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STEVEN
ERIKSON



Dust of Dreams

A TALE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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In war everyone loses. This brutal truth can be seen in the eyes of every soldier in every world . . .

In Letherii, the exiled Malazan army commanded by Adjunct Tavore begins its march into the eastern Wastelands to fight for an unknown cause against an enemy it has never seen.

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So this last great army of the Malazan Empire is resolved to make one final defiant, heroic stand in the name of redemption. But can deeds be heroic when there is no one to witness them? And can that which is not witnessed forever change the world? Destinies are rarely simple, truths never clear but one certainty is that time is on no one's side. For the Deck of Dragons has been read, unleashing a dread power that none can comprehend . . .

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DUST OF DREAMS

DUST OF DREAMS

A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen

Steven Erikson



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Ten years ago I received an endorsement from a most unexpected source, from a writer I respected and admired. The friendship born in that moment is one I deeply treasure. With love and gratitude I dedicate this novel to Stephen R. Donaldson.

Acknowledgements

Commenting on the first half of a very long, two-volume novel is not an easy task. My thanks (and sympathy) go to William Hunter, Hazel Kendall, Bowen Thomas-Lundin and Aidan-Paul Canavan, for their percipience and forbearance. Appreciation also goes to the staff at The Black Stilt and Cafe Macchiato in Victoria who were very understanding in my surrender to caffeine-free coffee. Thanks too to Clare Thomas; and special gratitude goes to my students in the writing workshop I have been conducting for the past few months. Shannon, Margaret, Shigenori, Brenda, Jade and Lenore: you have helped remind me what fiction writing is all about.

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Author's Note

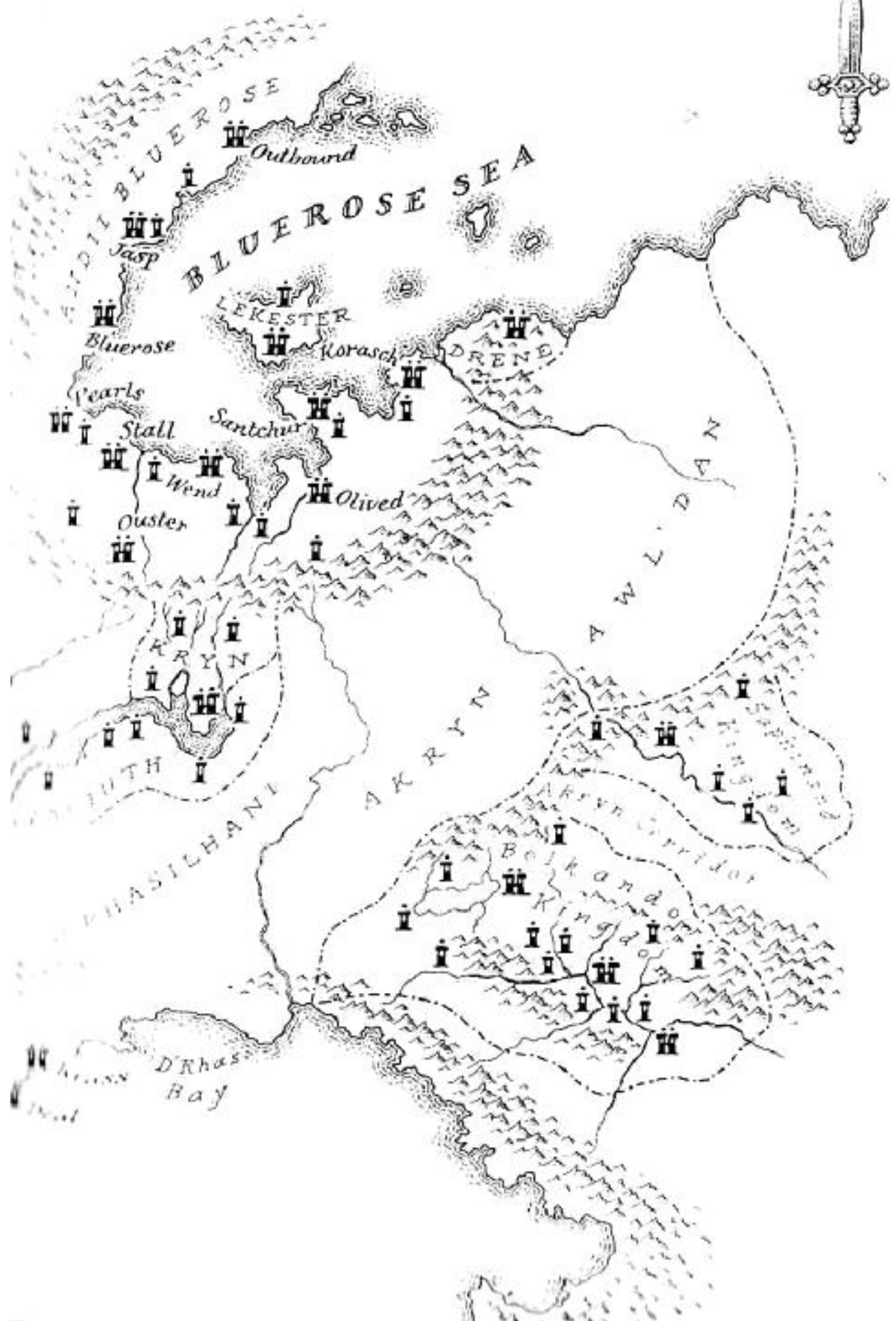
While I am, of course, not known for writing door-stopper tomes, the conclusion of 'The Malazan Book of the Fallen' was, to my mind, always going to demand something more than modern book-binding technology could accommodate. To date, I have avoided writing cliff-hangers, principally because as a reader I always hated having to wait to find out what happens. Alas, *Dust of Dreams* is the first half of a two-volume novel, to be concluded with *The Crippled God*. Accordingly, if you're looking for resolutions to various story-threads, you won't find them. Also, do note that there is no Epilogue and, structurally, *Dust of Dreams* does not follow the traditional arc for a novel. To this, all I can ask of you is, please be patient. I know you can do it: after all you have waited this long, haven't you?

