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Reaper's Gale

Steven Erikson

About the Book

The Letherii Empire is in turmoil. Rhulad Sengar, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, spirals into madness while the Errant, once a farseeing god, appears suddenly blind to the future. And the venal, self-serving courtiers who claim the emperor's ear seem intent on waging all-out war against the empire's neighbours.

And there is the matter of the Edur fleet that draws ever closer. Amongst its warriors are Karsa Orlon and Icarium Lifestealer and their presence alone means that blood will be spilled.

But a small band of fugitives seeks a way out. One of their company, Fear Sengar, hunts the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye, for with its help they might halt the Tiste Edur and save the emperor, his brother. However Silchas Ruin, brother of Anomander Rake, also travels with them. He carries the wounds made by the blades of Scabandari, and seeks revenge. There will be a reckoning – and it will be on an unimaginable scale ...

About the Author

Archaeologist and anthropologist Steven Erikson is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His first fantasy novel, *Gardens of the Moon*, marked the opening chapter in his epic 'Malazan Book of the Fallen' sequence and was shortlisted for a World Fantasy Award. The equally acclaimed subsequent volumes are *Deadhouse Gates*, *Memories of Ice*, *House of Chains*, *Midnight Tides*, *The Bonehunters* and *Reaper's Gale*. The thrilling eighth instalment in this remarkable story, *Toll the Hounds*, is coming soon from Bantam Press. Steven Erikson lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

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By Steven Erikson

GARDENS OF THE MOON

DEADHOUSE GATES

MEMORIES OF ICE

HOUSE OF CHAINS

MIDNIGHT TIDES

THE BONEHUNTERS

REAPER'S GALE

TOLL THE HOUNDS

DUST OF DREAMS

THE CRIPPLED GOD

THE FIRST COLLECTED TALES OF BAUCHELAIN & KORBAL BROACH

Reaper's Gale

A Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON



BANTAM BOOKS

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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Contents

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgements*](#)

[*Dramatis Personae*](#)

[*Maps*](#)

[*By Steven Erikson*](#)

[*Prologue*](#)

[*Book One: The Emperor in Gold*](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[*Book Two: Layers of the Dead*](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[*Book Three: Knuckles of the Soul*](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[*Book Four: Reaper's Gale*](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Glossary](#)

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE LETHERII

Tehol Beddict, a destitute resident

Bugg, Tehol's manservant

Shurq Elalle, an itinerant pirate

Skorgen Kaban, Shurq's First Mate

Ublala Pung, an unemployed Tarthenal half-blood

Ormly, a member of the Rat Catchers' Guild

Rucket, Chief Investigator of the Rat Catchers' Guild

Karos Invictad, Invigilator of the Patriotists

Tanal Yathvanar, Karos's personal assistant

Rautos Hivanar, Master of the Liberty Consign of Merchants

Venitt Sathad, Rautos's principal field agent

Triban GnoI, Chancellor of the New Empire

Nisall, First Concubine of the old emperor

Janall, deposed empress

Turudal Brizad, ex-consort

Janath Anar, a political prisoner

Sirryn Kanar, a palace guard

Brullyg (Shake), nominal Ruler of Second Maiden Fort

Yedan Derryg (The Watch)

