through the remains while they still hung in the air. It took long moments

even to focus on the creatures as they ripped into the Dead King's troops. Trolls, but red of hide, akin to Gorgoth rather than their cousins beneath Halradra, and of larger build. The first of them picked up an armoured man and threw him over the heads of the legion behind to strike the wall above the Gilden Arch. Claws scythed through the next man's neck, mail links sheared away. Descendants of the emperor's bodyguard, defending the throne. Six of them, terrible but too few.

I saw Kent snatch the sword of a fallen man just before another bore him to the ground. The dead swept round us, making the dais an island, cutting into the Hundred behind us.

'Run!' the Dead King said again. 'They'll let you go.'

'No.'

'No? But isn't that what you're good at, Brother? Jorg? Aren't you well-versed in leaving the child to die while you run off to hide? Perhaps you could find another bush to cower in?'

'What— who are you?' I stared into Kai Summerson's eyes, trying to see past them.

'You've left mother and son to die before, Jorg, slip away again. I won't tell.' Acid on every word as though I'd done him some deep and personal hurt.

Somehow I had my hands on his throat, though I knew he didn't need to draw breath, though I knew he could snap my arms. 'You know nothing of them, nothing!' I spun him around and he offered no resistance.

Over his shoulder Gorgoth, up against the wall, some small figure behind him, something dark in one hand, clutched against his chest. Two of the six trolls fought around him, an extravagance of violence, impossible speed, strength, skill, against impossible odds. Limbs, guts, armour, flying in crimson arcs, and still the dead rushed on. Gorgoth bent over his tiny burden, shielding it from the dead with his own body, crouching lower, lower, lost in the melee. Miana's white face now seen above his shoulder.

The Dead King smiled at me, a broken, ugly grin, my hands pale beneath his chin, the briar scars livid on wrist and forearm. The pain of those hooks burned again, and though a stone roof arched unbroken overhead it seemed that storm winds howled around me, that the rain lashed cold from black skies.

'In the end,' I said, 'there's no magic, only will.'

I struck at the Dead King, focusing upon him every piece of my desire to



see his destruction. I have lived a life driven by desire, the desire for revenge, for glory, to have what is denied me, a simple directive, pure and edged like a weapon. And such desire, such concentrated wanting, is the foundation of all magic – so the Builder told me.

Through narrowed slits I saw the Dead King's eyes grow wide, as if I really were choking him.

'You failed against Corion, Luntar dipped into your mind at will, even Sageous played you.' He coughed the words past my hands, still twisting that smile. 'And you think you can stop *me*?'

I could have told him I was older now. I could have said that I hadn't stood between those men and my son. But instead I answered, 'Practised spells laid out in books work better than something laid out new. The runes and sigils used for centuries serve better than yesterday's invention. They're channels where men's will has cut paths through what is real. I'll beat you because a million stand behind me now. Because my desire to win now runs in the oldest channels.' I told him because there's a power in the telling of a truth, and because reason has a keen edge.

'Belief? You've found God now?' He laughed, untroubled by the seal around his throat. 'The will of the faithful won't serve you just because you killed the Pope, Jorg. It doesn't quite work like that.'

'People can believe in other things, dead man,' I told him. Screaming all around us, red hands clawing, rich men dying.

'There's nothing—'

'Empire,' I said. 'A million souls scattered across a vast and broken empire, praying for peace, praying for the day a new emperor will sit upon the throne. And it's me.'

I struck again. Emperor in the heart of empire, unbroken. And the Dead King staggered, weakened, trapped in flesh.

'I came for revenge,' the Dead King said, though I'd no idea what revenge he spoke of. 'To show you what I'd made of myself after you abandoned me. And look what I have wrought!' Careless of my grip he spread his hands wide, to encompass the golden horde seething around us. 'I brought you the kingdom of the dead. Let me join with you, Brother. Let me lead our armies, and I will take the empire out past all boundaries, in this world and in the next, and make it whole, entire, and ours. Set aside these friends, this unchosen wife—' He glanced toward Miana.

I struck then with every fibre of my will. I struck with the strength of

empire, with the strength of a million, in that holy place, the very heart of empire, where the might and majesty of emperors past and the faith of generations had scored the paths of my power into the fabric of reality. A wind howled around us, cold and swirling, Kai Summerson fighting for release, deep within his own body, for whilst the holy may fail in any moment, the damned may in any moment reach for redemption. The gale spoke and the Dead King fought back.