Steven Erikson Victoria, B.C.

The EMPIRE of LETHER

and its neighbours...





DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE MALAZANS

Adjunct Tavore High Mage Quick Ben Fist Keneb Fist Blistig Captain Lostara Yil Banaschar
Captain Kindly Captain Skanarow Captain Faradan Sort Captain Ruthan Gudd Captain Fast
Captain Untilly Rum Lieutenant Pores Lieutenant Raband Sinn Grub

THE SQUADS

Sergeant Fiddler
Corporal Tarr
Koryk
Smiles
Bottle
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas
Cuttle
Sergeant Gesler
Corporal Stormy
Shortnose
Flashwit
Mayfly
Sergeant Cord
Corporal Shard
Limp
Ebron
Crump (Jamber Bole)
Sergeant Hellian
Corporal Touchy
Corporal Breathless
Balgrid
Maybe
Sergeant Balm
Corporal Deadsmell
Throatlitter
Galt
Lobe
Widdershins
Sergeant Thorn Tissy
Tulip
Gullstream
Sergeant Urb
Corporal Reem
Masan Gilani
Saltlick
Scant
Sergeant Sinter
Corporal Pravalak Rim
Honey
Strap Mull

Shoaly
Lookback
Sergeant Badan Gruk
Corporal Ruffle
Skim
Nep Furrow
Reliko
Vastly Blank
Sergeant Primly
Corporal Kisswhere
Hunt
Mulvan Dreader
Neller
Skullddeath
Drawfirst
*

Dead Hedge Alchemist Bavedict Sergeant Sunrise Sergeant Nose Stream Corporal Sweetlard
Corporal Rumjugs

THE KHUNDRYL

Warleader Gall Hanavat (Gall's wife) Jarabb Shelemasa Vedith
THE PERISH GREY HELMS
Mortal Sword Krughava Shield Anvil Tanakalian Destriant Run'Thurvian

THE LETHERII

King Tehol
Queen Janath
Chancellor Bugg
Ceda Bugg
Treasurer Bugg
Yan Tovis (Twilight)
Yedan Derryg (the Watch)
Brys Beddict
Atri-Ceda Aranict
Shurq Elalle
Skorgen Kaban
Ublala Pung
Witch Pully
Witch Skwish
Brevity
Pithy
Rucket
Ursto Hoobutt

THE BARGHAST

Warleader Onos Toolan

Hetan
Stavi
Storii
Warchief Stolmen
Warlock Cafal
Strahl
Bakal
Warchief Maral Eb
Skincut Ralata
Awl Torrent
Setoc of the Wolves

THE SNAKE

Rutt
Held Badalle Saddic Brayderal

IMASS

Onrack Kilava Ulshun Pral

T'LAN IMASS

Lera Epar Kalt Urmanal Rystalle Ev Brolos Haran Ilm Absinos Ulag Togtil Nom Kala Inistral
Ovan

K'CHAIN CHE'MALLE

Matron Gunth'an Acyl J'an Sentinel Bre'nigan K'ell Hunter Sag'Churok One Daughter Gunth
Mach K'ell Hunter Kor Thuran K'ell Hunter Rythok Shi'Gal Assassin Gu'Rull Sulkit Destriant
Kalyth (Elan)

OTHERS

Silchas Ruin
Rud Elalle
Telorast
Curdle
The Errant (Errastas)
Knuckles (Sechul Lath)
Kilmandaros
Mael
Olar Ethil
Udinaas
Sheb
Taxilian
Veed

Asane
Breath
Last
Nappet
Rautos
Sandalath Drukorlat
Withal
Mape
Rind
Pule
Bent
Roach

PROLOGUE

Elan Plain, west of Kolanse

THERE WAS LIGHT, AND THEN THERE WAS HEAT. He knelt, carefully taking each brittle fold in his hands, ensuring that every crease was perfect, that nothing of the baby was exposed to the sun. He drew the hood in until little more than a fist-sized hole was left for her face, her features grey smudges in the darkness, and then he gently picked her up and settled her into the fold of his left arm. There was no hardship in this.