Orbyn 'Truthfinder', Section Commander of the Patriotists

Letur Anict, Factor in Drene

Bivatt, Atri-Preda of the Eastern Army

Feather Witch, Letherii slave to Uruth

THE TISTE EDUR

Rhulad, ruler of the New Empire

Hannan Mosag, Imperial Ceda

Uruth, Matriarch of the Emperor and wife to Tomad Sengar

K'risnan, warlocks of the Emperor

Bruthen Trana, Edur in palace

Brohl Handar, Overseer of the East in Drene

ARRIVING WITH THE EDUR FLEET

Yan Tovis (Twilight), Atri-Preda of the Letherii Army

Varat Taun, her lieutenant

Taralack Veed, a Gral agent of the Nameless Ones

Icarium, Taralack's weapon

Hanradi Khalag, a warlock of the Tiste Edur

Tomad Sengar, Patriarch of the Emperor

Samar Dev, a scholar and witch from Seven Cities

Karsa Orlong, a Toblakai warrior

Taxilian, an interpreter

THE AWL'DAN

Redmask, an exile who returned

Masarch, a warrior of the Renfayar Clan

Hadralt, War Leader of Ganetok Clan

Sag'Churok, a bodyguard to Redmask

Gunth Mach, a bodyguard to Redmask

Torrent, a Copperface

Natarkas, a Copperface

THE HUNTED

Seren Pedac, a Letherii Acquitor

Fear Sengar, a Tiste Edur

Kettle, a Letherii orphan

Udinaas, a Letherii runaway slave

Wither, a shadow wraith

Silchas Ruin, a Tiste Andii Ascendant

THE REFUGIUM

Ulshun Pral, an Imass

Rud Elalle, an adopted foundling

Hostille Rator, a T'lan Imass

Til'aras Benok, a T'lan Imass

Gr'istanas Ish'ilm, a T'lan Imass

THE MALAZANS

Bonehunters

Tavore Paran, Commander of the Bonehunters

Lostara Yil, Second to Tavore

Keneb, Fist in the Bonehunters

Blistig, Fist in the Bonehunters

Faradan Sort, Captain

Madan'tul Rada, Faradan Sort's lieutenant

Grub, adopted son of Keneb

Beak, mage seconded to Captain Faradan Sort

8th Legion, 9th Company

4th Squad

Fiddler, sergeant

Tarr, corporal

Koryk, half-blood Seti, marine

Smiles, Kanese, marine

Cuttle, sapper

Bottle, squad mage

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, soldier

5th Squad

Gesler, sergeant

Stormy, corporal

Sands, marine

Shortnose, heavy infantry

Flashwit, heavy infantry

Uru Hela, heavy infantry

Mayfly, heavy infantry

7th Squad

Cord, sergeant

Shard, corporal

Limp, marine

Ebron, squad mage

Crump (Jamber Bole), sapper

Sinn, mage

8th Squad

Hellian, sergeant

Touchy, corporal #1

Brethless, corporal #2

Balgrid, squad mage

Tavos Pond, marine

Maybe, sapper

Lutes, squad healer

9th Squad

Balm, sergeant

Deadsmell, corporal

Throatlitter, marine

Galt, marine

Lobe, marine

Widdershins, squad mage

12th Squad

Thom Tissy, sergeant

Tulip, corporal

Ramp, heavy infantry

Jibb, medium infantry

Gullstream, medium infantry

Mudslinger, medium infantry

Bellig Harn, heavy infantry

13th Squad

Urb, sergeant

Reem, corporal

Masan Gilani, marine

Bowl, heavy infantry

Hanno, heavy infantry

Saltlick, heavy infantry

Scant, heavy infantry

8th Legion, 3rd Company

4th Squad

Pravalak Rim, corporal

Honey, sapper

Strap Mull, sapper

Shoaly, heavy infantry

Lookback, heavy infantry

5th Squad

Badan Gruk, sergeant

Ruffle, marine

Skim, marine

Nep Furrow, mage

Reliko, heavy infantry

Vastly Blank, heavy infantry

10th Squad

Primly, sergeant

Hunt, corporal

Mulvan Dreader, mage

Neller, sapper

Skuldeath, marine

Drawfirst, heavy infantry

OTHERS

Banaschar, the Last Priest of D'rek

Withal, a Meckros Swordsmith

Sandalath Drukorlat, a Tiste Andii, Withal's wife

Nimander Golit, a Tiste Andii, offspring of Anomander Rake

Phaed, a Tiste Andii, offspring of Anomander Rake

Curdle, a possessed skeletal reptile

Telorast, a possessed skeletal reptile

Onrack, a T'lan Imass, unbound

Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur renegade

Ben Adaephon Delat, a wizard

Menandore, a Soletaken (Sister of Dawn)

Sheltatha Lore, a Soletaken (Sister of Dusk)

Sukul Ankhadu, a Soletaken (Sister Dapple)