My will met that of the Dead King, neither of us with the slightest give in us. The vast and sleeping mind of empire behind me, lost hopes, broken dreams, all pushing, all pressing. The deadlands behind him, the desolation of lives ended, the need, the thirst to return. Impossible pressures built, and built, and built again. I felt the wheel turn, the fabric of everything and everytime start to tear. And in that instant I knew who stood before me.

In that second Kai Summerson learned to fly. He took the Dead King's feet from the ground and the wind scoured the empty inches beneath them. A small victory but one that held my enemy prone.

One hard, cold instant and I knew who hung in my grasp, and even then, with William weak before me, vulnerable, open, even knowing that I traced my father's path almost to the letter ... I stabbed him.

I let slip a hand from his throat, took Kai's knife from his belt, and drove it deep into his heart, the metal grating across ribs.

A single disbelieving laugh burst crimson from his lips, and then he fell, as if the knife had cut all his strings.

I released him and he fell, arms flailing, blood flooding from his chest. He fell and it took an age. My own brother. William, who I had failed in the thorns. Who I failed now. Whose death had cracked my life. Thorns held me once more. I couldn't catch him as he dropped. Kai's corpse hit the floor with the sound of ending, William already gone from him, back into the deadlands from where he had watched me for so many years, from so many dead eyes.

Luntar's paper fluttered from my sleeve. I picked it up as the dead guards toppled, in scores, then hundreds, all around the room.

'You can save him.' Four words. The future-sworn see less than they think. I had stabbed my brother.

'I don't understand.' Makin shouldered a corpse off him, rivulets of dark blood across half his face in three parallel lines. He spoke into the speechless moment. 'How did you kill him?'

'I watched him die.' I muttered the words. 'I stayed hidden and let them

kill him.'

Makin half-climbed, half-crawled, to me.

'What?' He set a hand to my wrist, stilling the tremble in the dripping dagger. I let the blade fall.

'I didn't kill him. He was already dead. He died eleven years ago.'

Marten came from behind, shoulder laid open to the bone, an ear missing. He took the paper from me, awkward in trembling fingers. 'Save who?'

'My brother, William. The Dead King. Always quicker, more clever, stronger-willed. And yet it never occurred to me that death wouldn't be able to hold him.'

'Death isn't what it used to be.' Perhaps the wisest words ever to come from Red Kent's lips. He lay dying among the dead, among the foe he had laid low, so torn there could be only minutes left to him. Makin went to his side.

'Miana!' As I shouted it I knew a hint of the pain I would feel were she not to answer. Fewer than half the Hundred still survived, many fewer. I saw no sign of Sindri, of my grandfather or uncle. Ibn Fayed I saw. At least I saw his head.

'Here.' And I found her, almost pinned to the wall behind Gorgoth's bulk. The red trolls lay broken in the carnage. Gorgoth unfolded, dripping and ripped. In one hand he held my son against his chest.

Something struck through me, seeing my child, there in that moment. Something sharper than edges. A certainty. The knowing that my father had failed to mould me in his image. I loved that baby, small and bloodied and ugly as he was. The denial had run from me. And with that knowing came another: the certainty that I could only ever hurt him. That the taint of my father would drip from my fingers unbidden and make another monster of my son.

I staggered back and fell into my throne. An autumn leaf swirled around my feet, brought in with the dead. A single maple leaf, scarlet with the season's sin. A sign. In that moment I knew myself too full of poison to do anything but drop. The fall had come for me. With numb fingers I undid the straps on my breastplate.

'Still ...' Marten shook his head and crouched beside Kai. 'A child. A boy. What was he? Ten?'

'Seven.'

'A boy of seven. Lost in the deadlands. Fought his way out? Became

king?’ With each question he shook his head. I could see the possibilities bubbling inside him.

*You can save him.* Luntar’s words. A man who saw the future.

‘I’ll bet he gave them hell.’ A grim smile tugged at me. I wondered if that same angel, the one that came to me past death’s doorstep, had visited little William. I wondered what short shrift he gave her. ‘I’ll bet he took the hardest path.’ Like the Conaught spear, William would have hauled himself deeper, aimed for the heart of darkness, found the lichkin. The rest lay beyond my imagining.

Kai sprawled, shattered and empty, William gone, the dead fallen, only Chella standing amid the gleam of their armour. My enemies defeated, and yet the sorrow remained, keener, more true, more clean, for I had always owned it. It echoed back to the thorns, the tone of a bell resounding through the years. We’re fashioned by our sorrows – not by joy – they are the undercurrent, the refrain. Joy is fleeting.