They'd camped near the only tree in any direction, but not under it. The tree was a gamleh tree and the gamlehs were angry with people. In the dusk of the night before, its branches had been thick with fluttering masses of grey leaves, at least until they drew closer. This morning the branches were bare.

Facing west, Rutt stood holding the baby he had named Held. The grasses were colourless. In places they had been scoured away by the dry wind, wind that had then carved the dust out round their roots to expose the pale bulbs so the plants withered and died. After the dust and bulbs had gone, sometimes gravel was left. Other times it was just bedrock, black and gnarled. Elan Plain was losing its hair, but that was something Badalle might say, her green eyes fixed on the words in her head. There was no question she had a gift, but some gifts, Rutt knew, were curses in disguise.

Badalle walked up to him now, her sun-charred arms thin as stork necks, the hands hanging at her sides coated in dust and looking oversized beside her skinny thighs. She blew to scatter the flies crusting her mouth and intoned:

'Rutt he holds Held Wraps her good
In the morning
And then up he stands—'

'Badalle,' he said, knowing she was not finished with her poem but knowing, as well, that she would not be rushed, 'we still live.'

She nodded. These few words of his had become a ritual between them, although the ritual never lost its taint of surprise, its faint disbelief. The ribbers had been especially hard on them last night, but the good news was that maybe they had finally left the Fathers behind.

Rutt adjusted the baby he'd named Held in his arm, and then he set out, hobbling on swollen feet. Westward, into the heart of the Elan.

He did not need to look back to see that the others were following. Those who could, did. The ribbers would come for the rest. He'd not asked to be the head of the snake. He'd not asked for anything, but he was the tallest and might be he was the oldest. Might be he was thirteen, could be he was fourteen.

Behind him Badalle said,

'And walks he starts
Out of that morning
With Held in his arms
And his ribby tail
It snakes out
Like a tongue
From the sun.'

You need the longest
Tongue
When searching for
Water

Like the sun likes to do . . . !

Badalle watched him for a time, watched as the others fell into his wake. She would join the ribby snake soon enough. She blew at the flies, but of course they came right back, clustering round the sores puffing her lips, hopping up to lick at the corners of her eyes. She had been a beauty once, with these green eyes and her long fair hair like tresses of gold. But beauty bought smiles for only so long. When the larder gapes empty, beauty gets smudged. 'And the flies,' she whispered, 'make patterns of suffering. And suffering is ugly.'

She watched Rutt. He was the head of the snake. He was the fangs, too, but that last bit was for her alone, her private joke.

This snake had forgotten how to eat.

She'd been among the ones who'd come up from the south, from the husks of homes in Korbanse, Krosis and Kanros. Even the isles of Otpelas. Some, like her, had walked along the coast of the Pelasjar Sea, and then to the western edge of Stet which had once been a great forest, and there they found the wooden road, Stump Road they sometimes called it. Trees cut on end to make flat circles, pounded into rows that went on and on. Other children then arrived from Stet itself, having walked the old stream beds wending through the grey tangle of shattered tree-fall and diseased shrubs. There were signs that Stet had once been a forest to match its old name which was Forest Stet, but Badalle was not entirely convinced - all she could see was a gouged wasteland, ruined and ravaged. There were no trees standing anywhere. They called it Stump Road, but other times it was Forest Road, and that too was a private joke.

Of course, someone had needed lots of trees to make the road, so maybe there really had once been a forest there. But it was gone now.

At the northern edge of Stet, facing out on to the Elan Plain, they had come upon another column of children, and a day later yet another one joined them, down from the north, from Kolanse itself, and at the head of this one there had been Rutt. Carrying Held. Tall, his shoulders, elbows, knees and ankles protruding and the skin round them slack and stretched. He had large, luminous eyes. He still had all his teeth, and when the morning arrived, each morning, he was there, at the head. The fangs, and the rest just followed.

They all believed he knew where he was going, but they didn't ask him since the belief was more important than the truth, which was that he was just as lost as all the rest.

'All day Rutt holds Held
And keeps her
Wrapped
In his shadow.
It's hard
Not to love Rutt
But Held doesn't
And no one loves Held
But Rutt.'