Kilmandaros, an Elder Goddess

Clip, a Tiste Andii

Cotillion, The Rope, Patron God of Assassins

Emroth, a broken T'lan Imass

Hedge, a ghost

Old Hunch Arbat, Tarthenal

Pithy, an ex-con

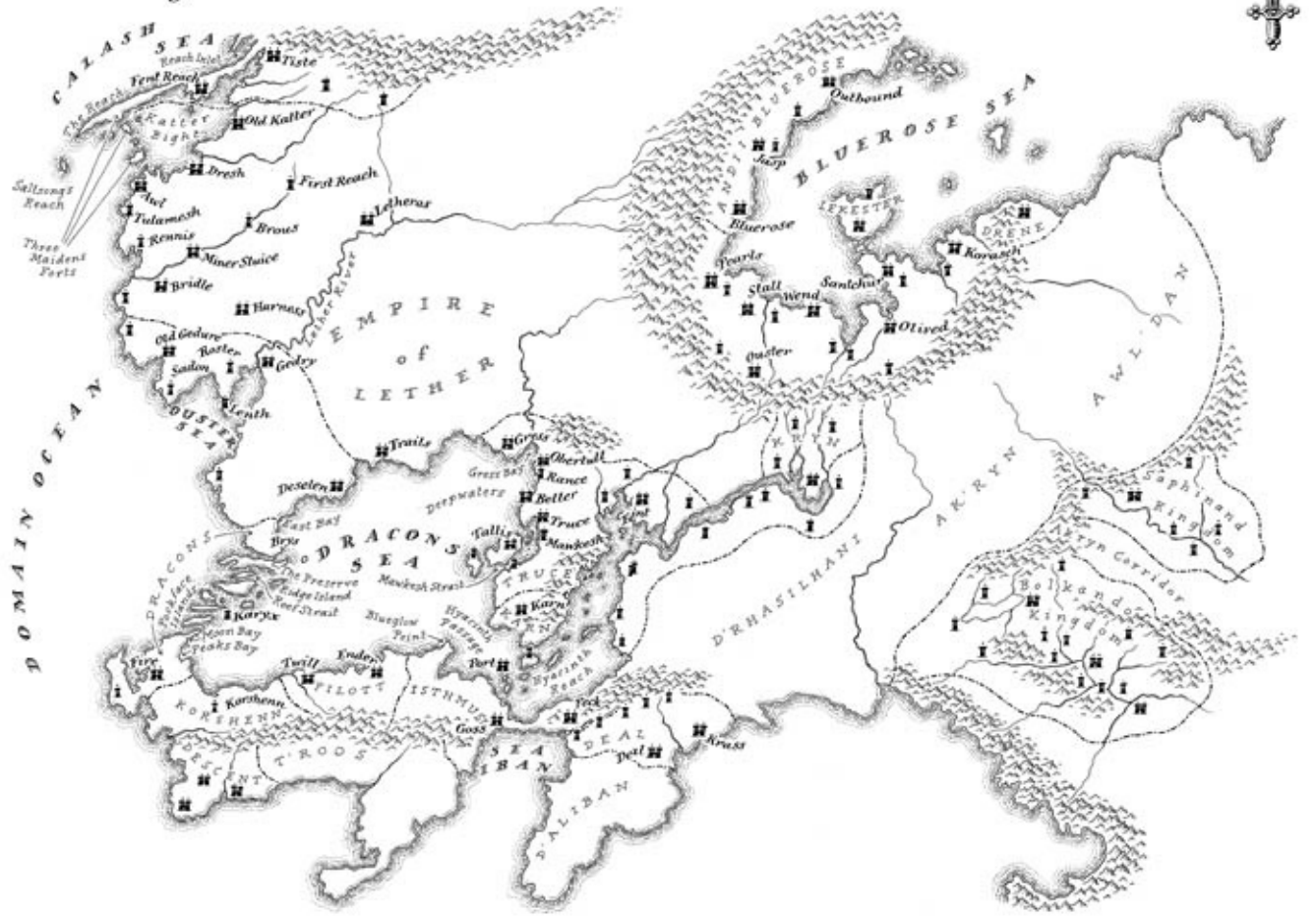
Brevity, an ex-con

Pully, a Shake witch

Skwish, a Shake witch

The EMPIRE of LEATHER

and its neighbours...