‘I let the thorns hold me, and a crack has run through all my days, deeper than the feelings it divides.’ The calligraphy of those scars lay writ across me still, white upon my flesh. ‘To everything there is a season.’ I spoke Ecclesiasticus. ‘A time to be born. A time to die.’

‘He will return: you can’t destroy him.’ Chella from the heaped corpses, her former troops. She sounded neither happy nor sad. More lost.

‘I don’t want to destroy him,’ I said. ‘He’s my brother. It was given to me to save him.’ I knew what to do. I had always known. I set a hand to the throne. ‘I hadn’t known how bitter-sweet this would taste.’ Across the hall my son cried in his mother’s arms, both of them beautiful. My brother would always return and my boy would never be safe, for our pain had become a wheel and the world lay broken. My brother, my son, my fault.

A tear made its slow passage across my cheek.

I stood somehow, though the strength had gone from me. And joined Makin, standing above him as he knelt with Kent. Marten at my shoulder. Rike came across, bloodied but whole, a gold chain decorated in diamonds and gore hanging from one fist, almost an afterthought.

‘I don’t want to destroy him,’ I said. ‘I want to save him. I should have saved him back when the thorns held me. Nothing has been right since then.’ Fear shook me, sudden, fierce, fear of what I had to do, fear that I hadn’t the courage.

‘No.’ Marten behind me. Marten would always be the first to understand.

Marten who failed his son, who let his boy die. There are no rights and wrongs in such matters. Only wrongs. ‘Don’t.’ The word choked him.

‘Death isn’t—’ And Red Kent died amid the circle of his brothers who did love him each in our way. ‘Isn’t what it was,’ I finished for him.

Chella stepped closer. No one moved to stop her. ‘He’s gone where you can’t follow, Jorg.’

‘You can’t.’ Marten’s voice thick with knowing.

‘Even now they tell me “can’t”, Makin,’ I said, half in sadness, half in the joy of ending. The bitter and the sweet. ‘They tell me “no” and think there must be something I won’t sacrifice to get what I want.’ What I need.

Makin looked up at that, confused but understanding we none of us were speaking of Kent. He struggled to rise and that’s when I hit him. A man like Makin you have to catch off-balance. I struck him hard enough to break my hand, and did. He fell boneless, one arm flopping out almost to Chella’s feet.

‘What?’ Rike took his gaze from Brother Kent, amazed.

‘He would have tried to stop me. Tell him he’s to be steward. An order, not a choice.’ I cradled my hand, let the pain sharpen away sorrow. ‘He would have tried to stop me. Even with his little girl gone all these years, he wouldn’t understand. Not Makin.’

‘Fuck Makin. *I* don’t understand.’ Rike bristled, the sword in his fist still dripping.

Movement at the Gilden Arch. Katherine, a sword clutched across her, unsteady.

‘Rike, glorious Rike! I knew I kept you around for a reason, Brother.’ I pulled the breastplate from me and opened my arms. ‘Do it.’

‘What?’ He stared as though I were mad.

‘I need to follow him, Rike. I need to find my brother.’

‘I—’

‘Kill me. You’ve threatened it often enough. Now I’m asking.’

Rike just stared, eyes wide and bright. Behind him Katherine had started to run toward us, shouting, begging me to stop or urging me on – I couldn’t tell.

‘I’m your fucking emperor. I command you.’

‘I—’ And the big idiot looked at his sword as if it were a foreign thing. ‘No.’ And dropped it.

And that’s when Chella stabbed me. My brother’s knife, taken from his corpse, stuck near enough into the wound that father gave me. She went one better though, and twisted the blade. Our final kiss.

‘Go to hell, Jorg Ancrath.’ The last words I ever heard.

## 53

On the road my brothers spoke of death many a time. The stranger who walked with us. But more than they talked of death they talked of dying, and often the business of avoiding it. Brother Burlow would speak of the light. The light that came to a man lying in his blood, when more of it lay out than in.

‘I’ve heard men say it starts so faint, like a dawn, Brothers. And you look and you find yourself in the tunnel that’s your life, that you’ve walked in darkness all your years.’

Burlow was a reader, you understand. It doesn’t pay to trust a lettered man on the road, Brothers, their heads are full of other men’s ideas.