Visto had come from Okan. When the starvers and the bone-skinned inquisitors marched on the city his mother had sent him running, hand in hand with his sister who was two years older than he was, and they'd run down streets between burning buildings and screams filled the night and the starvers kicked in doors and dragged people out and did terrible things to them, while the bone-skins watched on and said it was necessary, everything here was necessary.

They'd pulled his sister out of his grip, and it was her scream that still echoed in his skull. Each night since then, he had ridden it on the road of sleep, from the moment his exhaustion took him until the moment he awoke to the dawn's pale face.

He ran for what seemed forever, westward and away from the starvers. Eating what he could, savaged by thirst, and when he'd outdistanced the starvers the ribbers showed up, huge packs of gaunt dogs with red-rimmed eyes and no fear of anything. And then the Fathers, all wrapped in black, who plunged into the ragged camps on the roads and stole children away, and once he and a few others had come upon one of their old night-holds and had seen for themselves the small split bones mottled blue and grey in the coals of the hearth, and so understood what the Fathers did to the children they took.

Visto remembered his first sight of Forest Stet, a range of denuded hills filled with torn-up stumps, roots reminding him of one of the bone-yards that ringed the city that had been his home, left after the last of the livestock had been slaughtered. And at that moment, looking upon what had once been a forest, Visto had realized that the entire world was now dead.

There was nothing left and nowhere to go.

Yet onward he trudged, now just one among what must be tens of thousands, maybe even more, a road of children leagues long, and for all that died along the way, others arrived to take their place. He had not imagined that so many children existed. They were like a great herd, the last great herd, the sole source of food and nourishment for the world's last, desperate hunters.

Visto was fourteen years old. He had not yet begun his growth-spurt and now never would. His belly was round and rock hard, protruding so that his spine curved deep just above his hips. He walked like a pregnant woman, feet splayed, bones aching. He was full of Satra Riders, the worms inside his body endlessly swimming and getting bigger by the day. When they were ready - soon - they would pour out of him. From his nostrils, from the corners of his eyes, from his ears, from his belly button, his penis and his anus, and from his mouth. And to those who witnessed, he would seem to deflate, skin crinkling and collapsing down into weaving furrows running the length of his body. He would seem to instantly turn into an old man. And then he would die.

Visto was almost impatient for that. He hoped ribbers would eat his body and so take in the eggs the Satra Riders had left behind, so that they too would die. Better yet, Fathers - but they weren't that stupid, he was sure - no, they wouldn't touch him and that was too bad.

The Snake was leaving behind Forest Stet, and the wooden road gave way to a trader's track of dusty, rutted dirt, wending out into the Elan. So, he would die on the plain, and his spirit would pull away from the

shrunken thing that had been its body, and begin the long journey back home. To find his sister. To find his mother.

And already, his spirit was tired, so tired, of walking.

At day's end, Badalle forced herself to climb an old Elan longbarrow with its ancient tree at the far end - grey leaves fluttering - from which she could turn and look back along the road, eastward, as far as her eyes could retrace the day's interminable journey. Beyond the mass of the sprawled camp, she saw a wavy line of bodies stretching to the horizon. This had been an especially bad day, too hot, too dry, the lone waterhole a slough of foul, vermin-ridden mud filled with rotting insect carcasses that tasted like dead fish.

She stood, looking for a long time on the ribby length of the Snake. Those that fell on the track had not been pushed aside, simply trampled on or stepped over, and so the road was now a road of flesh and bone, fluttering threads of hair, and, she knew, staring eyes. The Snake of Ribs. Chal Managal in the Elan tongue.

She blew flies from her lips. And voiced another poem.

'On this morning We saw a
tree With leaves of grey

And when we got closer
The leaves flew away.

At noon the nameless boy With the
eaten nose Fell and did not move
And down came the leaves To feed.

At dusk there was another tree Grey
fluttering leaves Settling in for the
night Come the morning They'll fly
again.'

Ampelas Rooted, the Wastelands

The machinery was coated in oily dust that gleamed in the darkness as the faint glow of the lantern light slid across it, conveying motion where none existed, the illusion of silent slippage, as of reptilian scales that seemed, as ever, cruelly appropriate. She was breathing hard as she hurried down the narrow corridor, ducking every now and then to avoid the lumpy black cables slung along from the ceiling. Her nose and throat stung with the rank metal reek of the close, motionless air. Surrounded by the exposed guts of Root, she felt besieged by the unknowable, the illimitable mystery of dire arcana. Yet, she had made these unlit, abandoned passageways her favoured haunt, knowing full well the host of self-recriminating motivations that had guided her to such choices.