PROLOGUE

The Elder Warren of Kurald Emurlahn
The Age of Sundering

IN A LANDSCAPE torn with grief, the carcasses of six dragons lay strewn in a ragged row reaching thousand or more paces across the plain, flesh split apart, broken bones jutting, jaws gaping and eyes brittle-dry. Where their blood had spilled out onto the ground wraiths had gathered like flies to sa and were now ensnared, the ghosts writhing and voicing hollow cries of despair, as the blood darkened, fusing with the lifeless soil; and, when at last the substance grew indurate, hardening in glassy stone, those ghosts were doomed to an eternity trapped within that murky prison.

The naked creature that traversed the rough path formed by the fallen dragons was a match to the mass, yet bound to the earth, and it walked on two bowed legs, the thighs thick as thousand-year-old trees. The width of its shoulders was equal to the length of a Tartheno Toblakai's height; from a thick neck hidden beneath a mane of glossy black hair, the frontal portion of the head was thrust forward brow, cheekbones and jaw, and its deep-set eyes revealing black pupils surrounded in opalescent white. The huge arms were disproportionately long, the enormous hands almost scraping the ground. Its breasts were large, pendulous and pale. As it strode past the battered, rotting carcasses, the motion of its gait was strangely fluid, not at all lumbering, and each limb was revealed to possess extra joints.

Skin the hue of sun-bleached bone, darkening to veined red at the ends of the creature's arms, bruises surrounding the knuckles, a latticework of cracked flesh exposing the bone here and there. The hands had seen damage, the result of delivering devastating blows.

It paused to tilt its head, upward, and watched as three dragons sailed the air high amidst the roiling clouds, appearing then disappearing in the smoke of the dying realm.

The earthbound creature's hands twitched, and a low growl emerged from deep in its throat.

After a long moment, it resumed its journey.

Beyond the last of the dead dragons, to a place where rose a ridge of hills, the largest of these cleaved through as if a giant claw had gouged out the heart of the rise, and in that crevasse raged a rent, a tear in space that bled power in nacreous streams. The malice of that energy was evident in the manner which it devoured the sides of the fissure, eating like acid into the rocks and boulders of the ancient berm.

The rent would soon close, and the one who had last passed through had sought to seal the gap behind him. But such healing could never be done in haste, and this wound bled anew.

Ignoring the virulence pouring from the rent, the creature strode closer. At the threshold it paused again and turned to look back the way it had come.

Draconean blood hardening into stone, horizontal sheets of the substance, already beginning to separate from the surrounding earth, to lift up on edge, forming strange, disarticulated walls. Some then began sinking, vanishing from this realm. Falling through world after world. To reappear, finally solid and impermeable, in other realms, depending on the blood's aspect, and these were laws that could not be challenged. Starvald Demelain, the blood of dragons and the death of blood.

In the distance behind the creature, Kurald Emurlahn, the Realm of Shadows, the first realm born of the conjoining of Dark and Light, convulsed in its death-throes. Far away, the civil wars still raged on, whilst in other areas the fragmenting had already begun, vast sections of this world's fabric torn away, disconnected and lost and abandoned – to either heal round themselves, or die. Yet interloper

still arrived here, like scavengers gathered round a fallen leviathan, eagerly tearing free their own private pieces of the realm. Destroying each other in fierce battles over the scraps.

It had not been imagined – by anyone – that an entire realm could die in such a manner. That the vicious acts of its inhabitants could destroy ... everything. Worlds live on, had been the belief – the assumption – regardless of the activities of those who dwelt upon them. Torn flesh heals, the sky clears, and something new crawls from the briny muck.

But not this time.

Too many powers, too many betrayals, too vast and all-consuming the crimes.

The creature faced the gate once more.

Then Kilmandaros, the Elder Goddess, strode through.

*The ruined K'Chain Che'Malle demesne
after the fall of Silchas Ruin*

Trees were exploding in the bitter cold that descended like a shroud, invisible yet palpable, upon the racked, devastated forest.