‘But don’t look into that light,’ he said. ‘For sweet as it might be, there’s no coming back from there, and it will draw you in, yes it will. I’ve sat by too many men, laid broken on the verge, and heard them whisper about that light through dry lips. They none of them walked the road again.’

At least that’s how Fat Burlow had it. And maybe his light was sweet, Brothers. But I’ve looked into that light and it comes at first as a cold star in the dark of night. Closer and more close it draws, or you are drawn – these things are equal in a place without time – and you come to know it for what it is. A white hunger, Brothers, the incinerating incandescence of the furnace mouth, ready to consume you utterly.

That light took me in and it spat me out, far from the world.

I thought I knew death. I thought it dry. But the death I fell into was an ocean, cold and infinite and the colour of forever. And I hung there, without time, or up, or down. Waiting, always waiting, for an angel.

This death fell wet upon me.

I spat the water from a dry mouth. A cry escaped me and the pain came again, too deep to be endured. Lightning flashed and the thorns and coils of the briar made sharp black shapes against the sky. The rain lashed cold, and I hung in its embrace, unable to fall.

‘The thorns.’ My senses had left me for a moment.

A second crack of lightning, across the rolling thunder of the previous stroke. The carriage lay beside the road, figures moving all about it.

‘I’m in the thorns.’

‘You never left them, Jorg,’ she said.

She stood beside me, my angel, she of warmth and light and possibilities.

‘I don’t understand.’ The pain still lanced me, my flesh tenting crimson around a hundred barbs, but with her beside me it was only pain.

‘You understand.’ Her voice nothing but love.

‘My life was a dream?’

‘All lives are dreams, Jorg.’

‘Was— was none of it real? I’ve been hanging in the thorns all my life?’

‘All dreams are real, Jorg. Even this one.’

‘What—’ My arm twitched and red agony flooded me. I found my breath again. ‘What do you want of me?’

‘I want to save you,’ she said. ‘Come.’ And she offered me her hand. A hand in which colour moved like the faintly-shadowed skin on molten silver. To take that hand would end all pain. She offered me salvation. Maybe that was all salvation had ever been. An open hand waiting to be taken.

‘I bet my brother told you to go to hell,’ I said.

Lightning struck once more and there was no angel, just a Renar soldier carrying William by the ankles like a hunter’s kill. Carrying him toward that milestone, carrying him to dash his head open.

Nature shaped the claw to trap, and the tooth to kill, but the thorn ... the thorn’s only purpose is to hurt. The thorns of the hook-briar are like to find the bone. They do not come out easy. If you make a stone of your mind, if you thrash and tear, if you break and pull and bite, if you do these things you will leave the briar for it cannot hold a man who does not wish to be held. You will escape. Not all of you, but enough to crawl. And crawling, I left the briar. And reached my brother.

We died together. As we always should have.

A cold stone hall. Echoing. The ceiling black with smoke. Whimpers of pain. Not human pain, but familiar nonetheless.

‘One more,’ Father said. ‘He has a leg left to stand on, does he not, Sir Reilly?’

And for once Sir Reilly would not answer his king.



‘One more, Jorg.’

I looked at Justice, broken and licking the tears and snot from my hand.

‘No.’

And with that Father took the torch and tossed it into the cart.

I rolled back from the sudden bloom of flame. Whatever my heart told me to do, my body remembered the lesson of the poker and would not let me stay. The howling from the cart made all that had gone before seem as nothing. I call it howling but it was screaming. Man, dog, horse. With enough hurt we all sound the same.

I looked into the flame and found it that same incinerating incandescence which had waited for me at the end of my tunnel, blind, white hunger, blind, white pain. Flesh knows what it wants and will refuse the fire whatever you have to say about the matter.

But sometimes flesh must be told.

‘I.’

I couldn’t do it, Brothers.

‘Can’t.’

Have you ever dared a jump, perhaps from some untold height into clear waters and found that at the very edge you simply cannot? Have you hung from four fingers above an empty span of yards, hung by three fingers and by two, and known in that moment that you can’t drop? While any grip remains, your flesh will save itself in the face of all odds.

The heat of that fire. The fierceness of the blaze. And Justice twisting in its heart, screaming. I couldn’t do it.

I could not.

And then I could. I leapt. I let myself drop. I held my dog. I burned.

A dark sky, a tugging wind. It could be anywhere or any when, and yet I knew I had never been here.

‘You found me, then?’