The Root invited the lost, and Kalyth was indeed lost. It was not that she could not find her way among the countless twisting corridors, or through the vast chambers of silent, frozen machines, evading the pits in the floors over which flagstones had never been installed, and staying clear of the chaos of metal and cables spilling out from unpanelled walls - no, she knew her way round, now, after months of wandering. This curse of helpless, hopeless bewilderment belonged to her spirit. She was not who they wanted her to be, and nothing she said could convince them of that.

She had been born in a tribe on the Elan Plain. She had grown into adulthood there, from child to girl, from girl to woman, and there had been nothing to set her apart, nothing to reveal her as unique, or gifted with unexpected talents. She had married a month after her first bleeding. She had borne three children. She had almost loved her husband, and had learned to live with his faint disappointment in her, as her youthful beauty gave way to weary motherhood. She had, in truth, lived a life no different from that of her own mother, and so had seen clearly - without any special talent - the path of her life ahead, year after year, the slow decay of her body, the loss of suppleness, deepening lines upon her face, the sag of her breasts, the miserable weakening of her bladder. And one day she would find herself unable to walk, and the tribe would leave her where she was. To die in solitude, as dying was always a thing of solitude, as it must ever be. For the Elan knew better than the settled peoples of Kolanse, with their crypts and treasure troves for the dead, with the family servants and advisors all throat-cut and packed in the corridor to the sepulchre, servants beyond life itself, servants for ever.

Everyone died in solitude, after all. A simple enough truth. A truth no one need fear. The spirits waited before they cast judgement upon a soul, waited for that soul - in its dying isolation - to set judgement upon itself, upon the life it had lived, and if peace came of that, then the spirits would show mercy. If torment rode the Wild Mare, why, then, the spirits knew to match it. When the soul faced itself, after all, it was impossible to lie. Deceiving arguments rang loud with falsehood, their facile weakness too obvious to ignore.

It had been a life. Far from perfect, but only vaguely unhappy. A life one could whittle down into something like contentment, even should the result prove shapeless, devoid of meaning. She had been no witch. She had not possessed the breath of a shaman, and so would never be a Rider of the Spotted Horse. And when the end of that life had come for her and her people, on a morning of horror and violence, all that she had revealed then was a damning selfishness - in refusing to die, in fleeing all that she had known.

These were not virtues.

She possessed no virtues.

Reaching the central, spiral staircase - each step too shallow, too broad for human strides - she set off, her gasps becoming shallower and quicker with the exertion as she ascended level after level, up and out from Root, into the lower chambers of Feed, where she made use of the counterweighted ramp that lifted her by way of a vertical shaft past the seething vats of fungi, the stacked pens of orthen and grishol, drawing to a grating, shivering halt on the base level of Womb. Here, the cacophony of the young assailed her, the hissing shrieks of pain as the dread surgeries were performed - as destinies were decreed in bitter flavours - and, having regained some measure of her wind, she hastened to ascend past the levels of terrible outrage, the stench of wastes and panic that shone like oil on soft hides among shapes writhing on all sides - shapes she was careful to avoid with her eyes, hurrying with her hands clapped over her ears.

From Womb to Heart, where she now passed among towering figures that paid her no heed, and from whose paths she had to duck and dodge lest they simply trample her underclaw. Ve'Gath Soldiers stood flanking the central ramp, twice her height and in their arcane armour resembling the vast machinery of Root far below. Ornate grilled visors hid their faces save their fanged snouts, and the line of their jaws gave them ghastly grins, as if the implicit purpose of their breed delighted them. More so than the J'an or the K'ell, the true soldiers of the K'Chain Che'Malle frightened Kalyth to the very core of her being. The Matron was producing them in vast numbers.

No further proof was needed - war was coming.

That the Ve'Gath gave the Matron terrible pain, each one thrust out from her in a welter of blood and pungent fluid, had become irrelevant. Necessity, Kalyth well knew, was the cruellest master of all.

Neither soldier guarding the ramp impeded her as she strode on to it, the flat stone underfoot pitted with holes designed to hold claws, and from which cold air flowed up around her - the plunge in ambient temperature on the ramp evidently served somehow to quell the instinctive fear the K'Chain experienced as the conveyance lifted with squeals and groans up past the levels of I leart, ending at Fyes, the Inner

Keep, Acyl Nest and home of the Matron herself. Riding the ramp alone, however, the strain of the mechanism was less pronounced, and she heard little more than the rush of air that ever disoriented her with a sense of falling even as she raced upward, and the sweat on her limbs and upon her brow quickly cooled. She was shivering by the time the ramp slowed and then halted at the base level of Eyes.

J'an Sentinels observed her arrival from the foot of the half-spiral stairs that led to the Nest. As with the Ve'Gath, they were seemingly indifferent to her - no doubt aware that she had been summoned, but even were that not so they would see in her no threat whatsoever to the Matron they had been bred to protect. Kalyth was not simply harmless; she was useless. The hot, rank air engulfed her, cloying as a damp cloak, as she made her way to the stairs and began the awkward climb to the Matron's demesne.