Gothos had no difficulty following the path of the battle, the successive clashes of two Elder Gods warring with the Soletaken dragon, and as the Jaghut traversed its mangled length he brought with him the brutal chill of Omtose Phellack, the Warren of Ice. *Sealing the deal, as you asked of me, Mael. Locking the truth in place, to make it more than memory. Until the day that witnesses the shattering of Omtose Phellack itself.* Gothos wondered, idly, if there had ever been a time when he believed that such a shattering would *not* come to pass. That the Jaghut, in all their perfected brilliance, were unique, triumphant in eternal domination. A civilization immortal, when all others were doomed.

Well, it was possible. He had once believed that all of existence was under the benign control of a caring omnipotence, after all. *And crickets exist to sing us to sleep, too.* There was no telling what other foolishness might have crept into his young, naive brain all those millennia ago.

No longer, of course. Things end. Species die out. Faith in anything else was a conceit, the product of unchained ego, the curse of supreme self-importance.

So what do I now believe?

He would not permit himself a melodramatic laugh in answer to that question. What was the point? There was no-one nearby who might appreciate it. Including himself. *Yes, I am cursed to live with my own company.*

It's a private curse.

The best kind.

He ascended a broken, fractured rise, some violent uplift of bedrock, where a vast fissure had opened, its vertical sides already glistening with frost when Gothos came to the edge and looked down. Somewhere in the darkness below, two voices were raised in argument.

Gothos smiled.

He opened his warren, made use of a sliver of power to fashion a slow, controlled descent toward the gloomy base of the crevasse.

As Gothos neared, the two voices ceased, leaving only a rasping, hissing sound, pulsating – the drawing of breath on waves of pain – and the Jaghut heard the slithering of scales on stone, slightly off to one side.

He alighted atop broken shards of rock, a few paces from where stood Mael, and, ten paces beyond him, the huge form of Kilmandaros, her skin vaguely luminescent – in a sickly sort of way – standing

with hands closed into fists, a belligerent cast to her brutal mien.

Scabandari, the Soletaken dragon, had been driven into a hollow in the cliff-side and now crouched, splintered ribs no doubt making every breath an ordeal of agony. One wing was shattered, half torn away. A hind limb was clearly broken, bones punched through flesh. Its flight was at an end.

The two Elders were now eyeing Gothos, who strode forward, then spoke. 'I am always delighted when a betrayer is in turn betrayed. In this instance, betrayed by his own stupidity. Which is even more delightful.'

Mael, Elder God of the Seas, asked, 'The Ritual ... are you done, Gothos?'

'More or less.' The Jaghut fixed his gaze on Kilmandaros. 'Elder Goddess. Your children in this realm have lost their way.'

The huge bestial woman shrugged, and said in a faint, melodic voice, 'They're always losing the way, Jaghut.'

'Well, why don't you do something about it?'

'Why don't you?'

One thin brow lifted, then Gothos bared his tusks in a smile. 'Is that an invitation, Kilmandaros?'

She looked over at the dragon. 'I have no time for this. I need to return to Kurald Emurlahn. I will kill him now—' and she stepped closer.

'You must not,' Mael said.

Kilmandaros faced him, huge hands opening then closing again into fists. 'So you keep saying, you boiled crab.'

Shrugging, Mael turned to Gothos. 'Explain it to her, please.'

'How many debts do you wish to owe me?' the Jaghut asked him.

'Oh now really, Gothos!'

'Very well. Kilmandaros. Within the Ritual that now descends upon this land, upon the battlefield and these ugly forests, death itself is denied. Should you kill the Tiste Edur here, his soul will be unleashed from his flesh, but it will remain, only marginally reduced in power.'

'I mean to kill him,' Kilmandaros said in her soft voice.

'Then,' Gothos's smile broadened, 'you will need me.'

Mael snorted.

'Why do I need you?' Kilmandaros asked the Jaghut.

He shrugged. 'A Finnest must be prepared. To house, to imprison, this Soletaken's soul.'

'Very well, then make one.'

'As a favour to you both? I think not, Elder Goddess. No, alas, as with Mael here, you must acknowledge a debt. To me.'