William, seven years to him, golden curls, soft child’s flesh, Justice curled at his feet. The old hound lifted his head at the scent of me, his tail beating once, twice against the ground. ‘Down, boy.’ William set his hand between those long ears.

‘I found you.’ We shared a smile.

‘I can’t get in.’ He waved at the golden gates towering behind us.

I walked across and set a hand to them. The warmth filled me with

promises. I pulled away.

‘Heaven is over-rated, Will.’

He shrugged and patted our dog.

‘Besides,’ I said. ‘It’s not real. It’s a thing we’ve made. A thing that men have built without knowing it, a place made out of expectation and hope.’

‘It’s not real?’ He blinked at that.

‘No. Nor the angel. Not a lie, but not real either. A dream dreamt by good men, if you like.’

‘So what is death, really?’ he asked. ‘I think I have a right to know. I’ve been dead for years. And here you are, five minutes in, knowing it all. What is real if it’s not this?’

I had to grin at that. The older brother all over.

‘I don’t know what real really is,’ I said. ‘But it’s deeper than this.’ I waved at the golden gates. ‘Fundamental. Pure. And it’s what we need. And if there’s a heaven it’s better than this and requires no gates. Shall we find out?’

‘Why?’ Will lay back, still scratching between Justice’s ears.

‘Did you see your nephew?’ I asked.

Will nodded, hiding a shy smile.

‘If we don’t do this, he’s going to burn. Him and everyone else. And it will get pretty crowded around here. So help me find it.’ No half-measures. No compromise. Save them all, or none.

‘Find what?’

‘A wheel. That’s how Fexler thought of it. And expectations seem to matter here.’

‘Oh, that?’ Will hid a yawn and pointed.

The wheel stood on a hilltop, black against a mauve sky, horizontal on a raised shaft that sunk down into the stone. We walked across to it. The sky lightening above us, fractures spreading across it through which a whiter light bled.

From the hilltop we could look down over the dry lands, sloping away into darkness.

‘I’m sorry I left you, Will.’

‘You didn’t leave me, Brother,’ he said, shaking away some fragment of a dream.

I put both hands to the wheel, cold steel, gleaming. Builder-made. Builder-steel. ‘We need to turn this back and lock it off. It will take both of us to do

it.' I hoped I had the strength. My arms looked strong, smooth and corded with muscle. For some reason that smoothness surprised me, as if there should be something written there, old scars perhaps. Had there been scars once? But that was the past and I had let it go. It had let me go. 'We need to turn it.'

'If anyone knows how to push, it's us.' Will set his hands to the steel. 'Can this save them?'

'I think so. I think it can save them all. All the children. Even the dead ones. Even Marten's son, Gog, Degran, Makin's daughter, let loose from the dreams of men and given over to whatever was made for them.

'At the very least the Builders' machines won't scorch everyone we ever knew from the face of the Earth.'

'Sounds good enough.'

And so we strained to turn the wheel.

There was no wheel of course, no golden gates, no hill, no dry lands. Just two brothers trying to right a wrong.

And we must assume I succeeded. We are, after all, still here. I'm writing this journal, rather than being poisoned dust blowing on a sterile wind. And the magic that joined us at the last, that let me see beyond death with his eyes, that magic is ended. All magic is ended, cut off at the source, the wheel turned, the old reality from which we strayed so long, restored again.

I set the words here in Afrique-ink, dark as the secrets they ground up to make it. My hand traces its path across the whiteness of the page and the black trail of my days can be followed. Followed from the day I shook that snow globe, and understood that sometimes the only change to matter must be worked from without. Followed from that day to this day – this day that woke with the morning sun over Vyene, with the blue Danoob flowing silent and swift through the heart of the Unbroken Empire.

Little Will runs into the room. He comes often now, though his mother tells him not to.

'Jorg!' he says, and I appear.

'Yes.'

'You're not my daddy. Marten says so.'

'I'm a memory of him. And men are made of memories, Will.' It's the best I have to tell him.

'Uncle Rike says you're a ghost.'

'Uncle Rike is something that fell from a horse's backside, crudely fashioned into the shape of an ugly man,' I say.

Will giggles at that. Then serious, 'But you're white like a ghost. Nana Wennith says you can see through ghosts and I can see—'

'Yes, my emperor,' I say. 'I am a ghost. A data-ghost, an extrapolation, a compilation. A billion moments captured. Your father lived much of his life in a building made a thousand years ago.'

'The Tall Castle.' He smiles. 'I've been there!'