At the landing one last sentinel stood guard. At least a thousand years old, Bre'nigan was gaunt and tall - taller even than a Ve'Gath - and his multilayered scales bore a silvered patina that made the creature seem ghostly, as if hewn from sun-bleached mica. Neither pupil nor iris was visible in his slitted eyes, simply a murky yellow, misshapen with cataracts. She suspected the bodyguard was blind, but in truth there was no way to tell, for when Bre'nigan

moved, the J'an displayed perfect sureness, indeed, grace and liquid elegance. The long, vaguely curved sword slung through a brass ring at his hip - a ring half embedded in the creature's hide - was as tall as Kalyth, the blade a kind of ceramic bearing a faint magenta hue, although the flawless edge gleamed silver.

She greeted Bre'nigan with a nod that elicited no reaction whatsoever, and then stepped past the sentinel.

Kalyth had hoped - no, she had prayed - and when she set eyes upon the two K'Chain standing before the Matron, and saw that they were unaccompanied, her spirits plummeted. Despair welled up, threatened to consume her. She fought to draw breath into her tight chest.

Beyond the newcomers and huge on the raised dais, Gunth'an Acyl, the Matron, emanated agony in waves - and in this she was unchanged and unchanging, but now Kalyth felt from the enormous queen a bitter undercurrent of . . . something.

Unbalanced, distraught, Kalyth only then discerned the state of the two K'Chain Che'Malle, the grievous wounds half-healed, the chaotic skeins of scars on their flanks, necks and hips. The two creatures looked starved, driven to appalling extremes of deprivation and violence, and she felt an answering pang in her heart.

But such empathy was shortlived. The truth remained: the K'ell Hunter Sag'Churok and the One Daughter Gunth Mach had failed.

The Matron spoke in Kalyth's mind, although it was not speech of any sort, simply the irrevocable imposition of knowledge and meaning. 'Destriant Kalyth, an error in choice. We remain broken. I remain broken. You cannot mend, not alone, you cannot mend'

Neither knowledge nor meaning proved gifts to Kalyth. For she could sense Gunth'an Acyl's madness beneath the words. The Matron was undeniably insane. So too the course of action she had forced upon her children, and upon Kalyth herself. No persuasion was possible.

It was likely that Gunth'an Acyl comprehended Kalyth's convictions

- her belief that the Matron was mad - but this too made no difference. Within the ancient queen, there was naught but pain and the torment of desperate need.

'Destriant Kalyth, they shall try again. What is broken must be mended.'

Kalyth did not believe Sag'Churok and the One Daughter could survive another quest. And that was another truth that failed in swaying Acyl's imperative.

'Destriant Kalyth, you shall accompany this Seeking. K'Chain Che'Malle are blind to recognition.'

And so, at last, they had reached what she had known to be inevitable, despite her hopes, her prayers. 'I cannot,' she whispered.

'You shall. Guardians are chosen. K'ell Sag'Churok, Rythok, Kor Thuran. Shi'gal Gu'Rull. One Daughter Gunth Mach.'

'I cannot,' Kalyth said again. 'I have no . . . talents. I am no Destriant

- I am blind to whatever it is a Destriant needs. I cannot find a Mortal Sword, Matron. Nor a Shield Anvil. I am sorry.'

The enormous reptile shifted her massive weight, and the sound was as of boulders settling in gravel. Lambent eyes fixed upon Kalyth, radiating waves of stricture.

'I have chosen you, Destriant Kalyth. It is my children who are blind. The failure is theirs, and mine. We have failed every war. I am the last Matron. The enemy seeks me. The enemy will destroy me. Your kind thrives in this world - to that not even my children are blind. Among you, I shall find new champions. My Destriant must find them. My Destriant leaves with the dawn.'

Kalyth said no more, knowing any response was useless. After a moment, she bowed and then walked, feebly, as if numb with drink, from the Nest.

A Shi'gal would accompany them. The significance of this was plain. There would be no failure this time. To fail was to receive the Matron's displeasure. Her judgement. Three K'ell Hunters and the One Daughter, and Kalyth herself. If they failed . . . against the deadly wrath of a Shi'gal Assassin, they would not survive long.

Come the dawn, she knew, she would begin her last journey.

Out into the wastelands, to find Champions that did not even exist.

And this, she now understood, was the penance set upon her soul. She must be made to suffer for her cowardice. / should have died with the rest. With my husband. My children. I should not have run away. I now must pay for my selfishness.

The one mercy was that, when the final judgement arrived, it would come quickly. She would not even feel, much less see, the killing blow from the Shi'gal.