'I have a better idea,' Kilmandaros said. 'I crush your skull between a finger and thumb, then I push your carcass down Scabandari's throat, so that he suffocates on your pompous self. This seems a fitting demise for the both of you.'

'Goddess, you have grown bitter and crabby in your old age,' Gothos said.

'It is no surprise,' she replied. 'I made the mistake of trying to save Kurald Emurlahn.'

'Why bother?' Mael asked her.

Kilmandaros bared jagged teeth. 'The precedent is ... unwelcome. You go bury your head in the sands again, Mael, but I warn you, the death of one realm is a promise to every other realm.'

'As you say,' the Elder God said after a moment. 'And I do concede that possibility. In any case, Gothos demands recompense.'

The fists unclenched, then clenched again. 'Very well. Now, Jaghut, fashion a Finnest.'

‘This will do,’ Gothos said, drawing an object into view from a tear in his ragged shirt.

~~The two Elders stared at it for a time, then Mael grunted. ‘Yes, I see, now. Rather curious choice, Gothos.’~~

‘The only kind I make,’ the Jaghut replied. ‘Go on, then, Kilmandaros, proceed with your subtle conclusion to the Soletaken’s pathetic existence.’

The dragon hissed, screamed in rage and fear as the Elder Goddess advanced.

When she drove a fist into Scabandari’s skull, centred on the ridge between and above the dragon’s eyes, the crack of the thick bone rang like a dirge down the length of the crevasse, and with the impact blood spurted from the Goddess’s knuckles.

The dragon’s broken head thumped heavily onto the broken bedrock, fluids spilling out from beneath the sagging body.

Kilmandaros wheeled to face Gothos.

He nodded. ‘I have the poor bastard.’

Mael stepped towards the Jaghut, holding out a hand. ‘I will take the Finnest then—’

‘No.’

Both Elders now faced Gothos, who smiled once more. ‘Repayment of the debt. For each of you claim the Finnest, the soul of Scabandari, for myself. Nothing remains between us, now. Are you now pleased?’

‘What do you intend to do with it?’ Mael demanded.

‘I have not yet decided, but I assure you, it will be most curiously unpleasant.’

Kilmandaros made fists again with her hands and half raised them. ‘I am tempted, Jaghut, to send my children after you.’

‘Too bad they’ve lost their way, then.’

Neither Elder said another word as Gothos departed from the fissure. It always pleased him, outwitting doddering old wrecks and all their hoary, brutal power. Well, a momentary pleasure, in any case.

The best kind.

* * *

Upon her return to the rent, Kilmandaros found another figure standing before it. Black-cloaked and white-haired. An expression of arched contemplation, fixed upon the torn fissure.

About to enter the gate, or waiting for her? The Elder Goddess scowled. ‘You are not welcome in Kurald Emurlahn,’ she said.

Anomandaris Purake settled cool eyes upon the monstrous creature. ‘Do you imagine me contemplating claiming the throne for myself?’

‘You would not be the first.’

He faced the rent again. ‘You are besieged, Kilmandaros, and Edgewalker is committed elsewhere. I offer you my help.’

‘With you, Tiste Andii, my trust is not easily earned.’

‘Unjustified,’ he replied. ‘Unlike many others of my kind, I accept that the rewards of betrayal are never sufficient to overwhelm the cost. There are Soletaken now, in addition to feral dragons, warring in Kurald Emurlahn.’

‘Where is Osserc?’ the Elder Goddess asked. ‘Mael informed me that he—’

‘Was planning to get in my way again? Osserc imagined I would take part in slaying Scabandari. Why should I? You and Mael were more than enough.’ He grunted then. ‘I can picture Osserc, circling

round and round. Looking for me. Idiot.'

'And Scabandari's betrayal of your brother? You have no desire to avenge that?'

Anomandaris glanced at her, then gave her a faint smile. 'The rewards of betrayal. The cost Scabandari proved high, didn't it? As for Silchas, well, even the Azath do not last for ever. I almost envy him his new-found isolation from all that will afflict us in the millennia to come.'

'Indeed. Do you wish to join him in a similar barrow?'

'I think not.'

'Then I imagine that Silchas Ruin will not be inclined to forgive you your indifference, the day he is freed.'