'A building with many ancient eyes and many ancient ears. And in later

life he carried a special ring. He watched through it, and it watched him. A man ... a ghost, called Fexler, needed to understand your father, needed to know if he could be trusted to save the world.'

'He wanted to know if he was good enough,' Will says.

I hesitate and hide my smile. 'He wanted to know if Jorg was the right man. So he did what machines do when they have a complicated question to answer. He built a model. And that model is me.'

'I wish I had my real father,' Will says. He is only six. Tact may yet arrive.

'I wish you did too, Will,' I say. 'I'm only an echo and I feel only an echo of the love he would have had for you. But it's a very loud echo.'

He smiles and I know then that not all magic is gone from the world. The kind that burns – that has gone. Men will no longer fly, or cheat death of its due. But a deeper, older, and more subtle enchantment persists. The kind that both breaks and mends hearts and has always run through the marrow of the world. The good kind.

Will grins again and runs out of the room. Small boys have little patience. I watch the doorway through which he ran, and wonder what might come through it next. I could predict of course. I could build a model. But where would the fun be in that now?

One thing I do know is that it won't be Jorg of Ancrath who walks in through that doorway. Men are supposed to be scared of ghosts, not ghosts of men. A man may fear his own shadow, but here is a pale shadow that fears the man who cast him. Jorg of Ancrath will not return though. The magic has been shut off, enchantment has run from the world. Death is, once again, what it was.

I watch the door but no one comes. I make Miana sad. She spends her time watching the young emperor grow. Katherine thinks me a nothing, just numbers trying to count themselves, trying to measure a man who was beyond measures, perhaps beyond her dreams even. I watch the door then give up. Fexler will watch it for me. He watches them all.

Instead I sink down into the deep and endless seas of the Builders. Wheels within wheels, worlds within worlds, possibilities without end.

All of us have our lives. All of us our moment, or day, or year. And Jorg of Ancrath assuredly had his, and it has been my place to tell it.

He has gone beyond me now though, and I have no more to say. Perhaps somewhere Jorg and his brother have found the real heaven and are busy giving them hell. It pleases me to think so.

But the story is done.

*Finis*

## An afterthought

If you've got this far then you will have read three books and several hundred thousand words on the life and times of Jorg Ancrath. It will now be apparent that you're not going to be reading any more – and you might, with some justification, wonder why I have chosen to shoot what could well have been a cash cow squarely between the eyes.

The easiest and best answer is that the story demanded it. I acknowledge that I could have told the story to go jump off a bridge and turned events in a direction that allowed me to produce a book 4, a book 5, 6 etc. In years to come when I'm eating cat food cold from the tin I may wish that I had. The truth is though, that I wanted you to part company with Jorg on a high. I would rather readers finish book 3 wanting more than wander away after book 6 feeling they have had more than enough. There is a tendency for characters who march on past their sell-by date to become caricatures of themselves – to tread the same ground, growing more stale with each step. I hope Jorg avoided that fate and that together we've built something of worth.

I also very much hope you'll buy my next book!

## Acknowledgments

I need to thank my reader, Helen Mazarakis, for reading this whole trilogy one chunk at a time over the course of many years and telling me what she thought.

Sharon Mack who poked me into submitting my Prince of Thorns manuscript deserves another shout out. Thank you, Sharon.

My editor, Jane Johnson, is a marvel and has helped my career immensely on many fronts – very likely on occasions I know nothing about as well. I've also loved reading her books.

Also at Voyager, Amy McCulloch has worked hard on my behalf. I wish her great success with her first fantasy novel, due out this year.

And finally a round of applause for my agent, Ian Drury, for getting my work in front of people who were willing to take a chance on it, and for continuing to sell my books across the world. Gaia Banks and Virginia Ascione, working with Ian at Sheil Land Associates Ltd, have also exceeded all my hopes by getting Jorg's story into so many translations.



# Prince of Fools

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## About the Author

Mark Lawrence is married with four children, one of whom is severely disabled. His day job is as a research scientist focused on various rather intractable problems in the field of artificial intelligence. He has held secret level clearance with both US and UK governments. At one point he was qualified to say 'this isn't rocket science ... oh wait, it actually is'.

Between work and caring for his disabled child, Mark spends his time writing, playing computer games, tending an allotment, brewing beer, and avoiding DIY.

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(Please note: there are two underscores)

## Also by Mark Lawrence

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*King of Thorns*  
*Emperor of Thorns*

The Red Queen's War

*Prince of Fools*

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