A Matron never produced more than three assassins at any one time, and their flavours were anathema, preventing any manner of alliance. And should one of them decide that the Matron must be expunged, the remaining two, by their very natures, would oppose it. Thus, each Shi'gal warded the Matron against the others. Sending one with the Seeking was a grave risk, for now there would be only two assassins defending her at any time.

Further proof of the Matron's madness. To so endanger herself, whilst at the same time sending away her One Daughter - her only child with the potential to breed - was beyond all common sense.

But then, Kalyth was about to march to her own death. What did she care about these terrifying creatures? Let the war come. Let the mysterious enemy descend upon Ampelas Rooted and all the other Rooted, and cut down every last one of these K'Chain Che'Malle. The world would not miss them.

Besides, she knew all about extinction. The only real curse is when you find yourself the last of your kind. Yes, she well understood such a fate, and she knew the true depth of loneliness - no, not that paltry, shallow, self-pitying game played out by people everywhere - but the cruel comprehension of a solitude without cure, without hope of salvation.

Yes, everyone dies alone. And there may be regrets. There may be sorrows. But these are as nothing to what comes to the last of a breed. For then there can be no evading the truth of failure. Absolute, crushing failure. The failure of one's own kind, sweeping in from all sides, finding this last set of shoulders to settle upon, with a weight no single soul can withstand. There had been a residual gift of sorts with the language of the K'Chain Che'Malle, and it now tortured Kalyth. Her mind had awakened, far beyond what she had known in her life before now. Knowledge was no blessing; awareness was a disease that stained the entire spirit. She could gouge out her own eyes and still see too much.

Did the shamans of her tribe feel such crushing guilt, when recognition of the end finally arrived? She remembered anew the bleakness in their eyes, and understood it in ways she had not comprehended before, in the life she had once lived. No, she could do naught but curse the

deadly blessings of these K'Chain Che'Malle. Curse them with all her heart, all her hate.

Kalyth began her descent. She needed the closeness of Root; she needed the decrepit machinery on all sides, the drip of viscid oils and the foul, close air. The world was broken. She was the last of the Elan, and now her sole remaining task on this earth was to oversee the annihilation of the last Matron of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Was there satisfaction in that? If so, it was an evil kind of satisfaction, making its taste all the more alluring.

Among her people, death arrived winging across the face of the setting sun, a black, tattered omen low in the sky. She would be that dread vision, that shred of the murdered moon.

Driven to the earth as all things were, eventually.

This is all true.

See the bleakness in my eyes.

Shi'gal Gu'Rull stood upon the very edge of Brow, the night winds howling round his tall, lean form. Eldest among the Shi'gal, the assassin had fought and defeated seven other Shi'gal in his long service to Acyl. He had survived sixty-one centuries of life, of growth, and was twice the height of a full-grown K'ell Hunter, for unlike the Hunters - who were flavoured with mortality's sudden end at the close of ten centuries - the Shi'gal possessed no such flaw in their making. They could, potentially, outlive the Matron herself.

Bred for cunning, Gu'Rull held no illusions regarding the sanity of Mother Acyl. Her awkward assumption of godly structures of faith ill fitted both her and all the K'Chain Che'Malle. The matron sought human worshippers, human servants, but humans were too frail, too weak to be of any real value. The woman Kalyth was proof enough of that, despite the flavour of percipience Acyl had given her - a percipience that should have delivered certitude and strength, yet had been twisted by a weak mind into new instruments of self-recrimination and self-pity.

That flavour would fade in the course of the Seeking, as Kalyth's swift blood ever thinned Acyl's gift, with no daily replenishment possible. The Destriant would revert to her innate intelligence, and that was a meagre one by any standard. She was already useless, as far as Gu'Rull was concerned. And upon this meaningless quest, she would become a burden, a liability.

better to kill her as soon as possible, but alas, Mother Acyl's command permitted no such flexibility. The Destriant must choose a Mortal Sword and a Shield Anvil from among her own kind.

Sag'Churok had recounted the failure of their first selection. The mass of flaws that had been their chosen one: Redmask of the Awl.

Gu'Rull did not believe the Destriant would fare any better. Humans might well have thrived in the world beyond, but they did so as would feral orthen, simply by virtue of profligate breeding. They possessed no other talents.

The Shi'gal lifted his foreshortened snout and opened his nostril slits to scent the chill night air. The wind came from the east and, as usual, it stank of death.

Gu'Rull had plundered the pathetic memories of the Destriant, and therefore knew that no salvation would be found to the east, on the plains known as the Elan. Sag'Churok and Gunth Mach had set out westward, into the Awl'dan, and there too they found only failure. The north was a forbidding, lifeless realm of ice, tortured seas and bitter cold.

Thus, they must journey south.