'You might be surprised, Kilmandaros.'

'You and your kind are mysteries to me, Anomandaris Purake.'

'I know. So, Goddess, have we a pact?'

She cocked her head. 'I mean to drive the pretenders from the realm – if Kurald Emurlahn must die, then let it do so on its own.'

'In other words, you want to leave the Throne of Shadow unoccupied.'

'Yes.'

He thought for a time, then he nodded. 'Agreed.'

'Do not wrong me, Soletaken.'

'I shall not. Are you ready, Kilmandaros?'

'They will forge alliances,' she said. 'They will all war against us.'

Anomandaris shrugged. 'I have nothing better to do today.'

The two Ascendants then walked through the gate, and, together, they closed the rent behind them. There were other paths, after all, to this realm. Paths that were not wounds.

Arriving within Kurald Emurlahn, they looked upon a ravaged world.

Then set about cleansing what was left of it.

The Awl'dan, in the last days of King Diskanar

Preda Bivatt, a captain in the Drene Garrison, was far from home. Twenty-one days by wagon, commanding an expedition of two hundred soldiers of the Tattered Banner Army, a troop of three hundred Bluerose light cavalry, and four hundred support staff, including civilians, she had, after delivering orders for the setting of camp, slid down from the back of her horse to walk the fifty-odd paces to the edge of the bluff.

When she reached the rise the wind struck her a hammer blow to her chest, as if eager to fling her back, to scrape her from this battered lip of land. The ocean beyond the ridge was a vision from an artist's nightmare, a seascape torn, churning, with heavy twisting clouds shredding apart overhead. The water was more white than blue-green, foam boiling, spume flying out from between rocks as the waves pounded the shore.

Yet, she saw with a chill rushing in to bludgeon her bones, this was the place.

A fisher boat, blown well off course, into the deadly maelstrom that was this stretch of ocean, a stretch that no trader ship, no matter how large, would willingly venture into. A stretch that had eighty years ago, caught a Meckros City and had torn it to pieces, pulling into the depths twenty thousand or more dwellers of that floating settlement.

The fisher crew had survived, long enough to draw their beleaguered craft safely aground in high deep water thirty or so paces from the bedrock strand. Catch lost, their boat punched into kindling by

relentless waves, the four Letherii managed to reach dry land.

To find ... this.

Tightening the strap of her helm, lest the wind tear it and her head from her shoulders, Preda Bivatt continued scanning the wreckage lining this shoreline. The promontory she stood on was undercut, dropping away three man-heights to a bank of white sand heaped with elongated rows of dead kelp, uprooted trees, and remnants of eighty-year-old Meckros City. And something else. Something more unexpected.

War canoes. The seagoing kind, each as long as a coral-face whale, high-prowed, longer and broader of beam than Tiste Edur craft. Not flung ashore as wreckage – no, not one she could see displayed anything like damage. They were drawn up in rows high along the beach, although it was clear that that had happened some time past – months at least, perhaps years.

A presence at her side. The merchant from Drene who had been contracted to supply the expedition. Pale-skinned, his hair pallid blond, so fair as to be nearly white. The wind was blasting round the man's round face, but she could see his light blue eyes fixed on the array of war canoes, tracking their first westward along the beach, then eastward. 'I have some talent,' he said to her, loudly so as to be heard over the gale.

Bivatt said nothing. The merchant no doubt had skill with numbers – his claim to talent. And she was an officer in the Letherii Army, and could well gauge the likely complement of each enormous craft without his help. A hundred, give or take twenty.

'Preda?'

'What?'

The merchant gestured helplessly. 'These canoes.' He waved up the beach, then down. 'There must be ...' And then he was at a loss for words.

She well understood him.

Yes. Rows upon rows, all drawn up to this forbidding shore. Drene, the nearest city of the kingdom was three weeks away, to the southwest. Directly south of here was the land of the Awl'dan, and of the tribes' seasonal rounds with their huge herds virtually all was known. The Letherii were in the process of conquering them, after all. There had been no report of anything like this.

Thus. Not long ago, a fleet arrived upon this shore. Whereupon everyone had disembarked, taking all they had with them, and then, presumably, set off inland.