The Shi'gal had not ventured outside Ampelas Rooted in eight centuries. In that short span of time, it was likely that little had changed in the region known to humans as the Wastelands. Nonetheless, some advance scouting was tactically sound.

With this in mind, Gu'Rull unfolded his month-old wings, spreading the elongated feather-scales so that they could flatten and fill out under the pressure of the wind.

And then the assassin dropped over the sheer edge of Brow, wings snapping out to their fullest extent, and there arose the song of flight, a low, moaning whistle that was, for the Shi'gal, the music of freedom.

Leaving Ampelas Rooted ... it had been too long since Gu'Rull felt this . . . this exhilaration.

The two new eyes beneath the lines of his jaw now opened for the first time, and the compounded vision - of the sky ahead and the ground below - momentarily confused the assassin, but after a time Gu'Rull was able to enforce the necessary separation, so that the vistas found their proper relationship to one another, creating a vast panorama of the world beyond.

Acyl's new flavours were ambitious, indeed, brilliant. Was such creativity implicit in madness? Perhaps.

Did that possibility engender hope in Gu'Rull? No. Hope was not possible.

The assassin soared through the night, high above a blasted, virtually lifeless landscape. Like a shred of the murdered moon.

The Wastelands

He was not alone. Indeed, he had no memory of ever having been alone. The notion was impossible, in fact, and that much he understood. As

far as he could tell, he was incorporeal, and possessed of the quaint privilege of being able to move from one companion to another almost at will. If they were to die, or somehow find a means of rejecting him, why, he believed he would cease to exist. And he so wanted to stay alive, floating as he did in the euphoric wonder of his friends, his bizarre, disjointed family. They traversed a wilderness ragged and forlorn, a place of broken rock, wind-rippled fans of grey sand, screes of volcanic glass that began and ended with random indifference. Hills and ridges clashed in wayward confusion, and not a single tree broke the undulating horizon. The sun overhead was a blurred eye that smeared a path through thin clouds. The air was hot, the wind constant.

The only nourishment the group had been able to find came from the strange swarms of scaled rodents - their stringy meat tasting of dust - and an oversized breed of rhizan that possessed pouches under their wings swollen with milky water. Day and night capemoths tracked them, waiting ever patient for one to fall and not rise, but this did not seem likely. Flitting from one person to the next, he could sense their innate resolve, their unfailing strength.

Such fortitude, alas, could not prevent the seemingly endless litany of misery that seemed to comprise the bulk of their conversation.

'What a waste,' Sheb was saying, clawing at his itching beard. 'Sink a few wells, pile these stones into houses and shops and whatnot. Then you'd have something worth something. Empty land is useless. I long for the day when it's all put to use, everything, right over the surface of the world. Cities merging into one—'

'There'd be no farms,' objected Last, but as always it was a mild, diffident objection. 'Without farms, nobody eats—'

'Don't be an idiot,' snapped Sheb. 'Of course there'd be farms. Just none of this kind of useless land, where nothing lives but damned rats. Rats in the ground, rats in the air, and bugs, and bones - can you believe all the bones?'

'But I—'

'Be quiet, Last,' said Sheb. 'You never got nothing useful to say, ever.'

Asane then spoke in her frail, quavering voice. 'No fighting, please. It's horrible enough without you picking fights, Sheb—'

'Careful, hag, or you're next.'

'Care to try me, Sheb?' Nappet asked. He spat. 'Didn't think so. You talk, Sheb, and that's all you do. One of these nights, when you're asleep, I'm gonna cut out your tongue and feed it to the fuckin' capemoths. Who'd complain? Asane? Breath? Last? Taxilian? Rautos? Nobody, Sheb, we'd all be dancing.'

'Leave me out of this,' said Rautos. 'I suffered enough for a lifetime when I was living with my wife and, needless to say, I don't miss her.'

'Here goes Rautos again,' snarled Breath. 'My wife did this, my wife said that. I'm sick of hearing about your wife. She ain't here, is she? You probably drowned her, and that's why you're on the run. You drowned her in your fancy fountain, just held her down, watching as her eyes went wide, her mouth opened and she screamed through the water. You watched and smiled, that's what you did. I don't forget, I can't forget, it was awful. You're a murderer, Rautos.'

'There she goes,' said Sheb, 'talking about drowning again.'

'Might cut out her tongue, too,' said Nappet, grinning. 'Rautos's, too. No more shit about drowning or wives or compaiinin' - the rest of you are fine. Last, you don't say nothing and when you do, it don't rile nobody. Asane, you mostly know when to keep your mouth shut. And Taxilian hardly ever says nothing anyway. Just us, and that'd be—'

'I see something,' said Rautos.

He felt their attentions shift, find focus, and he saw with their eyes a vague smudge on the horizon, something thrusting skyward, too narrow to be a mountain, too massive to be a tree. Still leagues away, rising like a tooth.

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