There should have been signs, rumours, a reverberation among the Awl at the very least. *Who should have heard about it.*

But they hadn't. The foreign invaders had simply ... disappeared.

Not possible. How can it be? She scanned the rows once again, as if hoping that some fundamental detail would reveal itself, would ease the hammering of her heart and the leaden chill of her limbs.

'Preda ...'

Yes. One hundred per craft. And here before us ... stacked four, five deep – what? Four, maybe five thousand?

The north shoreline was a mass of grey-wooded war canoes, for almost as far as she could see to the west and to the east. Drawn up. Abandoned. Filling the shore like a toppled forest.

'Upwards of a half-million,' the merchant said. 'That is my estimate. Preda, where in the Errant name did they all go?'

She scowled. 'Kick that mage nest of yours, Letur Anict. Make them earn their exorbitant fees. The king needs to know. Every detail. *Everything.*'

'At once,' the man said.

While she would do the same with the Ceda's squad of acolytes. The redundancy was necessary. Without the presence of Kuru Qan's chosen students, she would never learn all that Letur Anict held back on his final report, would never be able to distil the truths from the half-truths, the outright lies. A perennial problem with hiring private contractors – they had their own interests, after all, and loyalty to the crown was, for creatures like Letur Anict, the new Factor of Drene, always secondary.

She began looking for a way down onto the beach. Bivatt wanted a closer look at these canoes, especially since it seemed that sections of their prows had been dismantled. *Which is an odd thing to do. Yet, a manageable mystery, one I can deal with and so not think about all the rest.*

'Upwards of a half-million.'

Errant's blessing, who is now among us?

The Awl'dan, following the Edur conquest

The wolves had come, then gone, and where corpses had been dragged out from the solid press atop the hilltop – where the unknown soldiers had made their last stand – the signs of their feeding were evident, and this detail remained with the lone rider as he walked his horse amidst the motionless, sprawled bodies. Such pillaging of the dead was ... unusual. The dun-furred wolves of this plain were as opportunistic as any other predator on the Awl'dan, of course. Even so, long experience with humans should have sent the beasts fleeing at the first sour scent, even if it was commingled with the stench of spilled blood. What, then, had drawn them to this silent battlefield?

The lone rider, face hidden behind a crimson scaled mask, drew rein near the base of the low hill. His horse was dying, racked with shivers; before the day's end the man would be walking. As he was breaking camp this dawn, a horn-nosed snake had nipped the horse as it fed on a tuft of sliver-stemmed grasses at the edge of a gully. The poison was slow but inevitable, and could not be neutralized by any of the herbs and medicines the man carried. The loss was regrettable but not disastrous, since he had not been travelling in haste.

Ravens circled overhead, yet none descended – nor had his arrival stirred them from this feast. Indeed, it had been the sight of them, wheeling above this hill, that had guided him to this place. Their cries were infrequent, strangely muted, almost plaintive.

The Drene legions had taken away their dead, leaving naught but their victims to feed the grasses of the plain. The morning's frost still mapped glistening patterns on death-dark skin, but the melt had already begun, and it seemed to him that these dead soldiers now wept, from stilled faces, from open eyes, from mortal wounds.

Rising on his stirrups, he scanned the horizon – as much of it as he could see – seeking sight of his two companions, but the dread creatures had yet to return from their hunt, and he wondered if they had found a new, more inviting trail somewhere to the west – the Letherii soldiers of Drene, marching triumphant and gluttonous back to their city. If so, then there would be slaughter on this day. The notion of vengeance, however, was incidental. His companions were indifferent to such sentiments. They killed for pleasure, as far as he could tell. Thus, the annihilation of the Drene, and any vengeance that could be ascribed to the deed existed only in his own mind. The distinction was important.

Even so, a satisfying conceit.

Yet, these victims here were strangers, these soldiers in their grey and black uniforms. Stripped now of weapons and armour, standards taken as trophies, their presence here in the Awl'dan – in the heart of the rider's homeland – was perturbing.

He knew the invading Letherii, after all. The numerous legions with their peculiar names and

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